Legends of the High Andes

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The Andes are the longest mountain chain in the world and form the backbone of 7 Andean countries: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. At the foot of these mountains, in the higher valleys, plateaus and basins, there lived once advanced civilizations like the Chibchas and the Incas. A large number of Indian tribes with a lower degree of culture also populated the Andean piedmont. The advent of the white man brought, with the mating of the Indian and European races, a new type of highlander, the *mestizo* or *cholo* (halfbreed). Important segments of the white race also settled near the high mountains. All these peoples originated and stored over the centuries a vast repertoire of folklore directly related to the high Andes. This lore is represented mainly in toponymics (reputedly the most beautiful in the world), in pottery and textile motifs and in different forms of the oral tradition. Most of this folklore has been fairly well studied but one product of oral tradition, legends, has not been. It is a strikingly rich field that still awaits proper research. As a sample of its wealth it will suffice to say that, while the Himalayan mountains have drawn much publicity from a single Snowman, the Andes, with 4 such creatures in their realm, have earned none.

Andean legends are extremely rich and varied, being the product of 3 different races and of 7 constituted nationalities. Wide variety was also encouraged by geographical diversity. The purpose of this contribution is to offer an introduction to these Andean legends by briefly surveying their more recurrent themes and motifs. By *Andean* can be understood any legend related to any being or any thing existing or that existed, whether actually or imaginatively, in the higher zones of the Andes. These higher zones do not depend solely on altitude. In the tropical Andes (N of Bolivia) it may be said to begin around 4000m, but in southernmost Chile, strange as it may sound, the Andean zone begins where the glaciers reach; that is, sea level. Mountaineers familiar with the legends of the mountains of old Europe will recognize in some Andean legends a similarity of traits.

Since the attitudes of the Andean races toward their mountains differ, a basic distribution of legends as per race could be made. Motifs more commonly found along the Andes are of indian origin and of *mestizo* or white origin as follows:

Of Indian Origin (Chibcha, Quechua, Aimara, Araucanian, Tehuelche and Mucu are the main groups).

—Genesis of earth and mountains, with a very common notion among most of the Andeans about the deluge or flood; mountains, passes, glaciers and other highland features as created by gods, titans or tribal heroes. Incidentally, the Paine peaks, so popular among mountaineers, were the souls of famous Araucanian warriors that were petrified by Cai Cai, the evil serpent that brought the flood to Arauco, in Southern Chile.[1]
—Stories about individual mountain peaks that were enshrined or that were ascribed virtues and defects like those of any human being.
—Relations among mountains. The motifs of war, love or marriage between 2 famous mountain peaks is particularly recurrent among Ecuadorian volcanoes.
—Evil and good gods, demigods and supernatural beings, inhabiting the higher areas. The Araucanians of Southern Chile had a particularly rich, albeit confusing, repertoire on these topics.
—Inca treasures buried in caves, mountain tops and volcanic craters, but more commonly in lakes, usually guarded by a bull with golden horns.

Of Mestizo and White Origin—Lost mountain passes, which in theory may link directly 2 distant populated areas in a few hours of march. This is a particularly common legend along the Chilean-Argentinian border, which has a length of some 2700km.
—Lost or mysterious volcanoes, unlocated and which occasionally erupt.
—Lost mines and old Inca or Spanish treasures. For such treasures there is a solid base, since the Incas often buried their dead with rich offerings. To locate such burial places became a usually rewarding sport in the 18th and 19th centuries.[2] And the Spaniards, fleeing from the often vindictive patriots at the times of Independence (around 1810), occasionally buried their belongings hoping to recover them when the King of Spain would reconquer his colonies.

—*Derroteros* ('leads' or courses to a rich mine or burial of treasures).

