

# Knowledge and Power: Land in Native American Cultures

Olivia Cadaval

The encounter between the peoples of eastern and western hemispheres that began nearly 500 years ago has had a dramatic effect on the way land and natural resources in the Americas are thought about and used. Exploration and colonization led to land use practices foreign to those developed by indigenous societies and compatible with the existing ecosystem. Almost 500 years ago, newcomers failed to learn from those who understood their home environment. The European campaign of "discovery" and conquest made this exchange impossible. Native populations of the Americas continue to pass on their systematic knowledge about their environment, but usually only within their own communities. This year's commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the year *before* Columbus' voyage has been undertaken in the belief that it is possible for our present society to learn and profit from indigenous knowledge about the land of the Americas. Conserving the earth in the present, as in the past, is as much about indigenous knowledge and society as it is about ecology and economics.

Since 1492, Native American lands and ways of life have been under siege. Native populations were enslaved, exploited and nearly exterminated, systematically driven off their lands, isolated in ecologically marginal reservations and largely disallowed social existence in the contemporary world except as subjects of ethnographic studies. The colonial despoilment of lands and resources, the cultural domination and distortion of native societies, the extinction of entire populations and the conversion of people into second-

class citizens was a prelude to the current onslaught of modern economic expansionism.

Today, Native Americans continue to be exploited and their lands continue to be expropriated while their cultural values and symbolic universes are denigrated and denied.

At the core of most Native American cultures are concepts of land, which shape all facets of political, social, economic and symbolic life. To Europeans, the 15th century conquest of the Americas simply provided land to be exploited for the enrichment of European royal states. In contrast, Native American cultures have generally perceived land as part of their cultural environment as well as the source of nourishment and shelter. Land sustains Native American communities. At the 1990 Continental Conference, "500 Years of Indian Resistance," held in Quito, Ecuador, participants formally declared: "We do not consider ourselves owners of the land. It is our mother, not a piece of merchandise. It is an integral part of our life. It is our past, present and future."

The intruders' strategies to control Native Americans and their lands obscured the diversity of indigenous cultures; they defined European life as the only ethical model and classified all Native Americans simply as "savages," who had no valid culture of their own and who needed to be "civilized." The newcomers' lack of respect for the land was matched by the lack of respect they showed native cultures. Diversity was excluded, and Native Americans were categorically called "Indians" ignoring the distinct cultures, histories, languages and ecological circumstances

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that have shaped Native American experience.

The first Europeans to come here encountered a world populated by many ancient and complex societies. The chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes of Tenochtitlan (the Aztec urban complex that has become Mexico City),

When we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and cues and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard, seen or dreamed of before. (Díaz del Castillo 1963)

The Aztec city of Tenochtitlan had a population larger than any city in Europe at the time.

The conquest succeeded in undermining political organization but not in eradicating cultural pluralism. Distinct, unique cultures continue to define the Native American landscape, in spite of profound transformations caused by particular histories of colonization, imposed patterns of settlement, missionary intrusions, and the more recent immigrations and forms of exploitation.

Native horticulture has depended upon crop variety and genetic diversity for maintaining successful food production in different environments. At the base of both Native American culture and horticulture is the concept of living in harmony with the diversity of the natural world. The Mexican anthropologist Arturo Warman uses the analogy of corn, which is native to the Americas. "Maize is our kin," he writes. Like Native American culture, he continues,

maize was not a natural miracle; maize was a human creation made possible through human intervention. Maize was the collective invention of millions of people over several millennia on this con-



continent. So we have maize as a cultural product. But maize is also diversity and diversity means knowledge and experimentation. Diversity was the way to live near the natural environment and not to fight with it. . . . (Warman 1991)

Contemporary Native Americans do not claim to have retained without change the cultures that existed prior to the European conquest. Much has perished, much has been destroyed and all has changed. In many cases, native communities have been able to absorb and restructure foreign elements to respond to new situations. The Mayan anthropologist, Jacinto Arias explains, "In our stories we tell ourselves our way of being did not die; nor will it ever die, because we have special virtues that compel us to defend ourselves from any threat of destruction." These moral virtues combined with thousands of years' knowledge of the land, cultural pride and struggle for self-deter-





*Textile traditions combine creativity and continuity. Weavers are inspired by dreams, legends, memories and other textiles. Today in many communities, textile revivals have brought about a growing sense of cultural pride and self-worth. A group of Tzotzil Maya weavers from San Andrés Larrainzar study the patterns and brocading technique used in a ceremonial huipil, or tunic. Photo by Ricardo Martínez*

mination have forged cultures of resistance.

Oriented both by the Smithsonian's overall concern for the conservation of cultures and by global attention focused on the meaning of the Quincentenary, this program will be an opportunity to hear the voices of members of Native American societies that have persevered for 500 years and have maintained an ancient care for the earth and the continuity of their own cultures.

This program samples the cultural and ecological diversity of Native American societies. The groups selected have for centuries continuously inhabited the regions presented. It is worthy of note that the continuity of their land tenure has depended in a large part on the marginality of the land they inhabit. The Amazonian rainforest, called by the Shuar "the lungs of the world," are almost impenetrable and until recently were ignored by the outside world. The Andean highlands are harsh and inhospitable, as is the arid desert of the Hopi in Arizona. The steep and eroded Mexican mountains of Chiapas and Oaxaca are a challenge even to native agriculturalists. The sandy dune country of the Ikoods is

blighted alternately by drought or flood. Although rich in resources, the coastal rainforest of southeastern Alaska is almost inaccessible from the interior because of mountains. Communication even between communities is difficult due to the impenetrable rainforest and has been limited to boats and more recently airplanes, weather permitting.

