

## Call Me Tío

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*“Geography is destiny.” – Jared Diamond*

**I**t rains off and on all day. When it gets really heavy, those of us digging on the Cusichaca Tableland don trash bin liners (Cusichaca chic) and hang out against one of the Inca walls we’re excavating, smoking and telling dirty stories.

We finally knock off early because of the rain.

As happens most days after coming home from the “Office,” when I get back to base camp the campesinos greet me with wide smiles and *¡Amigo!* Not because I’m their friend but because I have cigarettes. I’m a soft touch, and I can give out almost a whole pack by the time I’ve given to all who ask.

I sometimes wonder if I’m bribing them. Back in the States I give a cigarette to anyone who wants one, from college students to bums on the streets. But here the gulf is so wide between our cultures that rarely are there meaningless gestures. Despite the romantic notion that if you dig down deep enough the core of humanity – the wants and desires, the sorrows and heartache – is the same among us, the dictatorship of culture is more powerful. Surely, if there were a fire we’d all rush en masse to save the person’s straw-roofed home. But later, the gulf would reappear.

Environment affects the body, and the body affects the mind, particularly the neocortex, the seat of culture. When our ancestors moved from the savannah to the sierra, and the fauna they hunted became more agile, the shape of the spear they used changed. And then the “story” about how to smooth the shaft of that new spear changed. Story is culture, and culture must “fit the landscape,” the German psychologist Norbert Bischof has said.

If I were to look at Verónica, a 5,750-meter (18,860 ft) snow-capped peak northeast of Cusichaca, every day of my life I’d be a different person from who I am. If I were breathing this thin Andean air from the day I was born, my blood would be thinner and my lungs would be larger. My very circulatory system would be different, affecting the tonus of my blood vessels and the vasomotor nerve fibers, carrying more richly oxygenated blood cells to my brain where the stories are forged. Peruvians are a foot shorter than me not because they have small thoughts, but because small, compact bodies function

better at high altitudes. They make low-roofed houses with low doorways to accommodate smaller bodies, which I have to duck under every time I enter a campesino’s home. My body is repeatedly bowing, a physical action of reverence which unwittingly introduces humility into my life on a regular basis, though I have no idea what I’m in awe of.

**U**nder the auspices of the Earthwatch organization, a group of volunteer Americans have been helping out on the dig. On their first tour of Cusichaca they humped up to the Tableland, a brutal 1,400-ft vertical commute from base camp, like they were on a death march. There isn’t a firm body among them. Brad, a freshman at Skidmore College, is conversationally loud, brags about his drug-taking, and wears designer sunglasses. Rob, who is seventeen and just out of high school, is a near-genius, he doesn’t mind telling us. Tall with a sunken torso and long brown hair, he’s going crazy without his music. In the midst of all this remarkable Andean silence he’s hearing Eric Clapton and The Who.

As the Director of the Cusichaca Project explained the history of Pupatuyoc, one of the more complex sites on the dig, a short, chubby woman named Linda was listlessly putting on lipstick and checking herself in a small compact mirror, as if she were in a restaurant instead of the Andes. Janice, about five feet tall and stacked like a tiered wedding cake that’s been left out in the sun too long, was beet red up on the Tableland. She was breathing hard, fear creeping into her eyes. She looked like she was going to keel over right in front of us. However, when lunchtime came, she refused to eat what the cooks had prepared. At this altitude, considering the work, real work, they’d be doing, eating is essential; you have to keep up your strength. The food offended her.

By the time the tour was over, the Earthwatchers, who didn’t know each other before arriving at Cusichaca, had forged their own group, a separate clique from the rest of the diggers, a pasty horde that seemed abnormally isolationist in this grand, open country. They’re all white (pink, at this elevation), middle-class Americans. Their attitude is light, breezy, what I’d

call queerly American, vaguely defined as a combination of oblivion and entitlement. I recognize the type. When I was a bartender in London, Americans were the easiest tourists to spot. They were loud and imperious, and they'd pout when I said we didn't carry Budweiser, even as they were surrounded by an abundant selection of the best ales in the world. The Earthwatchers' smiles come a little too easily; their movements are a little too facetious. Their bodies don't seem to have the "talent," let's say, the stamina, either mentally or physically, to give off the confidence they do. I want to be gracious, but Dickens' description of Americans from an 1842 letter keeps swirling in my head: "They are heavy, dull, and ignorant." Exactly what I came here to get away from.

Stanford University neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky speculates that not only did environment have an effect on the creation of religions, that is, culture, but also on the types. Peoples who inhabit multi-zoned environments, like the Inca, tend to be polytheistic. There are many objects in a bio-diverse environment that can affect one's life, making it ripe for inhabitation by numerous malevolent and/or kind *huacas* (spirits). Desert-dwelling peoples, on the other hand, tend to be monotheistic, and their gods are usually harsh masters who "teach big, singular things, like how tough a world it is ... simple, desiccated, furnace-blasted." A pretty good personality profile of Old Yahweh.

