

Weaving the Future Script

I traveled to the Andean highlands of Northern Ecuador in search of more than llamas and mountains. I hoped to discover Indian traditions and Inca legends. The reality I found is that most native people remain among the poorest of the poor, lacking basic health care and education. But it's a different story in Otavalo. The Otavalos are weavers and traders. They travel the world selling their textiles and playing their music.

My wife says I make the same movie over and over. I'm an urban, Jewish, cosmopolitan, but I find myself obsessed with ideas about tradition, identity and self-sufficiency. I became fascinated with the story of the Otavalos--- the most prosperous Indians in Latin America. I believe that they have a right to tell their own story, but inevitably this has become a story told by me. I was surprised to hear that the Otavalos are called the "Jews of Ecuador." It's true. They are merchants in the rag trade. Selling their sweaters, shirts, tapestries and rugs from Columbia to Chile, in Europe, Japan and the United States.

Otavalos have always been "model Indians." By the 1950s Otavalo was christened the "Awaking Valley," chronicled by anthropologists and captured by North American tourists and photographers.

Intrigued by the crafts, delighted by the music, curious about the customs, I joined the parade of outsiders eager to understand and explain the world of the Otavalos.

I was invited to film Inti-Raimi a festival celebrating the June solstice and the corn harvest. The men dress in costumes. The most important is the Aya Huma, a nature spirit and masked warrior. The men drink and dance all night, ritually stomping the ground, planting the seeds of life, ensuring the next harvest. I was invited to dance, and when I finally put the camera down I felt swept along---- for a moment part of the community.

To an outsider the rhythms of community life seem timeless and intriguing. But it's not that simple. Otavalos still remember that for too many years the reality of life here was poverty and prejudice.

MIGUEL ANGEL:

THE COMMUNITIES HAD SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITH RACISM---

IN THE MARKET, WITH POLITICAL OFFICIALS, IN THE STREETS IN THE CITY.

TO BE AN INDIAN IS TO BE BEATEN.

I WAS VERY AFRAID---

EVEN GOING OUT WITH

MY OWN FATHER

TO THE CITY.

BECAUSE IN THE CITY

THOSE WHITES AND MEZTIZOS

BEAT US. MISTREATED US.

MY FATHER COULDN'T

SAY ANYTHING.

My family was living in Quito. The capital is full of young Otavalos selling on the streets. I met Segundo Flores selling his sweaters near my apartment and he invited me to come visit him in his home near Otavalo. To pass the time I watch a traditionally dressed Otavalo woman as she watched Sylvester Stallone.

Segundo Flores lives here with his brother Jaime's family. They have electricity, but no indoor plumbing. Jaime and Rosa have 2 children. Rumin~hui, named after an Inca warrior, and Stalin named after the bolshevik revolutionary. 90 year old grandfather Rafael lives with family too. He spent his life in poverty forced to work for hacendados--- wealthy landowners who ruled their enormous estates like feudal lords.

Miguel Angel:

HE WAS A DEBT SERF.

THEY HAD TO WORK IN THE

HACIENDA MONDAY TO

SUNDAY FROM DAWN

UNTIL 8 OR 9 AT NIGHT.

IT WAS ALWAYS THIS WAY.

MOST OF THESE PEONS

HAD DEBTS, PERMANENT DEBTS.

PASSED DOWN

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

THERE WAS NO WAY

THEY COULD LEAVE.

THEY WERE TIED TO THE HACIENDA.

The end of huasipingo---debt serfdom ---came too late for grandfather Rafael. But today his children and grandchildren are no longer bound to the land. The Flores are self-employed---entrepreneurs --- weaving and selling sweaters. Everybody works. Rumiñhui winds the yarn onto bobbins. Segundo works the loom. en do most of the weaving in Otavalo. They even weave their hair into shoulder length braids. Segundo told me he can weave enough cloth to make about 10 sweaters a day. This is production weaving. Segundo works quickly and with few breaks.

Jaime Flores:

THE FAMILY WORKS TOGETHER.

ME, MY BROTHER,

MY BROTHER-IN-LAW,

MY WIFE AND MY SONS.

WE LIKE TO WORK.

WE ONLY EARN

A LITTLE MONEY.

THE WOOL IS EXPENSIVE.

WE CAN'T MAKE THAT MUCH.

Sweaters. There are always sweaters. But Rosa also cooks, cleans, washes, irons and keeps house for the 3 men and 2 boys in her family.

