The basic virtue of all Aymara is respect—respect for every human being. This virtue is inculcated in the children by precept, by proverbs, by admonition, and by correction for any slip. A lack of respect is seen either as treating another human like an animal or as acting like an animal oneself. The basic division in Aymara grammar is also between the human and the nonhuman. There is one set of pronouns for human, and one set for nonhuman. Only after distinguishing human/nonhuman is sex distinguished—and terms used for humans are not used for animals and vice versa. The presence of another human must always be acknowledged; children must greet elders and all others without fail; the adults always greet each other. The penalty for treating others as animals is withdrawal or silence on the part of the offended person. Outsiders frequently violate these codes and are met with the “taciturn” Aymara. Because the dominant culture perceives women as subservient, such breaches of social grace occur more frequently with Aymara women.

The Aymara woman is not without power or resources. She is not, within her culture, a subject person. She and her man do different things, but they are essential to each other, and, to live well, must form a cooperative and equal partnership, a fact known to both. In this decade when the new concern for women has been marked by the designation of International Women’s Year, we would do well to look to other societies, like the Aymara, to see how a more equitable society could be run—rather than seeing them through our own culture’s distorted lenses. The harshness of the Aymara environment and our ethnocentricity should not blind us to the uncommon respect for humanness in the Aymara social structure.

Since the time of the Conquest, various groups have tried to impose upon the Aymara their concepts, mainly Hispanic, of social organization, including the relationships between males and females. Assuming its own superiority, the conquering culture remained blind to the Aymara reality. A good deal of preaching, planning, and teaching about male/female role models has gone into persuading the Aymara to be more “like us.”
*The organization of subject matter for writing an article on Aymara women is also typically Western. It is part of the Western perception of “mankind” that the norm is male, the female is derivative. It is part of our—and the producers’—cultural baggage. It is not the Aymara bias. It may even be necessary that material on women be presented separately for Western audiences, for all too often what women do in a general film remains invisible, especially if it contradicts prejudices.

**Some Aymara are aware of the incongruency between their own world view and that of the Western world. One incident from my own experience may illustrate: when selecting persons to work with the Aymara Language Materials Project at the University of Florida, an Aymara man explained to me that we would require a female Aymara speaker. Of the two Aymara co-authors of the materials, one is a woman and one is a man (Hardman, Yapita, Vasquez, et al., AYMARA YATIQANATAKI, 1974). Most other materials (missionary, Peace Corps, etc.) have erred partly because of a singular reliance on male informants. Aymara, however, would not be Aymara if women were excluded.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that some of the verbalizations shown in the film conform remarkably well to Western notions.* The Aymara have had 400 years to learn and to pass on to their children what it is the “misti” (European man or woman) wishes to hear. Courtesy demands that one say what one’s listener wishes to hear, but for most of the Aymara, these words are irrelevant.** As you watch the film, contrast the ideals the women express with their actual performance in routine activities.

Role, Status, and Power

Women are the primary producers in Aymara society through their control of agriculture, livestock, finances, and the household, although the labor of children and men is similarly essential to the family’s general welfare. Men too have important roles in agriculture and have primary control of contact with outsiders, mainly Spanish-speaking people of basically Western culture, for the pattern of contact is determined by the outsiders. Men also are dominant in ceremonial roles, both political and religious. Yet women and men may substitute for each other in any of the roles when necessity demands, and the cultural focus is on complementarity and interdependence. When a woman gives birth, for example, her husband will take over all her responsibilities for a period, with or without help from relatives. It is generally acknowledged, however, that women are more competent at men’s work than men are at women’s; thus you are more likely to see a woman plowing than a man dropping the potato seed, and you are more likely to see a woman in a ceremonial position than a man bartering in the marketplace.

The division of labor as given by the participants in the film merits closer attention. The women begin by saying that they can do everything. They then enumerate: we cook; take food to plowers; select seed; plant potatoes, ocas, apillas, corn; spin; care for animals; weave; arrange the house; raise the children; bear children; break clods; fertilize; and, on occasion, work at trades. The man adds that the women also butcher.

The men, according to the women, get firewood; tend the cooking fire; bring logs; make thread; mend their pants; plow; spin yarn; weave; braid (ropes); play the flute; and help the women raise children, cook, weave, spin. The man adds that men work with the pick as well as the foot plow, and that they butcher.