Ananda Coomaraswamy uses the term *land-náma*, "land naming" or "land taking," to describe this marriage. The idea is that a newly arrived people, the conquering Inca, for example, adapted their procured lands to their own mythology. The new land is then linked as closely as possible to the sociological, psychological, and spiritual patterns of the people, thus giving their existence validation through every tree, mountain, river, and stone in the realm.

The Wari, who developed the first conquest empire in the Andes between 540 and 650 C. E., were, like the Inca, fond of straight lines, and built an elaborate road system through their realm. The Inca adopted the Wari network, and subsequently had those roads going to Cuzco and Machu Picchu instead of Ayacucho, the Wari capital. Whereas the Wari worshipped Pachacámac, whose shrine is on a hill at the mouth of the Lurín Valley on the Pacific coast, the Inca turned him into Viracocha and moved him to the Quishuarcancha temple in Cuzco. The *huacas* moved from inhabiting this mountain to that, from this river to another of the Inca's naming. The terraces, along with the royal estates and ceremonial sites, were fitted to the land names the Inca gave them, thus to the Gods, thus back to the people who worked those lands and harvested the potatoes, beans, chilis, and *quinoa* (grain) directly from what they considered spiritual sources. They were constantly – every common task, every simple movement – in the process of doing holy work. Merely walking outside meant going to church. When an Inca man dug a potato he wasn't just excavating supper, he was recreating in his action the divine action of the Gods who caused everything to come into existence. Place and person, mythology and task, inextricably linked.

The Wari claimed the Chavín lands in the name of Pachacámac. The Inca claimed the Wari lands in the name of Viracocha. The Spanish claimed the Inca lands in the name of Christ. The London Institute of Archeology claims the land in the name of science.

During a weekend off from the dig I meet an American named Doug at the Albergue Hotel in Ollantaytambo, a couple of kilometers down valley from Cusichaca. He's been a masseur for twenty-two years, ten in Colorado before coming to Peru. He's an avid runner, balding, with what I'd call a very ornate personality and a dour girlfriend named Rocío. "I'm the best," he tells me vauntingly. According to him, he's saved half the people in Cuzco, pulling them back from the brink of death with his extraordinary hands.

He's not too impressed by the Wall of the Six Monoliths, weighing about 50–80 tons each, which make up the unfinished Sun Temple above Ollantaytambo. While most Inca buildings are built in the *pirca* style of architecture (mortared fieldstone), the sacred sites are built in the polygonal, precision, dry-fit style – the seams so tight one literally cannot slip a piece of paper between them – and are constructed of rose rhyolite granite (sometimes called red porphyry) quarried at Kachiqhata about five kilometers across the Urubamba River. In the evening, when the sun hits them just right, these temples and unfinished megalithic structures glow pink, more like gemstone than granite, as if they're fired within. The marriage of ideology and environment, as if the Inca sun god, Inti, was at the same time in the heavens and breathing from the lungs of the earth-mother goddess, Pachamama, a divine color bathing all the *Intip churin* (Children of the Sun) in a pale ruby glow. Doug has seen better.

Again, all the way out here, the intrusive American culture trait of insouciant disdain. I have a similar feeling, though in a different domain, as I had walking up to the Tableland with the Earthwatchers: shock. Cultural, not geographical. The sudden blast of American ethos appearing so starkly visible and inordinately gaudy, like neon amidst the modest mocha earth tones of rural Peru. Not even an attempt by this blustering ambassador to blend in.

I know, sometimes it can be hard. Blending into London was relatively easy for me. It's an international city. But into Peru, a little more difficult. Because I'm a full foot taller than the average Peruvian, I walk the streets like a signal tower amidst the low brown fields of humanity. After I pass I hear people whisper, *¡Qué alto!* ("What height!"), as if I'm a freak. I'm on display, obvious, and there's nothing I can do about it. I might as well be a pair of golden arches moving down the street. I'm emblematic. But I don't have to sell the product. Which is easy, because I don't believe in its curative properties.

Doug is not only selling the product – narcissism, insularity, self-absorption – he's advertising it like a carnival barker. It's a startlingly loud voice amidst the backdrop of such humiliating poverty and humbling landscapes. He seems, as Conrad's Marlow observes about the civilized masses, "... so full of stupid importance." Where from this braggadocio?

The Lamarkian premise of Diamond's book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is that environment is the most powerfully affecting force on evolution. Ice Ages, natural resources, competition – these are what move the Darwinian river in one direction or the other. To this, however, we must add the co-evolutionary river of memes (genes of culture) – those that favor the non-environmental course through innovation, observation, imitation, and communication. In the end, seeing a rack of urban concrete buildings every morning instead of the lush collars of Inca terrace hugging the mountains will alter what J. M. Balkin calls one's "cultural software," the thinking and perspectives we then replicate as a part of ideology, cosmic and provincial.

