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## COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING IN THE PERUVIAN ANDES: Decolonizing the academic disciplines

**Jorge Ishizawa**

In the final years of the 1980s, PRATEC, the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies, formally a NGO, was approached by authorities of the National University of Cajamarca seeking to have university staff learn how to impart knowledge that was pertinent to their students, in large majority from campesino origin. The first course was offered in 1990 and was mostly attended by university teachers. A few NGO staff members were invited to provide their rich field experience and their reflections on it. During the decade 1990-1999, PRATEC offered annual courses on Andean Peasant Agriculture in agreement with the state universities of San Cristóbal de Huamanga, Ayacucho (1990-93) and Cajamarca (1994-99) for the training of university teachers and personnel of rural development NGOs.

At the time knowledge in agriculture and related rural development studies was imparted at the university under a White Studies regime. This originated in Europe, specifically the prestigious agricultural school at Gembloux, Belgium, from where the founders of the first agricultural school in Peru came at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, more recently, in the United States. Doves of agronomists joined the Green Revolution for the modernization of Peruvian agriculture, based on the knowledge proper to cultivating the plains, and were thus totally blind to the specific characteristics of the Andean highlands. Before the agrarian reform in 1969, the coastal and highland haciendas [plantations] hired professionals to exploit the privileged stretches of land where modern agriculture could thrive. Thus, export crops like sugar cane and cotton were cultivated in the coastal haciendas and modern husbandry for wool, milk and meat was installed in the highland haciendas. Crops for sustenance were cultivated in marginal lands. With the recovery of the highlands by the native communities, and the demise of the hacienda system, the demands on technical personnel in the rural development professions changed in nature. Development projects required technical personnel knowledgeable in local agricultural practices. The agrarian universities were not ready for this change. The late Sergio Cuzco, an agronomist from Cajamarca, in the northern highlands, gives testimony to the challenge that confronted PRATEC's course: "When we left the University, we tried to take all the innovations we had learned and introduced them in the work we carried out with a NGO. We had resources, we could afford the minga (contribution to the common fund), we gave the peasants food. The peasants accepted all of it saying, 'It's OK'. Soon we realized that all the communal work achieved was ruined by the campesinos themselves. ... Having left the NGO in frustration we visited the campesinos and they said very frankly that we had done wrong. I learned that they themselves had to decide how they were going to improve the chacra [cultivated field]... To engage in a relationship of equivalence with the campesinos, ... we got a chacra and we established... a relation of reciprocity with the campesinos: we help them, they help us. Whatever we get from outside the community is for the ayni [mutual help]... We are strengthening what the campesinos do. We tell them: What you improve is according to your understanding of how the chacra must be nurtured. It is a strengthening of their thinking, of their practices. We do not propose blueprints, because we are very much aware that the chacras are not equal, because the campesino conducts it according to his own understanding and possibilities" (Afirmación Cultural Andina [Lima: PRATEC, 1993], 140-141).

It was people like Sergio Cuzco who provided their rich field experience in the early renderings of the annual course and gave the orientation of its contents. All participants and the members of the teaching team were learners. The course trained people who could accompany campesino families as Sergio did.

This is perhaps the explanation of the failure of the PRATEC course to meet the request of the university authorities in Cajamarca. Besides its contents, the course's format was too unusual for adoption in the regular programs of the host universities. The PRATEC annual course provided instead the impetus for the formation of community-based local and indigenous NGOs spread throughout the country (twenty, at the latest count) with which PRATEC has been implementing joint projects for the strengthening of rural communities that practice Andean traditional agriculture. These local NGOs are called Nuclei for Andean Cultural Affirmation (NACA). Starting in July 1995, PRATEC has been coordinating a number of programs for the strengthening of Andean peasant agriculture. One such project, funded by the German Ministry for Cooperation and Development (BMZ), was carried out by six newly founded NACAs (over the two existing then) in its first phase (1995-98) with two new NACAs joining in the second phase (1999-2001). The NACAs are formed by graduates of the annual course and are autonomous both from the administrative and financial points of view. The annual course provided a space for reflection and exchange on what was being learned in the accompaniment of the Andean Amazonian communities of nurturers of the diversity of plants and animals. There has been a constant feedback between the course and the projects' implementation. Together both activities can be seen as a form of research in action, not conventional academic research but documentation, reflection, exchange and dissemination centered on the demands

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posed by the accompaniment with the communities.

As an activity included in recent projects, PRATEC offered its course scaled up into a two-year Masters' program on Biodiversity and Andean Amazonian peasant agriculture. This began to be offered in 2002 in agreement with the Universidad Nacional Agraria de la Selva (UNAS), a state university based in Tingo María, in the upper Amazon region. Thus far, almost sixty university graduates have participated in the program. What has changed with respect to the annual course is the inclusion of an academic unit for in-depth consideration of global issues regarding biodiversity basing our understanding on the cosmovision of the peoples who have nurtured it for millennia.

The chacra at the center

The challenge for curriculum development in the original PRATEC annual course was to find a central idea that could help form people like Sergio Cuzco. The initial curriculum of the annual course identified specific topics on which contrasting views of the relationship nature-society in the Andean cosmovision and the modern Western cosmology could be developed. Central in this early formulation is the chacra or cultivated field as the basis of all conceptual developments. It was the daily life of the campesinos and its regeneration that constituted the course's main concern.

By the fourth version of the course in 1994, a basic curricular structure had emerged which arranged itself around the avatars of the communities in the Andean world. The first academic unit was devoted to the chacra and the sallqa [wild]. The topics of agriculture, soils, water, plants, animals, landscape, climate, were occasions to contrast the campesino understanding of them with the modern Western one. In the latter, nature was reduced to resources. In the Andean conception, all were persons and their relationships of mutual nurturance were explored. The second academic unit dealt with the communities of runas [humans]. The ayllu (the extended family of deities, humans and natural entities in a given locality) was contrasted with the Western notion of society. The third academic unit included topics relating to the communities of deities: Pachamama [Mother Earth], the Apus and achachilas [mountain deities].

There were ten-week periods between workshops where the ideas and concepts were tried in the understanding of the daily events of campesino life. In the first period, the participants were asked to collect five local practices of cultivation, transformation or use of native plants or practices of nurturance of native animals. Apart from contributing to documenting the rich lore of Andean campesino wisdom, the exercise had the educational purpose of the experience of learning to listen. This practice of listening, recording and documenting the knowledge of the communities they accompanied, prepared them to obtain testimonies on which a monograph was required to be presented in the third academic unit.

The fact that some of the course participants were intent on going back to their own communities to revitalize their agriculture and mode of life based on their own strengths and cosmovision provided a unique opportunity to attempt developing a local discourse. A two-tiered approach was used in which the local community-based organizations or NACAs undertook the accompaniment of the communities in their agrocentric cultural affirmation while PRATEC took over the technical coordination and management of joint projects, convening periodic meetings for the exchange of experience among the NACAs and for sharing the reflections made during the year around a common theme that was of pressing interest in the projects. These reflections were written in the form of essays which were put together, edited and published by PRATEC. There has been a strong synergy between the activities in the two tiers.

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