

Nimia Apaza, Kolla Lawyer Challenges Argentinean Health Minister

Nimia Apaza, an Indigenous Kolla lawyer in northern Argentina (General Coordinator and Lawyer for the Jujuy Native Council of Organizations), challenged Argentine social welfare minister Herminio Gómez regarding his explanation of infant mortality in the Susques Province. "Infant mortality is not a cultural problem," she asserts, "it is not true that mothers do not care for their children and that they let them die." For Apaza, it is "the clash of cultures that is killing our people; Western culture comes overwhelmingly, bringing so called 'superior and better ideas' than our traditional culture..."

How does Minister Gómez think that infant mortality rates in Susques, during the first months of 1995, are linked to the fact that mothers do not take their children to the health centers?

He presented an isolated case, possibly due to special circumstances. In fact, the academic calendar in Susques, which was once from summer until May, was changed from March to December. The previous calendar had a logic: in May, grazing cycles change, and therefore animals need to be taken farther away to find fodder. Mothers that do not have older children are forced to take younger children along. If they do not take their animals to graze, not only will one child die, but the entire family will suffer because they will not have food for the next year.

How then do you explain the growth of infant mortality rates?

It is the clash of cultures that is killing our people. When I speak about cultures, I assume that there is not one superior culture, nor that ours is inferior. The concept that our traditions and customs are backward has made this clash and invasion the cause of malnutrition and infant mortality.

How has Western culture affected Susques?

The people of the city don't understand that our people live 'within' nature and that no one is superior. Mankind is not the king of creation; we are all part of it. When nature is destroyed it pro-

duces a great imbalance. Susques, indeed, is the salt plateau of Jujuy. This is to say that it has little potable water and its vegetation is basically a small perennial bush called *Tola* (*Baccharis Tola*). *Tola* protects the topsoil against strong winds and reproduces with little rainfall, which once created a stable source of graze for llamas. The problem is that today, soil erosion has decreased the amount of *Tola* in the area.

Ecological collapse has caused desertification of the highlands. *Tola* has been used as a fuel in the school kitchen furnaces because there is no money available for other forms of fuel. Horacio Mercado, an agronomist, warned us about the ecological consequences, but was not heard by the local authorities. The truth is that our people traditionally harvest *Tola* for domestic use, but only take what's needed, avoiding the disruption of the natural equilibrium.

Can you describe for us the traditional diet in Susques?

Our diet traditionally depended on corn-based meals, such as: *Chilcan* (breakfast), *ulpada*, *tostadas* (snacks), *kalapurca*, *kalapi*, *tulpo*, *caldo*, *majao*, and *picantes* (lunches), *anchi* (desert), and *chicha* (corn beer). To this basic diet we added *quinua*, *java* beans, and potatoes, supplemented occasionally with *chalonga* (llama meat).

Can you explain the traditional economic patterns of exchange in this area?

Our people obtained corn through inter-communal bartering systems.

Burros (mules) were used to transport salt to the lower valleys to trade for corn. Nowadays, burros are considered dangerous on the highways. The police forbid them on the roads, so there is no bartering, nor corn. On the other hand, there are less grazing areas and beasts of burden are dying. People are aware of this problem and they are trying to save the llama and sheep instead of eating them to survive.

Before, families used to own large herds of animals and now they have less than fifteen or twenty heads. In a strategic drama of survival, our people learned to live under-nourished. Under these strenuous circumstances, the most affected are the children who cannot withstand high altitude weather and suffer from bronchitis, pneumonia, and whooping cough.

How has the school system devalued the traditions of your people?

Teachers with good intentions teach our children to eat everything available, but because of the general devaluation of our culture, it is understood that corn-based foods belong to poor people. So when children return home, they no longer want to eat traditional foods, and parents do not have the means to purchase processed foods. For example, noodles are available, but contain little nutritional value. The superior value put on processed food is what is causing the malnutrition of our people.

(Excerpts of an interview by Mariana Carbajal, with permission from weekly El Patriota, La Paz Nov 11-17, 1995)