An Introductory Essay on the Year of Peru

By Dan Paracka

“The Andean world was unique and too different to be understood by people come from overseas, preoccupied with enriching themselves, securing honors, and evangelizing the natives by force. An abyss must have been formed between the Andean way of thinking and the Spanish perspective, an abyss that to the present day has continued to divide citizens of the same nation.”i

The Year of Peru at Kennesaw State University (2011--2012) coincides with the 100 anniversary of Hiram Bingham’s discovery of the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu, one of the most spectacular archaeological sites and tourist destinations in the world. Bingham came across the site while searching for Vitcos, the last Inca capital.

Our celebration also corresponds with the 100 anniversary of the birth of Jose Maria Arguedas, one of the most influential Peruvian writers of the 20th century. A Peruvian novelist, poet, and anthropologist, he wrote mainly in Spanish, although some of his poetry is written in Quechua. He was one of the first novelists to write from the perspective of the indigenous peoples. His works include such stories and novels as Agua and Yawar Fiesta. He also served as a public official in the Ministry of Education, the House of Culture, and the Museum of History. KSU will host Cuatrotablas, a well-known theatre group from Peru that will perform works by Arguedas. Peru’s outstanding literary tradition, exemplified also by the recent awarding of the 2011 Nobel Prize for literature to Mario Vargas Llosa, will be a primary focus of KSU’s Year of Peru series including hosting a conference in February of 2012 on the theme of “Understanding Peru through Visual, Culinary & Literary Culture.”

Through the Year of Peru program faculty and students will have the opportunity to learn in depth about Peru’s rich history, culture and modern society. We will learn about a country rich in archeological discovery and human history, a story that does not simply begin with the Inca Empire. The Inca were just one in a long line of powerful civilizations (Ayacucho, Nasca, Tiahuanaco, etc..) that previously ruled the Andes region. The Inca ruled over a vast territory and the Empire comprised numerous ethnic groups who had been subjugated by either treaty or war.

Our study will also go beyond the sensational story of the Conquest when Pizarro and his brothers invaded Peru in 1532, took the Inca ruler Atahualpa hostage and held his empire ransom, forcing his followers to fill a room full of gold and then killing him anyway.ii Much about Inca society and culture did not survive the Spanish Conquest. Within a few decades, the daily objects, ancestral materials, and treasures of Inca civilization were methodically destroyed or removed by the Conquistadors. In particular, the gold and silver treasures of the empire were collected, melted, and converted into bars, and sent back to the treasury in Spain.iii In the words of Jose Carlos Mariategui, “The Conquest most clearly appears as a break in continuity. Until the conquest, an economy developed in Peru that sprang spontaneously and freely from the Peruvian soil and people...All historical evidence
agrees that the Inca people – industrious, disciplined, pantheist, and simple – lived in material comfort.‖iv Through the Year of Peru, we will learn about the devastating effects of not only disease (especially smallpox and measles) and exploitation that accompanied colonial rule but also the more complicated story of cultural loss and the often prejudiced hybrid mestizo identity of the Hispanic and Indian. Again, as Mariategui has written, “the Spanish established a system of forced labor and uprooted the Indian from his soil and his customs.”v Indigenous values were lost, denigrated or appropriated. Only recently have they begun to be reclaimed, especially in terms of understanding the deep cultural, spiritual and natural values, connections and reciprocity that humans have with the earth, our human ecology. We will also learn how the Inca’s own expansionary and sometimes cruel tactics of empire building contributed to its downfall. And we will learn of indigenous resistance to colonial and post-colonial rule. We will interrogate the notion of nationalism and its meaning both historically and in contemporary Peruvian society.

Qhapaq Ñan, Peru’s famous Inca Trail, is actually part of a much older and longer network of roads that connected Andean civilizations stretching 23,000 km from Colombia and Ecuador through Peru to Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile. This great Andean highway and supply chain formed the backbone of the Inca Empire’s political and economic power enabling vast cultural, commercial, agricultural, and productive exchange.vi They traded widely.

The Inca were obsessed with the beauty of mountains, positioning their cities of landscape architecture on precarious slopes with phenomenal views. For them, the stones were alive. As Rostworowski relates, “They situated their temples and palaces so they would harmonize with the environment, and their structures followed closely the contours of the land.”vii The craftsmanship and skill employed in engineering their cities and roads was both an expression of the peoples’ aesthetic worldview as well as incontrovertible evidence of their knowledge and ability to live, adapt and thrive in the complex vertical ecosystems of the closely situated mountains, coasts, deserts and jungles of the Andean region.

Pre-Columbian Andean societies thrived by linking the unique biodiversity of the numerous microclimates and microenvironments of the region and by developing elaborate eco-technologies and hydraulics for managing water, soil erosion, and agricultural production. A couple of interesting and poignant examples of Peru’s biodiversity highlight this point.

