

# The Recovery of Cultural Resources for Development

by Kevin "Benito" Healy

Can the culture of native peoples be a springboard for development, or does it inevitably block progressive change, creating permanent backwaters in society? For much of the 20th century, official development doctrine viewed indigenous culture as a barrier to improvement. As the Mexican sociologist Rudolfo Stavenhagen observed, development policies in Latin America after World War II assumed it was necessary to "integrate" and "assimilate" indigenous peoples into the cultural mainstream of a modern industrializing society (Stavenhagen 1992). Planning documents from this era frequently describe indigenous beliefs and customs as "backward" and "worn-out traditions" obstructing the path to modernization and economic progress.

Perhaps it is not surprising that 40 years of these policies have failed to produce most of their desired results. Although millions of indigenous people did become acculturated, many communities have not only resisted the pressures to give up their culture but have achieved a stronger cultural and political presence in the world. As for realization of the policies' economic development goals, most of Latin America's 45 million Native Americans and 400 ethnic groups still live in conditions of extreme poverty and social exploitation. They tend to have the worst schools, health clinics, housing, and agricultural lands in their respective countries. Native peoples frequently lack basic services of potable water and electricity and have the lowest life expectancy. They contribute labor for large-scale commercial farming and for the construction of schools and urban skyscrapers, yet they often get the lowest-paying jobs and the lowest prices for

their farm products.

In the past decade, the environmental crisis in the Amazonian rainforest has focused international attention on the issues of cultural pluralism and economic justice and the proper management of natural resources. Similarly, media fanfare over the Columbus Quincentenary created a tremendous reservoir of sympathy for native peoples and respect for their many contributions to the modern world. These events helped to discredit "assimilationist" policies and bring indigenous development issues to the boardroom tables of international and national institutions in Latin America.

But it had taken indigenous peoples years of dedicated organization building to be in a position to seize this historic opportunity. An emerging indigenous intelligentsia, activism by environmentalists and other allies, and increased international financial support for meetings of native peoples had helped form stronger indigenous coalitions to coordinate efforts toward common goals.

This organizational push and the rejuvenated interest in native peoples, even by powerful financial institutions like the World Bank, did not create ready-made solutions. Yet experiences in participatory development, alternative trade markets, and local education suggest sound ways to organize development projects and to build strategies for social change. Among the latter is an approach I would call "ethnodevelopment," which strategically places culture at the center of rural development planning. Local development projects that take this approach demonstrate how indigenous culture – technologies, knowledge, organizational skills, and talents of Indian groups – can be engaged for effective and sustainable development. Strategies for self-reliance like this create local political empowerment and socioeconomic revitalization and may even bring about reform of state policy.

The locally based, culture-centered approach of ethnodevelopment has actually benefited from increased communications, innovative trade rela-

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*Culture & Development in Latin America & the Caribbean has been co-sponsored by the Inter-American Foundation, in celebration of its 25th anniversary of promoting grassroots development.*





tions, and political alliances that transcend national boundaries and regions. These changes in the global context, helped along by the Quincentenary and environmental outcry, have created special niches in international markets for the products of local development projects. They have also led to support by influential political and financial institutions for indigenous peoples' defense of the rainforest. Growing international understanding of the artistic merit of native textiles has opened doors to markets and museums. Moving local culture to the center of development planning is part of these new strategies, alliances, and cultural perspectives.

Ethnodevelopment programs in the hemisphere frequently are based on the recovery of underutilized cultural resources. The internal colonialism of most Latin American societies devalued indigenous cultural resources and excluded them from public development plans. Ethnodevelopment, to the contrary, utilizes and revalorizes indigenous knowledge about crops, plants, the environment, appropriate technology, art, social organization, and language. Despite unrelenting discrimination, such knowledge has been kept alive over many generations and centuries by native communities with strong and resilient cultural identities.