The program will present Native American knowledge about land as it informs sacred and secular practices, which are often inseparably intertwined. The natural and spiritual relationships between humans and land are central to the world order of many Native Americans. As Chief Robbie Dick of the Cree Indians in Great Whale, Quebec, succinctly states, "It's very hard to explain to white people what we mean by 'Land is part of our life.' We're like rocks and trees." In Hopi tradition, physical and cultural survival derive from the unity of land and corn. Emory Sekaquaptewa explains how the "Hopi language and culture are intimately intertwined, binding corn, people and the land together." (Sekaquaptewa 1986)



The program is about land, ecosystems and cultural knowledge that have sustained Native American cultures before Columbus and in the present. Each culture represented has a vision of the cosmos and the world as a system of dynamic and interconnected processes. Research for the program examined how domestic, economic and ceremonial processes are connected through material and expressive culture to form a social fabric of productivity and meaning. Agricultural and ritual cycles often coincide in Native American cultures and echo seasonal rhythms of the land.

Participants of the Quincentenary program come from 15 cultural groups in six different ecological areas, including northern and tropical rainforests, Andean highlands, Arizona desert, and Sierra Madre mountains and coastal dunes of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico.

The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian participants come from the Southeast Alaskan rainforest. They represent distinct but related cultures that form part of a broader cultural region extending from Alaska to Washington State commonly known as the Northwest Coast. The Canelos Quichua, Shuar and Achuar participants come from the rainforest region of eastern Ecuador, which forms part of the northwestern region of the Amazon river basin. Canelos Quichua have settlements in this area among the foothills of the Andes, while Shuar live in the region's swampy lowlands, which extend beyond the Ecuadorian borders into Peru. The Achuar are the Shuar's neighbors to the east. The Lacandón participant comes from the rapidly disappearing rainforest region of eastern Chiapas in Mexico. Although different in history, social organization and cultural patterns, these northern and tropical rainforest societies often parallel one another in their management of resources and understanding of the land.

The Andes mountains rise above much of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. They form high plateaus where the climate is cool even at the equator, which passes through the highlands of Ecuador and Colombia. This region has altitudes ranging from 6,600 to 14,600 feet and an impressive diversity of terrains, microclimates and distinct cultural groups that live here.

Andean participants in our Festival come from three different cultural and ecological areas. The Aymara-speaking participants come from communities in the high pampas of Tiwanaku, which slope gradually into Lake Titikaka in Bolivia. Members of these communities are currently engaged in the Wila-Jawira Project to recover the ancient raised-field or *suka kollus*, farming tech-



*Subsistence for the Lacandón in the Chiapas rainforest depends on a diversity of crops and the rotation of garden plots, supplemented by resources from forest and river. Vicente K'in Paniagua helps clear the growth on an abandoned plot to prepare a new milpa, or garden.*

Photo by Ricardo Martínez

nology of the pre-Inca Tiwanaku society. The Jalq'a participants, who are also from Bolivia but speak Quechua, live in communities in a remote, rugged mountainous area south of Tiwanaku. Jalq'a cultural identity emerged among groups relocated by the Inca empire to be frontier outposts; links with their original communities were later completely severed by Spanish settlers. The third group of participants are Quechua-speaking Taquileños, who live on the island of Taquile in the Peruvian part of Lake Titikaka.

Hopi participants come from the high, arid desert of Arizona. Here the land has been eroded into buttes and mesas cut by deep canyons. Rivers flow only during snow melt or after a rainstorm, and streams flow underground. As in the Andean highlands, people can live in this dry region only with sophisticated agricultural techniques.

Participants from the multiethnic highlands of Chiapas in Mexico come from the Tzotzil-speaking community of San Pedro Chenalhó and the Tzeltal-speaking community of Tenejapa. Communities in this Mayan cultural region renowned for its textiles distinguished themselves from one another by characteristic styles of dress. Weaving and natural dyeing traditions in the area are currently being revitalized by state and private self-help projects.

Like Chiapas, the state of Oaxaca in Mexico is also multiethnic. Zapotec participants come from the farming communities of Zoogocho and Tenejapa in the northeastern mountainous region of the state. They differ in culture and dialect

from the Zapotec communities to the west and south. Ikood participants come from the fishing community of San Mateo del Mar in the dunes on the Pacific coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Although remaining culturally and linguistically distinct from nearby societies, they have long engaged in commercial trade with the dominant Zapotecs, who inhabit the surrounding area, and in bartering relationships with the Chontal, who live just north of them along the coast.

Participants will demonstrate subsistence activities and craft skills, present parts of ritual performances and narrate oral histories. These cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation and speak eloquently of the connections Native Americans have constructed between land and society. Discussion sessions will focus on some of the major issues which confront Native American cultures today. These include: natural resource management, traditional technology, maintenance and destruction of ecological equilibrium and questions of monocultivation, property titles, national parks, transnational corporations, military zones, economic development models, agrarian reform laws, foreign debt, political repression, self determination, cultural identity, intrusion of religious sects, fragmentation of lands and human rights.

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