What struck me most was my own tendency to romanticize the community here. I remember the special quality of the light.. The overwhelming sound I heard was the shuttle looms going back and forth. It seemed like from every house. And I had this fantasy of a community of people able to support themselves by crafts and artwork.

It took me awhile to see that the story here is more complicated than that.

Luis Morales is a very successful Otavalo businessman and a high priest in the local Mormon church. He owns ejidos Rumiñhui and employs 20 workers in his automated factory. They earn up to \$200 a month manufacturing 60,000 sweaters a year. Luis's profits are driven by exports. His markets include Columbia, Chile, Europe and the United States.

JAIME:

WE'RE SMALL PRODUCERS.

WE CAN'T TRAVEL ABROAD.

WE SELL TO MIDDLEMEN.

THEY BUY FOR EXPORT.

NOT US. WE DON'T HAVE

THE CAPITAL.

LUIS MORALES:

SOME FAMILIES DON'T LIKE

TO WORK. OTHERS DO.

SOME ALSO TRAVEL. THEY

HAVE MORE KNOW-HOW.

OTHERS DON'T TRAVEL, SO

THEY CAN'T GET AHEAD.

IT'S A LITTLE TOUGH.

THIS IS THE ONLY REASON

THAT THERE IS A LITTLE

INEQUALITY. FOR NO

OTHER REASON.

After the Flores' sold their sweaters to the wholesalers, Segundo agreed to show me around the Saturday market. The market is remarkably quiet. A young mother works for almost an hour putting her display together. Her baby holds a wrench, eager to help. By 10 the tourists begin to arrive. Some are just looking. Not buying hats. Trying on blouses. Towering over the Otavalos.

The impact of tourism is enormous. Tourists spend about \$7 million a year in Otavalo.

Tim Crowley: "The people here realize that the tourists are their bread and butter. And they like them. And they treat them well. They're very hospitable. That is what brought me here. That's why I stayed because it's just so charming going out into these villages and feeling like you're actually talking to these bizarre looking people. Beautiful. But they're not all that much unlike us.

WASHO CAHUASQUI:

MOST PEOPLE COME LOOKING
FOR "QUAINT CUSTOMS."

AND THAT'S TOO BAD.

"QUAINT CUSTOMS" ARE NOT
THE SAME THING AS CULTURE

MARIO CONJEO:

THE TOURIST INDUSTRY
ISN'T IN INDIGENOUS
HANDS. IT'S IN THE HANDS
OF WHITES AND MEZTIZOS.

THOSE WHO BENEFIT
MOST FROM TOURISM
IN OTAVALO ARE THE
WHITES AND MEZTISOS.

Every September at the time of the fall equinox the white-meztiso tourist industry celebrates Yamor. It's promoted as an indigenous festival. But the queen of Yamor is never a Native.

LUIS MALDONADO:
THE FESTIVAL OF YAMOR IS
AN INDIGENOUS FIESTA.
BUT THE CELEBRATION
ISN'T ABOUT YAMOR ---
THE BEER ---THE CHICHA-
--THAT'S MADE FROM CORN.
THE ^SCHICHA^S IS PART
OF THE RITUAL ---
THE FIESTA THAT'S CALLED
COYA RAIMI

The festival is held on a soccer field just down the road from the Flores family home. People from many different Indian communities have come together to celebrate the fall equinox ---the festival of Coya Raimi. The celebration is organized by F-I-C-I The Federation of Indigenous and Country People of Imbabura. F-I-C-I represents Otavalos and neighboring communities as part of a national Indian Rights Movement. In 1990 they joined with indigenous organizations from throughout Ecuador staging el Levantamiento--- The Indian Uprising.

" We are here for our land. For our people."

Blocking roads from the Amazon rainforest to the Andean highlands native peoples coordinated a national protest demanding land and justice. Although many Otavalos are no longer as impoverished as most, they appreciate the importance of a united Indian Rights Movement.

MIGULE ANGEL CARLOSAMA:
SINCE THE "INDIAIN UPRISING"
IN 1990, CONSCIOUSNESS
HAS BEEN RAISED.
WE'RE NEVER AGAIN GOING
TO STAND FOR EXPLOITATION.

WE'RE NOT GOING TO RETURN

TO THE TIME OF SERFDOM---

TO THE TIME OF RACISM.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD

ON THE HACIENDA

THE TEACHERS MADE US

SPEAK TOTALLY IN SPANISH.