Children, the women say, pasture pigs, sheep, llamas; help in the fields; get water and firewood; help spin, and help break clods. Assignment of such chores to children carries with it greater expectation of responsible implementation than most North Americans generally realize. Maria Marasa, who is only about eight years of age, is entrusted with a flock that represents approximately one-fifth of the family’s wealth. Children, of course, also play (and court) in the fields and pastures. Like young people everywhere, they would like to have more money, for clothes, dances, fiestas, and frivolities.
At the end of the enumeration, one old woman states that no one sits and does nothing, that each does what needs to be done as soon as the need is evident. This last statement is probably closest to the real Aymara cultural ideal: hard work, responsibility, and cooperation. Laziness is perhaps the worst sin—and the worst insult. Aymara are far more concerned with habits of industry and productivity than with what we would call sex roles.

The lists represent about the same division of labor as has been recorded in other Aymara communities.* The people in the film, however, omitted many details—obvious to them, but not to us. Both men and women weave, but not usually the same article; for example, women typically weave the awayu, the cloth used for carrying burdens on the back, while men typically weave the sacks used for carrying the harvest on pack animals. Women usually do the spinning, men the twisting—both operations, equally necessary, look identical to the untrained eye. Nursing infants are almost exclusively in the care of women, but as soon as they toddle and more so after weaning, older siblings and men spend more time caring for children. By age six or eight, if the family is not together, a young boy is likely to spend most of his time with his father, a young girl more time with her mother.

It is significant that both men and women in the film omitted mention of those spheres which are under the predominant control of one sex or the other: the marketplace and family finances (women) and ceremonial positions (men). Instead, they focused on their interdependence, those aspects of their lives where they must work together in harmony and cooperation for the task to be accomplished.

Most of an Aymara woman's activities are carried on outdoors—either in the fields, in the market, or in the courtyard of her home. Only sleeping is invariably indoors. Houses are solidly and practically built, without windows, which might encourage thieves or let in the cold. Virtually no attention is given to interior decoration. Some families have the cooking fire inside, others cook outdoors in a lean-to. In any case, family activity centers around the courtyard: people prefer to eat there and it is there that Aymara receive guests and perform most household tasks. The complex of buildings around the courtyard may include, in addition to sleeping quarters, corrals for the animals, shelter for the smaller animals, and storage for the harvest and for foodstuffs and seeds.

Aymara women hold the purse strings for the family. Care of the household includes the disposition of all goods, including food, as well as all money. Controlling who may eat what and how much is a powerful role in a society where food is highly valued, symbolically and otherwise, and where it may also be in short supply, particularly at certain seasons.

Communal pasture in Vitocota.
Most of an Aymara’s waking hours are spent working in the fields. Wresting subsistence from the hard, harsh land requires constant cooperation between woman and man, with help from children and kin, real and fictive, as well as reliance on Aymara institutions such as ayni* and mink’a. These institutions reinforce community ties and obligations in addition to supplementing the family as labor units during peak periods of agricultural work.

As corollary to an Aymara woman’s primary control of the purse, she is the family trader. She sells the family produce and buys what the family needs. If a family grows commercial crops (e.g., onions), a woman will leave her husband home to care for the house, older children, and fields while she takes the harvest to market in La Paz or other trade center. Periodically, women from Vitocota shop and trade in nearby centers, such as Escoma or Chuma, for goods not home-grown or locally produced. Sometimes the trip is planned as an excursion for the whole family. Husbands are sometimes sent by their wives to purchase items in the marketplace, but it is considered a risky venture as the men are likely to pay too much. Most large purchases—a bicycle, for example—are agreed upon mutually by the partners in a marriage; only exceptionally will a man go ahead with a purchase against his wife’s wishes.

Education and the Cultural Environment

As more Aymara attend school or travel outside villages like Vitocota, they come in contact with people and institutions that differ from their own. The dominant culture in Bolivia, politically and socially, is Hispanic. Most Spanish-speaking Bolivians have imbibed the values of the Iberian peninsula along with its language. A notable feature of this Hispanic cultural complex is a preference for dealing “man to man” on important issues. In their relations with these “outsiders,” the Aymara superficially comply. An Aymara woman’s decision or opinion is relayed through her husband—who states it as he knows the misti expects him to; i.e., as his own.