Ethnodevelopment in Latin America is pursued by alternative institutions, which are usually independent from top-down, politically driven government agencies. These include organizations like producer associations, certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), innovative educational and research institutions, and indigenous political federations. These alternative institutions have devel-

*Quinoa, known as the grano de oro de los Andes (golden grain of the Andes), has been grown for thousands of years in the Andes and has recently been discovered by health food stores for its superior nutritional value. Andean farmers such as this Peruvian have spearheaded a quinoa revival through their producer organizations.* Photo by Miguel Sayago

oped ways to restructure market relations, refocus educational programs, and increase indigenous self-management capacities and opportunities. They use cultural recovery and identity revalidation for socioeconomic development.

The ethnodevelopment approach has its precursors. Chief among these are the "participatory" or "people-centered" approaches which emerged in the 1970s via NGOs and grassroots organizations. They gained a place in the 1980s both in social science literature and in important international organizations (Uphoff and Esman 1984). The Inter-American Foundation, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary, was in the forefront of U.S. entities working in Latin America with this approach.

The participatory approach was a response to the Third World development patterns which, "top down," were controlled by social elites and, "trickle down," widened the gulf between haves and have-nots (Barraclough 1991). Standard Western development approaches were also seen to rapidly diminish the world's non-renewable natural resources and to force huge populations into overcrowded urban shantytowns.

Earlier in this century, some native groups themselves showed the way by using their cultural val-





Native peoples of Ecuador and Bolivia helped organize experimental bilingual schools in their communities that later contributed to national educational reforms. Bilingual education involves not only the use of native languages but active community involvement and a curriculum which highlights the communities' cultural values. Photo by Kevin "Benito" Healy



Andean women recover their sense of dignity through popular education programs that analyze discrimination and explore alternatives. This illustrated, didactic poster from Bolivia reflects experiences shared by native women in community workshops. Illustration by Germán Treviño

ues and traditions as a foundation for development. The Otavaleños of Ecuador created a regional textile industry with sophisticated marketing strategies and used the earnings to reestablish a land base for their group (Solomon 1972). The Mexican Nahua transformed traditional ceramic designs into bark paintings and have sold them to tourists and other consumers to sustain economic development (Goode 1988). And in perhaps the hemisphere's most famous and commercially successful use of culture for development, the Kuna of the San Blas Islands transformed their body painting traditions into appliqué work called *molas*.

Ethnodevelopment projects described in this article involve native peoples in the Western hemisphere and fall into three main project areas: agriculture, education, and native arts.

The recovery of native crops is important to the world's food supply as well as to the development of native peoples. The National Academy of Sciences' recent book, *The Lost Crops of the Incas*, describes many valuable Andean native plants available for use in development programs, among them *quinoa*. A highly nutritious cereal grain now sold in health food stores in the United States, *quinoa* has been grown by native peoples high in the Andes for thousands of years. Agricultural development and aid policies emphasized wheat at the expense of *quinoa*, contributing to the latter's decline from the 1950s through the 1970s. However, the rising health consciousness primarily among affluent Western consumers has created a demand for *quinoa* and an opportunity for Aymara and Quechua organizations to manage all stages of its production, from organic cultivating and processing to transporting and exporting. Prehispanic organizations called *ayllu*s organize the production of *quinoa* with tractors on communally owned pampas in otherwise desolate corners of the Andes at 12,000 ft. above sea level.

This year's Folklife Festival includes two examples of indigenous organizations that export organic products and build upon native communal traditions. The federations of El Ceibo in Bolivia and ISMAM in Mexico produce organic coffee and cacao with state-of-the-art agrobiological practices, directly exporting to U.S. and Western European health food stores. Another federation that side-steps commercial middlemen to reach markets abroad is the Brazilian sisal-producing APAEB.

The cultural recovery of native tree species in the



Andean countries has become a key resource for reforestation programs to improve soils and vegetation. Blinded by assimilationist policies and dependency on Western resources, planners overlooked the tree species adapted to the landscape over millennia. The Australian eucalyptus tree, for example, enjoyed a long heyday in Latin America modernization programs because of its rapid growth, aesthetic appeal, and practical uses. But its negative impact on soil conservation and ground water supplies available for nearby plants has shaken the faith of even its most die-hard advocates. This change in attitude has led to greater appreciation for native communities as permanent protectors of these resources. Indigenous organizations began mobilizing support, establishing decentralized nurseries, cooperating in research on indigenous knowledge, and even identifying the important place of native trees in indigenous ceremonies and rituals.