AND WE DIDN'T KNOW HOW.

WE HAD TO SPEAK

QUICHA SECRETLY.

THEY TAUGHT US SPANISH

BY WHIPPING US.

JAIME FLORES:

BEFORE THERE WAS

A LOT OF EXPLOITATION.

BUT NOW THERE'S NOT.

BECAUSE NOW WE RESPECT

ONE ANOTHER.

THERE'S BILINGUAL EDUCATION---

OUR LANGUAGE AND

SPANISH.

FOR THE KIDS ---I WANT THEM

TO STUDY. IF POSSIBLE

TO GO TO THE UNIVERSITY.

TO GET SOME KIND OF DEGREE.

TO DO SOME KIND OF

PROFESSIONAL WORK.

BECAUSE IN THE FUTURE

MAKING HANDICRAFTS

WILL BE VERY HARD FOR THEM.

BECAUSE THERE'S

LOTS OF HANDICRAFTS.

IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO DO MUCH.

Like most kids his age Rumiñhui has dropped out of school. He's trying to convince his father Jaime to let him travel overseas--- to sell sweaters on the street. For large numbers of young Otavalos selling overseas is a big adventure. But it's not easy. They don't know the language. They don't know the customs. They have to learn how to get buy.

Tim: "Those people that have gone overseas and started making a lot of money for around here, come back and they're really quite changed. They really want to have a big radio, a car.

They're as much entitled to progress, I'm sure, as anyone is."

Some Otavalos change after living in the States. And some are changed by missionaries coming to Otavalo.

MARIO CONEJO:

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTALS

OF PROTESTANTISM IS

INDIVIDUALISM.

THE INDIGENOUS TRADITION
IS MORE COMMUNITARIAN.
THIS IS ONE
NEGATIVE FEATURE
ADOPTED BY THE MORMON
OR EVANGELICAL INDIGENOUS.
BECAUSE IT'S OBVIOUS
THAT THERE'S A TREMENDOUS
INDIVIDUALISM.
THIS MAKES US MAKES US
EASY MARKS FOR THIS
PROCESS OF CONSUMERISM
WHICH YOU CAN SEE ALL
AROUND US.

Elder Scott: "The reason why I'm here is that first of all I was called by a prophet of God to preach the word of God. I was sent here by revelation to teach the people here in Ecuador and especially in Otavalo. Some members through becoming members of the church have become more successful. They have received more blessings from their father in heaven. But I've also seen others that have gone through more turmoil."

Mormon and Evangelical missionaries have made great headway among Otavalos.

JAIME FLORES:
BEFORE WE WERE CATHOLICS.
BUT WE'VE CHANGED.
WELL I HAVEN'T CHANGED.
BUT MY WIFE, MY TWO SONS
ARE IN THE FOREIGN CHURCH.

THEY BELONG THERE.

NOT ME.....NOT YET.

Catholic or not, on the Day of the Dead all Otavalo families honor their ancestors. Jaime's asked Segundo to bring flowers for their mother's grave. Jaime's sister-in-law Gladys has come with her newborn baby Diana. Diana's father Alberto is hanging with his friends, wired for his walkman. As tradition requires, Rosa-- Jaime's wife--- has brought food for both the living and the dead. While the Rizadores intone traditional prayers, white-meztizo vendors sell balloons and ice cream. Times have changed. Today Otavalos can hire meztizos to repair Indian graves.

And in town Indian school boys are getting shoeshines from meztizo kids.

LUIS TARQUINO PINTO:

I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

OF THOSE [INDIANS] IS GOOD.

MUCH BETTER THAN THAT OF

US [WHITE-MEZTIZOS].

Tim: "Between meztisos and indigenous there's a huge amount of envy. the indigenous work harder. They're more thrifty. They save in order to be able to invest. And they're quickly taking over the economic power in the town."

MARIO CONEJO:

I UNDERSTAND THAT IT'S HARD TO ACCEPT AN INDIAN CAN LIVE BETTER THAN HE

CAN; THAT AN INDIAN CAN HAVE A NEW CAR AND HE CAN'T;

THAT AN INDIAN CAN TRAVEL AND HE CAN'T

Tim: "There's huge envy on the part of the meztizos. And the meztizos still have the political power which is also probably going to change pretty quickly.

MARIO CONEJO:

THERE ARE PARTS OF THE

INDEGENOUS COMMUNITY

WHO BELIIEVE THAT

NOW IS THE TIME

TO GET EVEN WITH

THE WHITES AND MEZTIZOS.