A grammatical particular adds to the impression of male dominance that is created. In Aymara the designation of singular and plural is grammatically optional. A speaker of Aymara does not, ordinarily, mark number. On the other hand, Aymara demands that the inclusion or exclusion of the second person, “you,” always be marked. Therefore, the Aymara who speak Spanish have taken two forms in Spanish (English is just like Spanish at this point), the forms yo, “I,” and nosotros, “we,” which make for them a meaningless distinction, and used them for a meaningful distinction; i.e., yo means “not-you” and nosotros means “you-included.” Thus, an Aymara speaker talking to an outsider about Aymara matters will use what to the Aymara is the “not-you” form, but which the outsider understands as the singular form: my house, my field, my potatoes, I plant, I harvest, I buy, I sell, etc.

*ayni, exchange labor; mink’a, personalized wage labor.
Film Dialogue

We women . . . we're not strong.
Yes . . . boy babies are more valuable.

A boy is support for us . . . security.
You are so right.

School is necessary for boys.
For girls it's not really necessary.

We are in different times . . . boys and girls both go to school!

In my time there wasn't "Going to school."
There wasn't any school.

If there had been "Going to school" . . .
Wow! We would know how to read and write!

For girls it's different . . .
They want to go, too.

Some families send their girls. I do not.

Women in conversation

Because of the pattern of culture contact and because socio-economic mobility requires Spanish, Aymara women attach great importance to formal schooling for their sons. They often determine that at least one of their sons shall have a "good" education. The women have been at the center of community organizations, particularly after the 1952 revolution, formed to build schools. These buildings are the pride of the community, and often the best in the area. Afterward, the women have petitioned the government for teachers. The women then push their sons, with or without the approval of their husbands, into attending school. (Every Aymara man I have known who has achieved a relatively high level of education has been pushed there by his mother—often herself illiterate and monolingual in Aymara—and sometimes lacking the father's consent.) Because the dominant Hispanic society, which also determines the curricula, opens fewer and less attractive doors for girls, obviously there is less perceived need for their formal schooling. If a family cannot afford to send all its children to school, preference will be given to the boys; the choice, however, reflects attitudes in the dominant culture, not among the Aymara.

In the marketplace, women keep accurate commercial accounts in their heads, and the girls learn from their mothers to do complex arithmetical operations rapidly. They are also able to remember
accounts for people whom they have dealt with over long periods. One old woman, I know, illiterate, can recount all the debts incurred in her village over the last 60 years, the amount of the principal, to whom it is owed, and how much interest has accrued. She can remember with equal facility how much certain goods cost and when.

Marriage, Kin, and Community

Marriage is a long, heavily symbolic process among the Aymara—not a simple ceremony. Permission for sexual activity is a minor or negligible aspect of a rite which has as its focus the stabilizing of community life and property. Completion of all the ceremonies attendant to marriage may even take several years.*

Marriages among the Aymara come about in various ways:

(a) The marriage may be arranged by the parents. This is not frequent, and accounts for most of the very young marriages.

(b) A couple in love may ask their parents to arrange a marriage. This is the expensive, formal way, and quite desirable. It may look to an outsider like (a) because of the couple’s reticence in revealing affection publicly. Afterward this arrangement may be claimed to have been the first because of continued reluctance to admit what goes on in the fields or pastures.

(c) The couple may elope, thus forcing parents to make arrangements. This is the cheaper way, and may be sanctioned by the parents without their necessarily admitting it, if finances are a problem.

Before any marriage takes place, godparents must be selected. (In some Aymara villages, two sets of godparents are chosen.) The godparents are responsible for seeing that the prospective husband and wife receive good advice and that they get along well. In addition, if a marriage goes on the rocks, particularly in the early stages, the godparents are held responsible. Because it is their reputation that suffers, it is difficult to persuade someone to be a godparent unless he or she feels the couple is compatible. From the moment the first steps are taken toward the marriage ceremony, the importance of cooperation in Aymara culture is made clear, not only the cooperation and “living well” between the partners of the marriage, but also the ties and obligations of the couple now becoming complete people within the community. And the reciprocal relationships extend through the generations. Couples who do not get along reasonably well have trouble later getting godparents for their children, and thus trouble getting people for mink’a and ayni, and so on.

In the marriage preparations and ceremonies a strong emphasis is also placed on productivity and industry. Both the bride’s and

**Film Dialogue**

My girls have asked me, “Why didn’t you put me in the school?”