The first example is the potato an essential part of Peruvians’ diet for millennia. Archaeological evidence indicates that potato was cultivated in the Peruvian Andes 8 000 years ago, and recent research suggests the potato’s centre of origin lies in Peru, just north of Lake Titicaca. Today, Peru’s farmers cultivate as many as three thousand varieties and four species of potato. Peru is also Latin America’s biggest potato producer and annual consumption is a high 80 kg per capita. The potato is produced mainly by small farmers, at altitudes of from 2 500 m to 4 500 m in the central Andes.viii

The KSU Commons will be featuring fine Peruvian cuisine each Friday throughout this academic year and we will host several of Peru’s finest chefs in our kitchen as chefs-in-residence. Peruvian Cuisine is steadily conquering the palates of the best chefs worldwide. The unique blend of indigenous food
varieties and traditions as well as immigrant culinary influences such as Spanish, African, Chinese, or Japanese have contributed to one of the World’s most delicious cuisines.

The second example of Peru’s biodiversity relates to the vast deposits of bird guano deposits found off Peru’s southern coast on the Chincha islands. The era between the 1840s and the 1890s was marked by a frenzy for this nutrient rich commodity - one ton of guano is the equivalent of 33 tons of farm manure and is also high in nitrates, a key ingredient in the manufacture of explosives. The Inca were well aware of guano’s uses and put to death anyone who killed guano-yielding birds. The word guano is derived from the Quechua word huanu meaning dung. The Paracas civilization thrived in the desert long before the Inca making use of the rich marine life of the area. Peruvian guano deposits were estimated at 11 million tons in the 1840s and a brisk trade quickly developed accounting for as much as 80 percent of Peru’s annual revenues, although at a time when foreign capital controlled most of Peru’s mining, commerce and transportation interests. So valuable was guano for agriculture and weapons production that Spain and England came into conflict for control of this lucrative resource in what came to be known as the Guano Wars or the War of the Pacific which proved disastrous for Peru. In the end, Chile occupied all Peru’s guano islands and even imposed a war indemnity upon the defeated nation to be paid for by guano revenues. Today, guano mining is controlled by the Peruvian government, and exploitation of this resource is carefully controlled and regulated.

Another highlight of the Year of Peru at KSU this year, will be an exhibit in January 2012 titled “Engaging History: Continuities of Textile Traditions in the Andes.” Peru has the longest continuous textile record in world history. Simple spun fibres almost 10,000 years old provide evidence of the first human occupation in western South America. Elaborate fabrics, dating from 3000 BC up to the present, survive in large numbers. Trade in raw materials for making textiles crossed the Andes from desert coast to tropical jungle and ancient textiles from the interior of Peru have been found in coastal burial sites. Textiles have had many uses in Peru, for example, Khipu were knotted textile record-keeping devices used by the Incas. Although the Spanish went to South America in search of gold, at their first meeting, the Inca offered the Spanish conquistadores their highest riches - textiles.

During the Year of Peru, KSU will host a Fulbright scholar, Oswaldo Miguel Gavidia Cannon from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú who along with several KSU faculty will offer classes focused on Peru. We will also be sending groups of faculty and students to Peru to study. They will have the opportunity to see firsthand some of the differences between coastal and cosmopolitan Lima with places such as Cuzco, Arequipa or Iquitos. They will be involved in service-learning projects and meet with fellow students and colleagues to exchange ideas. They may even learn to tell the difference between a llama, alpaca, vicuna and guanaco!

Today, Peru shines as a beacon of success. It is a dynamic place with great energy and creativity. It is looking for new solutions to old problems. The Year of Peru creates a platform to learn from others in a way that does not discredit or discount what seems foreign or alien but instead embraces the unknown as a source of creativity and vitality that enriches our understanding of a complex and fragile world, a world that desperately needs all people to exercise both the freedom and the responsibility
necessary to nurture and care for one another and the lands we inhabit. The study of Peru is a study of
social change and its impact on and relationship to identity formation and community building.

\[\text{i} \text{ Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, History of the Inca Realm (Cambridge University Press, 1999), x.}\]
\[\text{iii} \text{ http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/2003/sepocht/feature1.html}\]
\[\text{iv} \text{ Jose Carlos Mariategui, Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971) [1928], 3.}\]
\[\text{v} \text{ Jose Carlos Mariategui, Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971) [1928], 37.}\]
\[\text{vi} \text{ http://whc.unesco.org/en/ghapagnan/}\]
\[\text{vii} \text{ Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, History of the Inca Realm (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 59.}\]
\[\text{ix} \text{ http://sajournal.blogspot.com/2005/07/guano-wars.html}\]
\[\text{x} \text{ http://museum.archanth.cam.ac.uk/textiles/collection/samerica/peru/}\]