The *derrotero* legend is extremely abundant in Central Chile, a mining country. Closely related to the *derrotero* or to the hidden treasures are the legends of mountains that cast a spell or a curse upon those who enter their realm, either to ascend them or to uncover treasures or mines existing on their flanks.
—Lost mythical cities, among which the fabled City of the Caesars, supposedly located somewhere in Northern Patagonia, and which originated search expeditions for almost 200 years. Some mythical cities are also said to exist on high mountain tops and can be seen only on specific days of the year and solely under certain circumstances. Legends of this type also have a solid base, since it is now well known that the Indians of the old Incadom climbed for religious purposes some very high

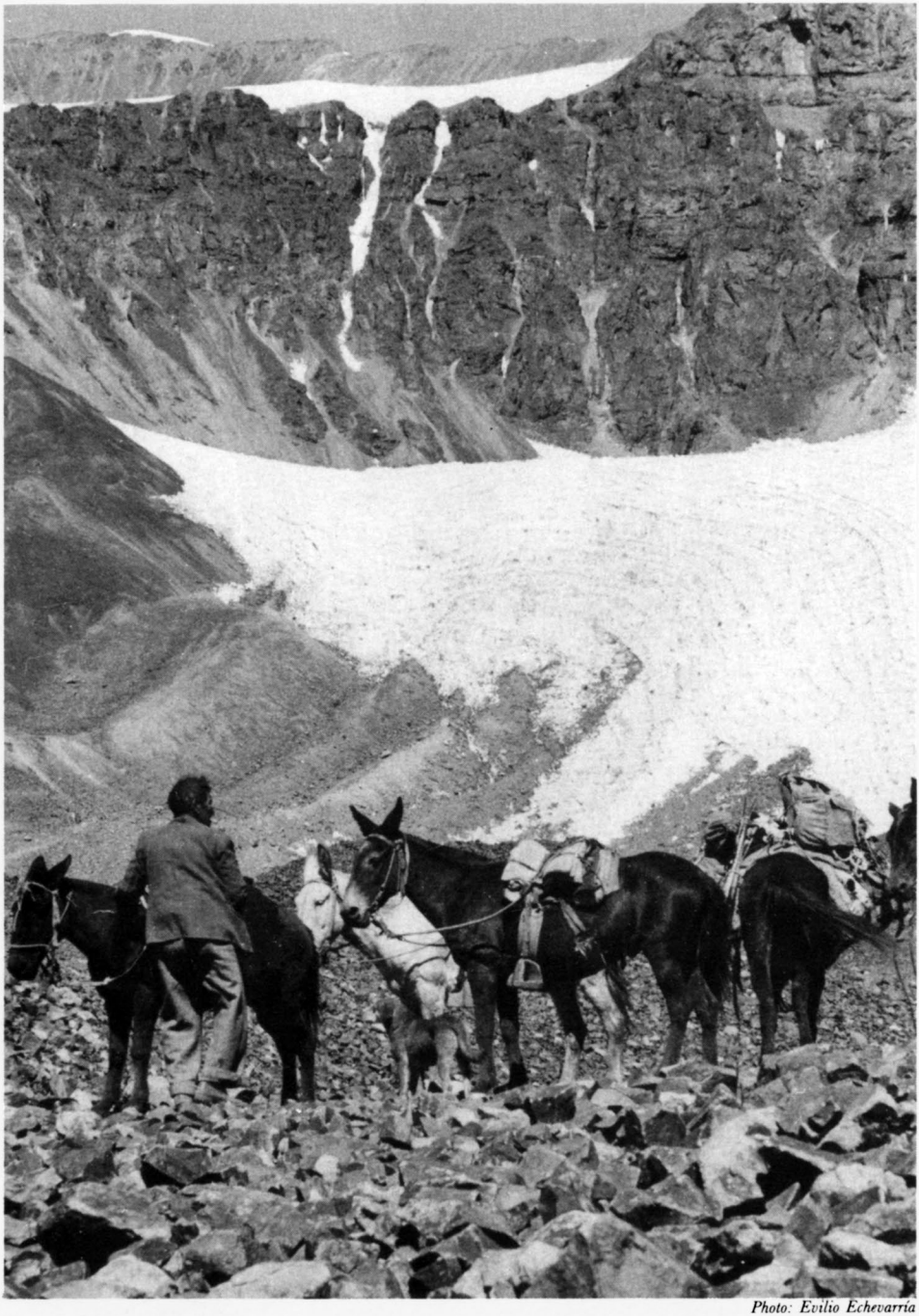

Photo: Evilio Echevarría

23 An Arriero in the central Andes of Chile. The Arriero are the main source for learning the oral tradition

mountains (up to 6700m) and built on their tops sacrificial shrines and stone walls of enclosures (probably habitations). The great quantity of firewood found on such tops and the 'lights' mentioned by legends that refer to such 'cities', clearly indicate that dwellers of the lower valleys were familiar with fires lighted at the summits by their inhabitants.[3]
—The evil doings of the Devil ('El Diablo') in the higher valleys and the damnation brought upon those who dealt with him.
—And the spirits of the snow and the effects they bring upon herdsmen, prospectors, treasure seekers, smugglers, caravans, etc.

The 15 or so motifs listed above, with infinite variants, are by far the most common ones to be heard among the Andean peoples, from Venezuela to Cape Horn. An equally infinite variety of lesser motifs could easily be added.

The 2 most common motifs I have myself found along the Andes are those pertaining to the treasure of the Incas and to the Spirit of the Snow. They are of interest to mountaineers, because they provide a good insight into the mentality of the Andean dwellers of all times and need to be described at some length.

The Treasure of the Incas

Although this was originally an Indian legend, it was the Spaniards who unwillingly launched it. The treasure of the Incas was an undetermined number of loads of gold and silver objects that Indians were carrying to pay for the ransom of king Atahualpa, then in the hands of the Conquistadores. Upon learning that the Spaniards had executed their king before receiving the full ransom, the Indians threw the undelivered loads into some mountain lakes and fled. Tradition has in time posted a guardian by the sacred lakes, and that guardian is usually a bull with golden horns. In time, too, the legendary bull became a *de facto* defender of Indian tradition, since the Indians of the Andes hope that their buried treasures will some day be recovered to aid the redemption of their oppressed race.

