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*Keeping the Sabbath in the Andean Highlands: The Seventh
Day Adventist Mission to the Peruvian and Bolivian Altiplano,
1909-1930*

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by

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Abstract

This story is about the creation of a community. A religious community led by young, relatively educated men from both Anglo and Latin America. Men who had discovered that global capitalism, industrialism and prospects of immigration significantly altered their social, economic, and cultural prospects; that in different pace, and causing a large variety of ramifications, their family structures, native communities, and established life trajectories were shifting; at times, even vanishing. Seeking alternatives, both spiritual and practical, they traveled geographical and/or social and cultural distances, eventually finding themselves seated together on the pews of a small church in a mission station in remote Puno, Peru.

For a small handful of them, the rocky and arid Altiplano was a strange land, with people who spoke an undecipherable tongue and lived according to seemingly erroneous beliefs and practiced strange (not to say satanic) costumes. They were foreigners who had arrived to Puno after choosing to go on a salvation mission. For the majority, Puno was home, or at least it used to be. They were born by the lake, spent years on its shores, and were an integral part of the landscape until they left. Returning several years later these natives found that they had become strangers, living on the social and economic margins of their previous communities. The former were Seventh Day Adventists missionaries from the United States, and the latter were their Aymara speaking converts and unequal spiritual brothers. Each group in itself, and both of them together, stand at the center of this study.

Lending tools from microhistory, this research delves into the life intimacies of a group of missionaries and converts shedding light on the global trends that brought them together. Sneaking in to the protagonists' homes, it analyzes the power structures each side was embedded in, with

particular attention to issues of “race” and “class”. Proceeding to discuss the complex relationships within the mission, this research explores the ways in which they mirrored or deviated from larger, transnational, power relations. In this regards, this research relates to a wide body of scholarship dealing with a rather obscure concept “cultural imperialism”.

Emerging during the 60s, -with a particular Latin American aroma given to it by the Chilean literary critic, Ariel Dorfman and the Belgian sociologist Armand Mattelart, the term never matured into a full theoretical framework. Rather, it has been implemented relatively loosely, referring to the cultural dominance of world powers, such as the United States, which often accompanied their economic and political hegemony. From the 90s’ however, “cultural imperialism” has been under attack, especially from post-modern and post-structuralist perspectives, claiming that it deprives historical protagonists of their agency and treats cultural goods as if they carried a monolithic and static value. Christianity and missionary expansion, from North to South, have received special attention in this regards, as scholars hotly debated how to “read” indigenous participation in such movements.

“Cultural Imperialism” as a conceptual framework undoubtedly has its drawbacks. Yet one might wonder whether in certain ways the baby has not been thrown out with the bathwater; that perhaps too much focus has been put on its weaknesses, leading scholars to underemphasize power structures. After all, the protagonist’s awareness of power relations, whether or not he regards them as legitimate and the price he is able or willing to pay in case of confrontation, influence his decisions and make up part of his agency in the first place. Similarly, one’s place within social hierarchies, and the ways in which he is subjected to others, influence issues of reception and interpretation. In other words, in order to thoroughly understand the issue of reception and how

cultural products travel from one culture to another, the question of relations of power (and their own dynamism) is pertinent.

Thus, at the core of this research lies the argument that missionaries and converts were subjected to similar global forces. Forces they had little control over, that both “pushed” and “pulled” them out of their native environments and into an alternative community. Nevertheless, the places that missionaries and converts originated from, their disparate positions within both local and global power structures, particularly in terms of race and class, set forth a different range of opportunities, expectations, blind spots and abilities. These in turn manifested themselves inside the mission walls.

The dissertation is divided into three main sections entitled: “The Protagonists”, “The Missions” and “The Community”. The first part, consisting of two chapters, looks into the missionaries’ and the converts’ social, economic and religious backgrounds. It finds, for example, that leading converts were for the most part army veterans, young men in their twenties who had returned from military service only to discover that there was little left for them in the community. The souring price of wool, the avalanche of the large haciendas and the intense competition of resources had taken a toll on their families and familial property leaving them, in the best scenario, to fight for what they once had. Moreover, not only were veterans economically and politically marginalized, the cultural habits they acquired in the barracks, particularly the basic (and sometimes very basic) knowledge of Spanish, put them at odds with hegemonic notions of Indian-ness and the local hierarchies which support it. Missionaries, like converts, were also mostly young men in their twenties, and they too felt the ramifications of an expanding global market. On the brink of economic independence, and with no options to inherit their father’s farm or workshop, they found

that establishing their own agricultural small enterprise was highly risky, deciding instead to join the growing ranks of white collar professionals.

The second section, also composed of two chapters, delineates the projects that both sides brought with them into the mission and sets them parallel to each other. It exemplifies how missionaries, through a religious outlook, and while using prominent Christian tropes such as “self-sacrifice”, constructed their identification with the “new middle class” of white collar professionals. A comfortable middle class material standard of living, which they could seemingly have had back home, but gave up in favor of the Lord’s work, was transformed into sacrifice. For a growing number of young Aymara men, conversion became an escape route, a way to break away from harsh the racial impositions of the Andean social hierarchy. It was a prism through which Indians were able to reinterpret their lives and shape their own racial perceptions, usually in a manner which contrasted with popular notions of Indian-ness. Conversion, therefore, played an essential role in Indians attempts to reject hegemonic racial constructions which were supported both by mestizos and other Indians. Furthermore, converts could do so with a degree of security, enjoying the auspices of white, relatively wealthy foreigners. From the perspective, the more Indians who answered their call, the more their sacrifice was justified and worthwhile.

This section also explores the power structures missionaries and converts were entangled in vis-à-vis their home communities. It shows, for example, that while the idea of mestizaje was prevalent, and race in the Andes was culturally, rather than biologically constructed, it was not without its limits. Both Indians and local mestizos did not accept racial adaptations easily, often viewing such attempts as fraudulent, reacting violently against them. Missionaries were also subjected to hegemonic ideas about the nature of their work in general and the sacrifice they were expected to

make in particular. Such notions made it quite difficult, from a social aspect, to leave the field or demand better working conditions from the General Conference.

The final section, comprising of one chapter, brings both converts' and missionaries' projects together. It examines the dynamic relationships between the missionaries and converts over a period of 20 years with one major watershed, the departure of the missionary Ferdinand Stahl from the mission. Hence we discover that in the first stages of the missionary enterprise, both sides were committed to the idea of a mission whose endeavors were directed exclusively towards the indigenous population. For Indians, an "Indian mission" provided a much needed space for racial redefinition. For missionaries it enhanced the idea of sacrifice. Furthermore, Indians had benefited from missionaries' blind-spots, an important one resulting from disparate understanding of race, giving Indians autonomy to conduct their own affairs. Yet, by the beginning of the 20s' things had begun to change. Stahl left Puno and missionaries no longer found the idea of an "Indian mission" fruitful. Instead, they had decided it would be more beneficial to turn to new audiences, particularly mestizos. However, doing so they were undermining converts' efforts of racial reconstruction and social change, eventually leading to the departure of major indigenous figures who had been part of the mission from its first days.

In broader terms, an examination of the changing nature of the mission and the shifting relationships between missionaries and converts elucidates the advantages and disadvantages of cultural imperialism. It demonstrates the importance of agency but also emphasizes its limits. It indicates the various ways in which religious and other cultural ideas were received by local populations but also points to incidences in which one side used its power to impose a specific world view on the other. More than anything, in this context, the case of the Seventh Day Adventist

mission demonstrates the disparate prices people are demanded to pay for similar actions, depending on their place within power structures. Converts, in this regards, paid more.