Cultural recovery also contributes to school reform in indigenous communities. A monolingual (Spanish) educational policy that exclusively promotes Western values often fails to meet even its own objectives. Instead of turning out productive citizens with the skills and "modern values" needed for a rapidly changing economy, it has left community members with low self-esteem and poor reading and writing skills. The search for solutions to

this crisis led NGOs, grassroots organizations, and local community groups to undertake small-scale bilingual education programs.

Two pilot projects became models for national educational reform plans in their respective countries. In the Andean mountains of Ecuador, a church organization in collaboration with native leaders and educators fended off opposition from the public authorities to organize bilingual (Quechua-Spanish) elementary schools taught by indigenous members of the same community who had received intensive training in their new profession. In the dry, hot, Bolivian Chaco, native Guaranis and an educational NGO established a bilingual school district with teachers-college graduates they themselves retrained in an educational approach which respected and utilized native cultural values. Indigenous federations can provide political muscle to sustain such experiments. For example, in the Ecuadorian city of Latacunga, a protest march by 5,000 federation members mobilized support for the legal recognition of the bilingual school district.

The Andean experience also showed that bilingual education requires overhauling the school curriculum to reflect the culture, history, and physical environment of the participating native communities. Under conventional rural schooling,

## Cultural Energy & Grassroots Development

by Charles D. Kley Meyer

"Culture is like a tree," says Mariano López, a Tzotzil Indian leader from the municipality of Chamula in Chiapas, Mexico. "If the green branches – a people's language, legends, and customs – are carelessly lopped off, then the roots that bind people to their place on the earth and to each other also begin to wither. The wind and rain and the elements carry the topsoil away; the land becomes a desert." Afro-Ecuadorian folklorist Juan García echoes this urgency and, in so doing, offers a solution. "Cultural rescue," he says, "is impossible without

development at the community level. And the converse is also true."

Both of these testimonies imply that cultural expression, in all its richness and variety, is not just a by-product of how a society organizes its social and productive relationships; it is a vital instrument for generating the insights and energy needed to transform those relationships.

Cultural energy is a prime motivator of social action among individuals, groups, communities, and even nations. It is generated by common people through everyday creative expression – in work and in "entertainment," which often

overlap. It is also galvanized by the concerted efforts of cultural activists who consciously use it as a development tool. They realize that the presence or absence of cultural energy can make the difference in whether a project is launched, sustained, and expanded. Cultural energy is a powerful force in the creation and reinforcement of group solidarity, organizational efficacy, participation, and volunteer spirit – all of which are basic ingredients of successful grassroots development initiatives.

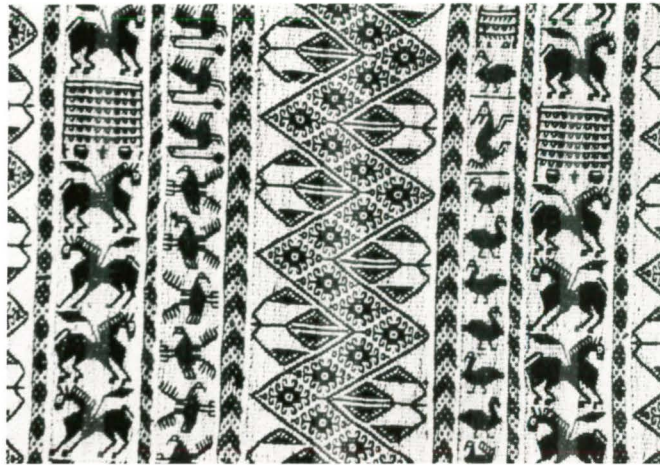
Excerpted from: Charles D. Kley Meyer. 1992. *Cultural Energy & Grassroots Development*. *Grassroots Development* 16/1:22-31.



indigenous school children were expected to absorb their lessons from texts which shunned or trivialized their culture and presented strange images and concepts of urban, middle-class lifestyles. For revamping these curricula, the United Nations has promoted the term "intercultural" education, a broadening of the narrow Eurocentric focus to incorporate indigenously based perspectives.