WE DON'T BELIEVE THAT IS THE WAY.

WE BELIEVE THAT

WE HAVE TO

SEIZE THE TIME ---

DEMOCRATIZE POWER

AND DEMOCRATIZE

THE [POLITICAL] SPACE

IN OTAVALO.

Despite inter-ethnic tensions, there is an old Otavalo tradition of seeking out white compadres ---godfathers----for Indian children.

My friend Jaime asked my wife and I to be godparents for his niece Diana. I told him if he didn't mind Jewish godparents we didn't mind buying the pig for the 3 day christening party.

A few days after the party, Jaime and Segundo came to see me in Quito. They hoped I could help get them a visa to travel to the States. Every year about 10% of Otavalos travel to foreign countries. But visas to the United States are the hardest to get.

Jaime Flores:

WE'RE NOT THINKING OF

LIVING OVER THERE.

FOR CRAFTS AND MUSIC
AND GOD WILLING
TO HAVE A LITTLE MONEY
FOR OUR HOME
AND FOR OUR KIDS.
BUT ...THIS IS OUR IDEA.

WASHO M. CAHUASQUI:
REGARDING OUR CRAFTS IN
OTAVALO AND TEXTILES---
ONLY A LITTLE IS
GOING TO LAST.
LOTS IS CHANGING.
WE NEED TO LOOK
FOR [OTHER] KINDS OF WORK.
WE HOPE TO UNDERSTAND
THAT WITH THE PROFITS
FROM CRAFTS,
THE PEOPLE OF OTAVALO,
THE COMMUNITY,
WILL CONCENTRATE MORE
ON STUDY, ON EDUCATING
THEIR CHILDREN,

TO HAVE WORK,
TO HAVE A VISION.
BECAUSE WE AREN'T GOING
TO LIVE OUR WHOLE LIVES
FROM CRAFTS.
IT'S NOT GOING TO BE
THAT WAY FOREVER.
THE WORLD HAS ENOUGH CRAFTS.

The future in Otavalo is far from certain. The U.S. embassy refused to let Jaime and Segundo visit me in the States. Jaime's brother-in-law, Alberto, has left his wife Gladys and our godchild.

MARIO CONEJO:

THE PEOPLE OF OTAVALO
THE OTAVALO INDIANS
HAVE DEMONSTRATED
IN THESE 500 YEARS
A VERY IMPORTANT ABILITY
TO ADAPT
TO NEW REALITIES.
THERE ISN'T ANY OTAVALO
HERE
---A YOUNG PERSON,
NO MATTER HOW
DYSFUNCTIONAL
HE APPEARS,

NO MATTER HOW MUCH
HE APPEARS TO HAVE
LOST HIS TRADITIONS---
THERE ISN'T ONE OF THEM
WHO DOESN'T FEEL PROUD
TO BE AN OTAVALO INDIAN---
A QUICHA OTAVALO

I think in a matter of decades people are going to stop speaking their traditional language;
know as much about Inti-Raimi as I do about the ritual meaning of Jewish holidays, and in many ways
be cut-off from customs and insights that their grandparents and great-grandparents had.

JAIME FLORES:

THE SYMBOL OF THE

AYA HUMA...

HOW CAN I TELL YOU?

I DON'T KNOW.

LOTS OF US HAVE CHANGED.

AND HAVE LOST

THE CULTURE, THE TRADITIONS.

LUIS MALDONADO:
THE INDIAN PEOPLE

HAVEN'T DISAPPEARED.

WE ARE ALIVE.

WE'EW OUT IN FORCE.

WE ARE BOUND TOGETHER

BY COMMITMENTS, BY THE
PROJECT OF CREATING
A SOCIETY WITHOUT OPPRESSION.
WITHOUT RACIAL DISCRIMINATION.
WITHOUT INJUSTICE.
WE WANT TO LIVE IN PEACE.

MIGUEL ANGEL:

WE'RE CHANGING.

WE'RE PROUD TO BE

CHANGING.

TODAY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

HAVE A VOICE.

BEFORE NO.

AND WE GIVE OUR SUPPORT TO OTHERS.

WE'RE CHANGING.

It seems to me that the Otavalos are weaving their future. Taking threads from the past.
Creating new patterns. They keep what they want of tradition. Changing in their own way, to their own rhythm.
Skills I'm still trying to master.