The surprising side of this very common Andean legend is that it is the bull, most Spanish of animals, that defends the Indian tradition against the very descendants of the Spaniards. This has however an explanation, supplied by the Peruvian novelist José María Arguedas. Contrary to popular belief it was not the horse among European animals but the very Spanish bull that impressed the Andean Indians most. The Indians had in their mythology a ferocious dragon, the *amaru*. To their astonishment, they saw all the fearful characteristics of an *amaru* fully materialized in the Spanish bull and they adopted this animal as theirs. The *amaru* in time fell into oblivion. Today, the now Indian bull lives near lakes, tarns and even craters and mountain tops and the awesome sounds of the mountains at night are caused by those guardians of Inca treasures. It might also be added that legends of this type carry a clearly revindicationist political message in favour of an oppressed race.[4]

The Spirit of the Snow

The Indians had 3 such beings: the Chambo (Ecuador), a spirit that rides on a goat over the snowfields and glaciers, the Hualapichi (Bolivia), who leaves its fox-like imprints on the snow, and the Trauco (Southern Chile-Argentina), a veritable Abominable Snowman which it closely resembles and who feeds on the blood of animals and of human beings. The Trauco is also the son of Cai Cai, the evil serpent of Araucanian mythology.

The Andean *mestizos* and whites added La Lola. The origin of this Andean spirit of the snows is unknown. *Lo-la,* according to some, is a term remnant of a primitive Fuegian language now lost and may have meant *dead prairie,* that is, a land covered by the shroud of the snow. La Lola is indeed the personification of the snow and of snowstorms. The mountain peoples of Central Chile and Argentina represented snow itself in the body of a white woman who with her enchanting voice directs wanderers lost in a blizzard to an abyss. The base of this legend is very firm. Witness to this the numerous toponymics that in those countries describe the evil doings of La Lola: Paso Come-caballos (Pass 'Eater of Horses'), Cerro Yeguas Heladas (Peak of the Frozen Mares), Llano de las Calaveras (Plateau of the Skulls), Laguna Yeguas Muertas (Lake of the Dead Mules), Cerro Los Helados (Peak of the Frozen Ones), etc. La Lola is by extension also a killer that enters into the frigid mountain mines and kills miners stranded inside their galleries. Miners in Central Chile assert that wherever she goes, she is followed by a walking coffin, so sure is she indeed of getting her kill.