The Centro de Capacitación Integral de la Mujer Campesina (CIMCA), a participant in this year's Folklife Festival, has developed popular education programs for consciousness raising and leadership development among poor native women in a remote region of the Andes. Popular education of this sort in Latin America has its roots in the ideas and methods of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. His widely read book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, describes a philosophy for non-formal education that treats issues of social discrimination and power. Popular education opposes the rigid, authoritarian, rote-memory style of formal schooling, which reinforces discrimination toward low-income people. It revitalizes indigenous cultural values and social movements and gives native peoples a different place in the school history texts. One can see the effects of this approach in the enormous volume of popular literature that contributes to the revitalization of Native American cultures – booklets, pamphlets, educational comic books, didactic posters, and simple training manuals. Popular education also develops skills to help indigenous organizations manage the *mini-medios*, or alternative social communications. Producing educational bulletins and newsletters has enabled indigenous peoples to advocate their development agendas more effectively.

An adjunct to popular education, community radio has opposed the deculturation that came with commercial broadcasting and wide use of the transistor radio. Rural educational radio stations were often begun by Catholic organizations to prosely-



*In an era of multiculturalism, native textile designs similar to this pattern from the Tarabuco ethnic group are popular among students and others as a form of wearable art. Indigenous associations of producers have developed favorable markets with Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) in the United States and Western Europe. Photo by Sean Sprague*

tize widely dispersed native populations. The ethics promulgated by the Second Vatican Council changed the church's radio goals from "civilizing" Indians to assisting indigenous struggles for social justice and development. Thus radio stations like Radio Latacunga in Ecuador became critical sources of information, voices for cultural values, and forums of

community problems for thousands of indigenous communities in the hemisphere. Native peoples savored the sounds of their once-suppressed voices, languages, stories, music, and heroes, as well as the personal greetings and development information spread through a new and powerful medium. They "took the microphone in their hands" to achieve previously unimaginable roles as regional broadcasters and local reporters of community news and grassroots struggles.

Another impressive example of ethnodevelopment in the hemisphere has been the recovery of hand-woven textile traditions. Because native costumes were popular among tourists, they became an important source of cash for communities struggling to survive in the expanding market economies of the Andes and Central America. To attain greater income, rural development strategies have tried to improve the quality of workmanship and increase the producers' share of profit by organizing associations and cooperatives. These organizations can be fragile and fail to survive the competition, yet many groups are forging ahead to bring economic progress to their communities.

Promoting native art for economic development often requires building a community business from the bottom up, in villages and communities with a legacy of poor educational opportunity. Festival participants such as the Jalq'a and Tarabukeños of Bolivia, the Maya of Guatemala, the Kuna of Panama, the Taquileños of Peru, the artisans of Haiti, and the Mapuche of Chile know the many





challenges of obtaining raw materials at reasonable prices, keeping accurate records, devising investment and marketing strategies, organizing skills-training programs, and ensuring the accountability of leaders and managers.

A recent strategy in ethnodevelopment of handwoven textiles uses art museums and galleries to educate the public about living traditions and to promote sales by native art producer organizations. The former institutions reflect a growing awareness in North and South America that finely woven native textiles are valuable decorative arts. A prime example of this was the 1992 Native American art exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which included numerous articles of traditional dress. In Latin America, the ironies of this change in perception are not lost on the indigenous weavers, whose finely woven clothing still elicits ridicule on the streets of Latin American cities.

The visual codes of textile art are a window into the history, the world view, and the spiritual dimensions of a society and its relationship with the physical environment. Revitalization of this art form brings a deeper appreciation among native groups as well as outside observers for communal ritual practice, festival celebrations, traditional forms of authority, and democratic decision making. Organizations such as ASUR of Bolivia, La Casa de la Mujer Mapuche of Chile, Taquile Island of Peru, and CDRO of Guatemala in this year's Festival show fruits of this broader cultural recovery.