After days and weeks of sifting through the soil, one becomes intimate with it. I get the feeling I could name every grain of sand erupting under my trowel. Such intimacy begets immersion, a welding of task to intent so immediate that one cannot help but *be here*, blissfully forgetting the self, the Earthwatchers, the campesinos, and all the constructs of culture artificially imposed upon behavior. There are times during the day, rare and fleeting, when, just for a moment, I feel as if my body has lost its skin. There are no boundaries. Even intent disappears. I'm just doing . . . .

Then I'm back. My trowel nicks a potsherd or a pebble digs into my kneecap, and I'm reminded that this is not my land. Repetition is not ritual. I'm descending through the strata like a traveler passing through highway towns, paying scientific homage at every level, cataloguing, sifting, throwing potsherds into the Finds box like coins into a tollbooth basket, then moving on. And the Gods do not speak – Pachamama is buried too deep in her grave. It would take a lifetime, a very different lifetime, for me to see what Inca man's descendent sees.

There's a British digger in camp, a loner named Henry, about 25, who wears as much indigenous clothing as he can – sandals, a heavy alpaca tunic, and the long-eared *chullo* hat he's never without. Not so unusual. But he's also on a mission. He's told me, and others, that before he leaves the dig his goal is to get at least one of the campesinos to call him *Tío* (Uncle). *Tío* is a non-familial appellation of respect, not freely given, not easily earned. It's particularly not applied to outsiders, and is reserved for people much older and wiser than Henry. But he really wants it, and his obvious, solicitous attempts to get it seem desperate. He speaks only Spanish (barely), will not eat any non-indigenous food, and refuses to hang around with "foreigners" anymore, i.e. white people. I've actually heard him ask one of the campesinos to call him *Tío*, as if respect could be dispensed from a gumball machine. He was rebuffed, with the same look on the campesino's face as on the face of the guard I attempted to bribe at the Lima Airport when I tried to get into the country with my single-burner camp stove and a quart of gasoline.

In London I knew several people in my graduate program (not archeology) who, within three months of arriving in England from America, were speaking like grizzled Cockneys, with no sense of irony. My Slovak grandmother lived in the United States for seventy years, and at the end of her life she

was still taking her cat to the "Wet." I don't think Henry and my classmates are victims of the parrot syndrome. And I don't believe their adaptations to their surroundings are a subset of colonial guilt. They are formless. They are so desperate to belong, to join in the communal song, they'll abdicate any ideation of self just to be thought incorporate, even as they'll no more be Inca or English in their lifetimes than hammers or whales.

I work on a site called Patallacta, where there are over a hundred crumbling Inca houses and, of course, the famous Inca terraces. Patallacta is considered the main administrative part of the Cusichaca settlement, and is where the Incas grew and stored food, kept track of distribution, and was home to the middle class bureaucrats who served and fed the priests and *mamaconas* (virgin women assigned to ceremonial sites) at Machu Picchu.

Every morning as I rise to Patallacta I have to momentarily stop and remember where I am. The surrounding mountains look exactly like the Catalina Mountains north of Tucson, Arizona. The Urubamba Valley looks like Sabino Canyon at the base of the Catalinas: steep, almost vertical mountainsides slashing down to a swift-coursing river. The same vegetation: cousins of prickly pear cactus, here called *tuna*, and agave, called *maguey*. The same crisp, clean air and the absolute solemnity of silence and mountains. I feel as if I could have been in Arizona yesterday, a college kid instead of a campesino bumming a cigarette from me, and the paltry concepts of distance and time are only the figments of scientific imaginations.

In his book, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard speaks about the feeling of "immediate immensity" that often overwhelms one in the presence of nature. Although he was referring to forests and their depths, more inside than out, the immensity one takes in at a single glance at Patallacta is, indeed, immediate, almost shocking to the eye. While Bachelard says that such external grandeur can lead to a "consciousness of enlargement" and the "immensity within ourselves," I merely feel small, humble. The word humility has its roots in the Latin *humilis*, meaning "low," which is from *humus*, "earth." Close to the soil. As I make the 1,400-vertical-foot commute to the "Office" every morning, I am as close to this land of ashes and dust as a body of fluid can be. I am bound mercilessly, reverently in my plodding, to the most primal and immortal of cultural landscapes – the elemental molecules that make up the earth, the stars, and this body, moving *through* and at the same time *with* place, the universe within and without.

After I hand out the cigarettes, and when my "friends" and I occasionally look at each other, and they're giving me those huge campesino grins, I see them seeing me. I'm behind their eyes. Knowledge is physical. It resides in the body. It's seared into the face as a thousand micro-mannerisms subconsciously absorbed by a lifetime of sight – each of us having become what we've seen – and which, if appreciated in their totality, tell me I am not one of them, and never will be. We smile and nod and smoke my cigarettes.