“I might have learned one or two words.

“When you saw me old enough, you sent me out with the sheeps, pigs, and llamas

... when you saw me older, you ordered me to work in the fields.” My girls tell me this.

“We wanted to read and write because the houses in La Paz have numbers on them.

“We wanted to learn ... so we might live without problems.” That’s how my girls talk.

Aymara woman


**Film Dialogue**

Did you talk with many boys before marrying?

I wasn’t my husband’s friend before marrying.

Without ever talking, we came together.

All of a sudden we were married.

I never talked with boys in the pastures...

My father was my husband’s best friend. He brought him to our house many times.
the groom's wedding finery is designed to display their industry. The concern is less with beauty than in demonstrating how productive each one is. In this way, the couple provides evidence of prior achievements, having already worked to acquire or make their finery. Thus they are assumed to be off to a good start. Gifts—in money and goods—are gratefully received by the godparents on behalf of the couple. These tokens are, in fact, ayni. Collectively, the gifts are viewed as a type of loaned capital which gives the young couple something to work with and simultaneously expresses the faith of the community in the future productiveness of the couple. The ayni debts symbolized by the gifts will be paid off over a period of many years, and represent the strong ties to the community the couple assumes at marriage. In one of the marriage ceremonies, all the money the couple has received is wrapped in a bundle and placed on the woman's back. Hers to dispense and control, it is symbolic of her role in family finances. Other ceremonies are similarly concerned with property, almost always in land. Usually, the young couple's parents will give them a portion of the family's land, either as an outright gift in lieu of rights on inheritance or in usufruct until disposition by the parents.

By the time all the ceremonies have been completed, the couple has shown the community some evidence of their seriousness and productivity, has received some land to work, and is indebted to most of the people around them. Equally important, the couple has some capital and the support of the community, which has an interest—an investment, in fact—in the success of the enterprise. The newly married couple, moreover, will help to launch other new couples, and thus will have people indebted to them, again strengthening community ties.

The Aymara marriage is the coming together of two kin groups and the establishing of new kin ties, particularly ceremonial ties. It establishes for them a position of responsibility within the community. The two individuals remain two individuals. No names are changed at marriage, and all property remains individually held, although jointly cultivated, and will be disposed of individually, usually through equal inheritance to each child from each parent. In none of the Aymara ceremonies is the role of the woman shown or felt to be less than that of the man—different, but not less. If anything, the woman's role is more valued because of her edge in productivity. Only in those cases where a Catholic or Protestant ceremony is held as one of the many ceremonies does the woman assume inferior status because of her sex. In Latin or Spanish, such ceremonies may be largely or entirely unintelligible to the participants, although some are now held in Aymara. Aymara itself has had to be distorted in the attempt to express the lower status accorded woman within the Christian marriage. Even so, the Christian ceremony is but one of 10 or 15 ceremonies Aymara perform over a period of many months.

Marriage is not romanticized among the Aymara, and there are numerous folk sayings to the effect that singles have it made and
that marriage is hard work and expensive. The women in the film comment favorably, at one point, on some elderly single women living quite well. At the same time, the verb “to marry,” *jaqichi-siña*, literally means to cause oneself to become a person, and full status in the community is reserved for those who are married. Despite these ambivalent attitudes, virtually everyone eventually marries—some very late indeed. There are few young marriages; the average age is between 25 and 35, although late thirties or early forties marriages are not unusual.

No Aymara woman goes into marriage expecting anything but hard work—nor does any Aymara man for that matter. Life is very hard for the Aymara woman. It is not the structure of her society but the harshness of her physical environment. Hers are the problems of the human condition. Poor health, crop losses, high mortality rates—all take their toll. Realistic and reliable methods for controlling childbearing are not available, although some native herbs and remedies may indeed be effective for some purposes. The Aymara woman is subject to the difficulties that all women everywhere have always faced: too many children, not enough children, children too late, children too early, and all the risks inherent in bringing forth the much valued new generation.