Ethnodevelopment also can involve struggles to

*The convergence of the environmental movement with the Columbus Quincentenary empowered indigenous movements seeking "territorial rights" in the Amazon basin and other parts of the hemisphere. This 34-day Bolivian "March for Territory and Dignity" led to presidential decrees granting a million and a half hectares to native peoples of the lowlands. Photo by Presencia*

regain control over indigenous lands. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the call for "territorial rights" by forest-dwelling peoples from the Amazon region became one of the loudest rallying cries in the Americas. As global environmental consciousness grew, the cause of territorial rights reached the front pages of newspapers and the lips of national political figures. Deforestation of indigenous homelands by timber and oil companies, investors, ranchers, peasant colonists, and miners left Indians little choice but to oppose the prevailing development policies and seek allies in the environmental movement. They were able to draw legitimacy and support, for example, from the revised Convention 169 of the UN's International Labor Organization, which promotes the constitutional rights of tribal and native peoples to their own development and unique cultural identities.

What do Amazonian Indians want? The most important goal is national legal recognition of their *collective rights* to territorial units large enough for traditional rainforest lifestyles, environmental protection, and small-scale sustainable development. These rights include administration of the territory by traditional native institutions. Indigenous terri-



torial resource management is bound up with local cultural identities, for as anthropologists have shown, group self-identification in the Amazonian rainforest is based on both physical and symbolic relationships with a particular geographical area (Davis and Wali 1993). Earlier conservation programs in the Amazon – national parks, protected areas, and biosphere reserves – typically ignored these basic cultural rights and identities of the native inhabitants.

Influenced by the nonviolent political mobilization of indigenous organizations in the 1980s and early 1990s, national governments recognized the Indians' territorial rights to over 17 million hectares in Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador. New rights on paper are an impressive political triumph, but official recognition is part of a long-term struggle to keep natural resources from predatory economic agents and to manage sustainable development.

Fortunately, Amazonian organizations have two established models of territorial control in the Shuar of Amazonian Ecuador and the Kuna of Panama. Both achieved their territorial rights and autonomy many decades ago through political activism. Now their indigenous professionals go on technical missions to improve natural resource management in the new Amazonian territories, and their organizations form cooperative agreements with outside institutions and individual botanists, biologists, and other scientists to help protect the area's biodiversity and gain development assistance.

Native groups at an early stage of their quest for territorial rights sometimes use the techniques of community mapping. Historically, maps have been used by the politically powerful sectors of society to impose their landholding desires on native peoples. At best, indigenous peoples hired outside professionals to make maps for their legal use. But recent participatory mapmaking methods have partially

turned the tables, enabling indigenous and peasant communities to gain social and political advantage from their intimate knowledge of the environment. Settlements, houses, temporary structures, soils, trees, water resources, and forest types recorded on the maps convey social and natural landscapes more accurately than official maps and undermine efforts to present territories as "uninhabited lands." As part of the broader social process of empowering rural peoples in Latin America, community mapmaking can be widely used to produce and analyze local knowledge. At this year's Festival, the Emberá demonstrate how they used community mapping strategies to defend their environment and territory in the Darién zone of Panama.

As a group, the ethnodevelopment projects represented at this year's Festival combine the recovery of cultural and organizational resources with the use of technologies developed relatively recently, like community-based surveying and radio broadcasting. All of these strategies serve the ultimate goal of empowering the original inhabitants of our hemisphere as active participants in their own development.

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Kevin "Benito" Healy is a representative for the Andean region at the Inter-American Foundation. He has a Ph.D. in development sociology from Cornell University and frequently speaks and writes on Andean grassroots development issues. He has long-standing relationships with the Festival groups from Bolivia and Peru beginning with his work on Taquile Island as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1960s.

Charles D. Kleymeyer is a representative for the Andean region at the Inter-American Foundation. He has a Ph.D. in development studies from the University of Wisconsin.