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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Enduring Aymara Cosmivision in the Context of Development in Chile**

**Review by Nell Haynes**

*Aymara Indian Perspectives on Development in the Andes*

by Amy Eisenberg

University of Alabama Press, 2013

In *Aymara Indian Perspectives on Development in the Andes*, Amy Eisenberg demonstrates how certain kinds of development—specifically those related to mining, highway construction, and the diversion of water sources—have impinged on the “social fabric” of Aymara communities in northern Chile. Rather than ethnography analyzed through the lens of anthropological theory, this book is part field guide, part historical account, and part policy recommendation. This is especially important because work about northern Chile is limited, and English-language scholarship about indigenous people in the region is particularly sparse.

Eisenberg aligns her work as a form of public anthropology focused on social justice by detailing the sorts of injustice experienced by Aymara communities, brought about by the “modernization” of northern Chile, primarily in the 1990s. In a sense these are injustices experienced by the most marginal population of an already marginalized region. Framing her project as an attempt to contribute to understandings of development impacts on the environment rooted in the Aymara cosmivision, she echoes what many anthropologists take for granted: the importance of autonomy, sovereignty over ancestral lands and the resources therein, and a voice for indigenous groups in contexts of environmental resources and development. She describes consequences of development as “dehumanizing situations” in which Aymara individuals are denied rights to land, water, work, education, and healthcare (p 32). Careful to include positive effects of development projects as well, Eisenberg demonstrates the complexity of development projects’ impacts, while remaining clear that most Aymara understand the impacts as overwhelmingly negative.

Eisenberg provides careful documentation of her methods, including more than 100 interviews in 16 different communities using an 23 question interview instrument; “visual ethnoecology” using an associated photographer to document geographical, biological, and cultural phenomena; and topographical maps and Global Positioning System information. Eisenberg also emphasizes the collaborative nature of the research, working with Manuel Mamani M., an Aymara linguist, folklorist, and ethnomusicologist; Roberto Jara Miranda, President of the Neighborhood Organization of Putre; and Juana Crespo Cancino, director of the Women’s School in Putre. Beyond these collaborators, the project included “community participation, respectful dialogue, empirical fieldwork, and accurate documentation of social and environmental impacts through systematic analysis of community and household needs, constraints, and Aymara concerns and strategies for survival” (p. 3). In keeping with this collaborative method, Eisenberg and her colleagues provided a preliminary report to Aymara experts, participants, and collaborators for technical review.

For individuals interested in conducting this type of collaborative and multivalent research aimed at policy recommendations, the methods detailed here are instructive. As a result of this research strategy, the book primarily takes a macro approach, quickly rehearsing individual examples of how these may affect daily life for certain individuals, in order to devote more time to the ways in which the changes brought by development impact an “Aymara cosmovision,” writ large. Based on interviews with Aymara-identified residents of altiplano pueblos in northern Chile, the overall result concentrates on individuals’ declarations of their problems rather than providing descriptions of the ways their daily lives have changed as more participant observation may have yielded.

Eisenberg focuses on connecting the Aymara worldview to the impacts of development on local communities. Though this approach sidesteps recent debates in indigenous studies, Mapuche issues, Aymara issues in other countries, the current government of Chile, and regional dynamics, it provides detailed documentation of Aymara history (Chapters 1 and 2), current political subjectivity (Chapter 2), livelihood strategies (Chapter 2), cosmovision (Chapter 3), and their cultural landscape including geography, demographics, topography, geology, weather patterns, flora, fauna, and other natural resources (Chapter 4). Only after intricate explanation of such contextual data, does Eisenberg move on to discuss the ways that development has impacted each of these factors, usually disrupting Aymara ways of life and views of their place within local environmental systems (Chapters 5 and 6). We come away with a sense of cultural landscape as a symbolic environment “where livelihoods are sustained, where present and future generations live, and where spirits reside” (p. 150). Indeed, the landscape is described as a part of local definitions of self and culture.

This book left me with many questions, perhaps the most important being concerned with the

ways “traditional” Aymara beliefs and lifeways become integrated into everyday modern life within contexts of development, as well as the ways Chilean Aymara have organized, protested, or advocated in defense of their rights. Further, this book misses an opportunity to relate the environmental changes caused by development in this particular context to broader discussions of climate change. Yet, in other ways the book is an important resource for anyone interested in the Aymara, in Chile, or beyond. It provides detailed descriptions of methodology, collaborative research, and a vast amount of Aymara cultural knowledge. The detail with which Eisenberg discusses the continuities between the long history of the Aymara and their current views and practices is essential for any understanding of present day Aymara environmental relations. In fact, within these pages, a number of possible research questions are hinted at, but left unexplored, implicitly providing indications of possible directions for future research.

Above all, it is clear that this book would be most valuable in the hands Chilean government land managers and developers (p. 6). Unfortunately, the national government is generally considered unresponsive and oblivious to the north of Chile (see Frazier 2007), meaning that this resource may not be as effective as social justice oriented readers might hope. Nonetheless, *Aymara Indian Perspectives on Development in the Andes* provides strong encouragement for integrating Aymara voices into development projects, giving hope that the gulf between tradition and progress might not be impossible to overcome.

## References Cited

Frazier, Lessie Jo

2007. *Salt in the Sand: Memory, Violence, and the Nation-State in Chile, 1890 to the Present*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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