The depositories of the Andean legends belong to 2 races: Indian and *mestizo*. It has been so far quite hard to communicate with the Andean Indians in order to extract from them a part of their very rich cultural heritage. The Indians—for whatever reasons—prefer not to communicate with whites, even if they speak well the Indian language or dialect. However, they have at times condescended to share some of their knowledge with missionaries and a few explorers. *Mestizos,* on the other hand, are very talkative once one strikes a friendship with them. They are not only the depositories of their own exceedingly rich oral tradition, but also the keepers of at least a part of the Indian lore. These *mestizos* usually work as miners, farmhands, smugglers (although this they would never confess) and herdsmen, but above all as *arrieros* (muleteers). The *arriero* who rents his animals to mountaineers and who also acts as camp attendant is then the logical link between mountaineers and the sources of Andean folklore. Of course, a very good command of Spanish is an absolute necessity in order to converse with him.[5]

There was a time perhaps when the legacy of the Andean cultures was being remembered and treasured. That time is now clearly behind us, irretrievably lost. The dynamic changes that followed after the Second World War brought to the Western world a mobilization of people in every direction. Not too slowly, then, the Andean customs of old began

to be forsaken, to disappear. How much is now definitely lost, we shall never know.

Several mountain writers have drawn attention to the particular fixedness of purpose that characterizes climbers in modern times. To seize a summit or to overcome an obstacle seem on the average to be the only logical goals, with the exclusion of any other. Frank S. Smythe in *The Valley of Flowers,* one of the finest works world mountaineering has ever produced, described nature and the overall mountain scenery with a sentiment not found in books today. John A. Jackson, in a book that carries the explicit title *More than Mountains,* pointed once to every thing that in the highlands are before our eyes and which yet we do not see. And in *Lhotse 75,* almost half of the book deals with the architecture of higher Nepal, as fondly studied by Italian climbers as amateur scientists. It is now then the last chance for expeditionary mountaineers to rescue from oblivion whatever cultural manifestation from areas visited may soon be lost to modern progress. And mountain legends, most forsaken of folkloric manifestations, belong to a field almost untouched, and this, not only in the Andes.

Seven Andean Peaks and their Myths.

Pico Bolívar (5002m, Sierra Nevada de Mérida, Venezuela).

Caribay was an expert archer of the Mucus and inhabited the moorland above the Motatán river. One day she saw 5 eagles, dazzlingly white, and followed them, eager to get some of their feathers. When almost exhausted she was about to give up the chase, she saw the eagles alighting on the higher hills. She climbed there and killed them with her arrows. She then ran to the dead birds and when she was going to pluck some of the feathers she coveted, she felt her fingers freezing. She fled in horror. The five dead eagles had become the 5 ice peaks that now we know as the Sierra Nevada de Mérida.

Chimborazo (6267m, Cordillera Occidental, Ecuador).

Married to the nearby mountain Tungurahua, Chimborazo suspected that she was unfaithful to him. Out of sheer jealousy, the mighty mountain went to war against Carihuairazo and Altar, suitors of his wife. Since Chimborazo was the favourite mountain of the Indians, he had to win over his rivals. He defeated his enemies with powerful blows and the sunken ridges and tops of his rivals are a proof of Chimborazo's might.

Huascarán (6769m, Cordillera Blanca, Peru).

