



Photo Guillermo Gelgado

A gathering of Aymara Women

DROUGHT

AYMARA CAMPESINOS FORCED TO MIGRATE TO THE CITIES

In one blow the drought and freeze of 1978 destroyed the future of Nicolás Mullisaca, who as the eldest child would have been responsible for his parents' land. Like many other children of campesinos, he was forced to leave for La Paz in search of work.

"It was not a happy day, but it was the only choice because there was nothing to eat. For a campesino, leaving the land that our ancestors have farmed for generations is always a very sad thing."

Nicolás Mullisaca, and later his five brothers, started out as casual laborers in the city of La Paz. He became a mason and has worked in this profession ever since, except for two years when he went looking for gold for a company in Tipuani where he nearly died of tuberculosis.

For one year now he has worked as a mason for a construction company with about 30 employees. It is hard work, with a time card to punch and pay docked for arriving even a little late. He travels an hour from the worksite in the center of the city to his home with his wife and eight children in the barrio of Pasankeri.

Pasankeri is located high above La Paz and is one of the final rungs in the ladder of suburbs which climb up out of the city. It is the last barrio before arriving at Ciudad Satélite at the very peak in El Alto.

Their pig stays in the lower part of their yard. Above, there is a little patio that his wife Ceferina uses to wash clothes and prepare the

food, and where the kids and the dog play. The adobe house has two rooms, and alongside the bed stands a sewing machine that the two parents use. Spanish and Aymara are spoken in the Mullisaca family household, Spanish because it is more practical in the city, and Aymara so the children don't lose their culture.

"I dream of opening a tailorshop in Pasankeri. For a year and a half I've attended a sewing course at night here in my barrio and soon I'll be done," says don Nicolás.

His wife has attended a course in weaving and is hoping to get a loom. But with ten stomachs to fill, they live hand to mouth and it's practically impossible to pull together the necessary capital to start their own business or save the 150 bolivianos that a loom costs.

"I will probably be a mason for many years to come, and knowing this, I take on as much responsibility as the others in working to form a union to ask for better wages." At one time he was a campesino leader in his village.

Many migrant families suffer from the harsh conditions of the city, and from not even knowing their neighbors and have to face frequent periods of unemployment.

"We worry about the children and fear that they will fall in with delinquents or drugs," explains Ceferina Mullisaca. "In the countryside, life is far more peaceful and safe."

"Sometimes mestizos and white people ride by in mini-vans and humiliate us for being

Aymara. They harass us as we carry our loads and accuse us of being dirty."

In the city, access to medical attention and education is easier. Yet without money, life in the city is impossible, while in most cases, people in the countryside can live from what the land yields.

"Work in the city is boring and makes us feel like slaves. For a campesino, work is also hard but at least you feel free, and the work is interesting," said Nicolás Mullisaca.

His parents still live in the countryside and he and his family return during planting and harvesting to San Andrés Machaca, a village located in the province of Ingari, three hours to the west of La Paz, near the Peruvian border. For Nicolás and Ceferina, going to the country is like returning home, while their children treat these visits as outings.

"I am not ashamed of my roots as an Aymara and a campesino. I am proud of our culture. When my children grow up, I hope to go back and live in my village."

"But to make this happen, we will need economic help for digging wells and better tools to work the land. We're never going to get these with governments run by the rich who could care less about the problems and needs of poor campesinos," said Nicolás. He adds that "so long as neoliberal policies hold sway, migration from the country to the city is sure to continue."

Source: *Aquí*, [Chuquiawu, Bolivia]