To wail and bemoan one’s fate and the hardness of life—and thus to instruct the young not to expect too much—is a frequent

*Aymara girls.*

**Film Dialogue**

*This old mother of mine had many children! She complied by delivering 12 apostles.*

*Three of us are living . . . 2 women . . . 1 man. There were 12.*

*They say one must comply with 12 apostles. I complied with 12, too.*

*I have 8 sons . . . 4 daughters . . . 8 boys and 4 girls.*

*My husband hated my last 2 boy babies . . .* 

*He said, “Why have you had all these children?! You breed like an animal!”* 

*What can the mothers do? We have to raise them!* 

*Women in conversation*
It is quite difficult to translate Aymara into English. First, every Aymara sentence carries with it a suffix to mark the data source: Did the speaker witness the event? Was knowledge by hearsay? By inference? Or not witnessed by anyone? Or outside the involvement of the speaker? We do not do this in English, and in fact, if we wish to indicate anything about data source we must usually add another clause. (Our legal profession attempts to deal with this difficulty all the time—with only moderate success, as anyone attempting to read legalese will attest.) Therefore, the answer to any question in Aymara includes one of these suffixes, which is then ignored when translating (correctly) into English. Over the course of the movie, however, the effect is quite different from that obtained by reading the full Aymara text. For example, in the translation as it appears in the subtitle, the speaker, as a woman, says that women are weak. But her actual statement uses a suffix to indicate that the speaker is not involved. The more accurate rendering is “they say we’re weak, but I wouldn’t know about that.”

Directions of Change

The lot of the Aymara woman is made more difficult by the sexism of the dominant society, and it becomes progressively more difficult as Aymara men are influenced by Hispanic custom. She is not allowed to be heard, her accomplishments are either credited to her men or discounted, and, although she controls the marketplace, even in cities like La Paz, her status outside her own people is unrecognized. Yet many of the truck fleets, for example, carrying produce into La Paz are owned by Aymara women, who may have men driving for them. Some Aymara women drive themselves. The 1966 Bolivian National Auto Racing competition was won by an Aymara woman.

Because the dominant society projects itself onto the Aymara, and ignorantly presumes Aymara men run everything, efforts to help the Aymara “develop” regularly turn into “failures.” Two recent examples suffice to illustrate the patterns. International development agencies chose a number of Aymara men to be instructed in rabbit-breeding and sheep-shearing. The Aymara women in both cases thought it was all very funny, but never told the outsiders. The outsiders did not ask and never approached the women. The outsiders took the whole affair very seriously, of course, with diplomas, ceremonies, and all the appropriate trappings. The Aymara men politely played just the role the outsiders wanted while they were there. Because Aymara women control the livestock, whatever good suggestions the instructors might have made were wasted. They were simply talking to the wrong people. In a similar case, an attempt to improve agricultural production through seed selection and/or introduction bypassed the women who in practice control the potato and other crop seed.

The sexism of the dominant culture is felt increasingly among the Aymara. Two channels of influence are particularly important and sometimes overlap; the experience of education in Protestant schools and the process of adjustment in an urban, and therefore more Hispanic, environment. In some cases the lot of the rural Aymara woman may deteriorate. Men who are gentle, cooperative farmers in the country may become brutal wife-beaters in the city as they become less pagan (more Christian by missionary
standards) and more urbane (more civilized by dominant culture standards). Where conversion to Protestantism has occurred, Aymara women may be urged by the missionaries to be subservient to their husbands when Aymara culture would demand no such thing. In such cases women may learn to denigrate themselves verbally, often without understanding what that should mean culturally—and therefore without implementation. With the spread of public schooling, both Aymara men and women have become more adept at mouthing sex role concepts from the Western world. Understanding them is something else."

Married couples do, of course, quarrel; the frequency of "perfect marriages" among the Aymara is probably not much greater than anywhere in human society. The fights are not necessarily one-sided, however; note that in the fight described in the film, it was the daughter and the daughter-in-law who took care of the man—stopped him and put him in his place. Women regularly break up the men's fights, and if the men are drunk, the women take them home and put them to bed.

* * * * *

The Aymara community of Vitocota is close knit. Social pressures favor marriage, and divorce or separation is not common. However, no Aymara woman is obliged economically to remain with a man: she owns her own land, and she controls the finances. She often has a place in the market where she can buy and sell (and shrewd bargainers they are) and is generally considered capable of doing "anything."

In the film's last scene, when the young girl and boy are asked to move aside so that an older man may take water from the well, we see clearly that it is age and not sex that determines the man's brusque tone. As the children mature in a world ever more conscious of woman's role, it is to be hoped that their own traditional values may come to be appreciated by the larger society and that they themselves may be exemplars of their industrious and cooperative society.

[Photographs by Neil Reichline]