Huandi was a princess, daughter of the chieftain who governed Yungay. One day, an Inca warrior named Huáscar visited the region. Huandi's father was an enemy of the Incas and when he learned that Huáscar and his own daughter had fallen in love, he forbade the matrimony. The 2 youths fled, but they were soon captured by Huandi's father and his warriors and sentenced to death. Both were tied to rocks rising in the freezing heights. They perished there and became

the mountains now known as Huandoy and Huascarán. They suffered intensely during their agony and shed tears, which formed the waterfalls and streams that descend from the 2 magnificent massifs.

Condoriri (5648m, Cordillera Real, Bolivia).

The legend associated with the triple peak of Condoriri, which resembles a white condor with its wings open, is strikingly similar to the one reviewed above for Pico Bolívar. A Tiahuanaco prince, fond of hunting, saw once a beautiful white condor (an omen for excellent luck among the Aimaras today). He followed it and had to climb rock after rock when the giant bird headed for the mountains. A snowstorm broke and the hunter had to take shelter under a rock. When the storm ceased, he saw to his surprise and delight that the condor was standing on a nearby crag. He took aim with his arrow and released it. The dart hit the magnificent bird exactly when it was opening its wings. The condor fell dead. The prince rushed to it and when he touched his feathers he felt a freezing cold beginning to take control of his body. Terrified, he fled without looking back. The condor had become a giant mountain of ice.

Tronador (3370m, Southern Andes, Chile-Argentina).

Tronador ('The Thunderer'), so called for its precipice swept by avalanches falling down the W side (into Chile), was a mountain sacred to the Tehuelches and Araucanians. A tribe that lived under its shadow had to go once to war against an army of pygmies that had invaded the territory around the sacred mountain. Thanks to a stratagem, the pygmies defeated the warriors and their brave chieftain, Linco Nahuel, was captured. The pygmies forced him and other prisoners to ascend to the summit ridge of Tronador, so as to throw the warriors down the Western precipice. Tronador at that time had only one summit pyramid and it was the abode of the *pillán* (genie) of the mountain. Most of the prisoners had been hurled into the abyss when suddenly the mountain erupted. The *pillán* was thus showing his anger for the sacrilege perpetrated by human beings who had stained the snows with blood. All warriors and pygmies fell and only the king of the pygmies and Linco Nahuel were spared. The *pillán* froze them and they are still there, converted into smaller pyramids on each side of the main summit, throne of the mountain genie. They will stay there forever and only a bird called Furrufuhue, personifying the Wind, is allowed to talk to them.

Paine (2670m, and the Torres del Paine, ca 2400m, Southern Patagonia, Chile).

Cai Cai was the evil serpent that hated mankind and caused a flood in order to exterminate it. Tren Tren was a friendly serpent that saved as many human beings as she could, by helping them to climb to the higher hills, above the waters. But many warriors of the Araucanian nation could not escape and drowned. Cai Cai petrified their corpses and heroes like Panilef, Painemal and Huincamal became some of the well-known peaks of Paine, the Towers and Chaltén (FitzRoy).

Bibliographic Notes

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(3) Evelio Echevarría, 'Inca Mountaineering 1400-1800', in H. Drasdo and M. Tobias, *The Mountain Spirit* (New York, 1979), pp 118-25.

(4) José María Arguedas, *Mitos, leyendas y cuentos peruanos* (Lima, 1976), pp 49-52.

(5) Basic works dealing with Andean legends are: Carlos Keller, *Mitos y leyendas de Chile* (San Felipe, Chile, 1972); Manuel Dannemann, *Bibliorafía del folklore chileno* (Austin, Texas, 1970); F. Coluccio, *Diccionario folklórico argentino,* 2 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1950); J. F. Costa, *Diccionario del folklore boliviano* (Sucre, Bolivia, 1972); Marcos Yauri, *Ganchiscocha* (Lima, 1961); J. M. Arguedas, *op. cit.*; J. Monast, *Los indios aimaras* (Buenos Aires, 1972); Benjamín Torrico, *Indígenas en el corazón de América* (La Paz, 1971) and Walter Ruben, *Tiahuanaco, Atacama und Araukaner* (Leipzig, 1952). A very large number of legends can be found in Andean mountaineering journals.