

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Titicaca

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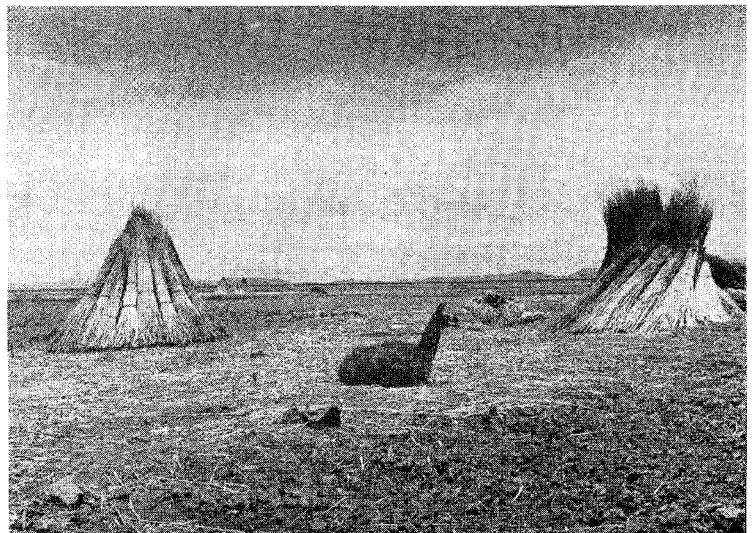
Dear Mr. Rogers:

Coming south on the flat altiplano past Juliaca, the Lake is hidden by a wide pampa lying between the shoreline and the Puno road. You get your first look at it when you start climbing into the hills that ring the town of Puno in a natural amphitheatre. Off to the east a green line appears and, as you climb higher, the line widens and broadens until you are looking at tens of square kilometers of reed marsh. The entire bay below you is choked with titora growing seven feet and more above the surface of the water. There are canals winding in from open water, and a few balsas are anchored in them. Where the marsh meets the rocky shore, black-billed ibis, mudhens and gulls hunt in the shallows. Cattle and hairy razor-backed hogs wallow in the marsh, feeding off the water weeds. Beyond the strip of flat shore, the land rises in rocky slopes and wind-carved cliffs. The rainy season is close, now, and flat-bellied clouds are building up far out on the Lake; squalls coming in from the west are dragging ropes of rain among the high peaks. Over the Lake, the sky between the clouds is very blue with that empty look to it like the sky over the sea.

The first open water you see is the Bay of Puno and, in the distance, the narrows leading out toward Bolivia. To the south, the desolate promontory of Chucuito drops sharply to the water, and to the north the ring of hills closes in to the shore, the slopes scored with tiers of ancient terraces now forgotten and crumbling. Below you is the town of Puno with a finger of dock jutting out into the bay. One of the railway company's five steamships has just come up the Lake from Bolivia, and a train is moving down to the pier to meet her. A sail balsa, its reed mat curving in the wind, is coming in past the reed marsh; far out, a fleet of double-ended trading boats is beating in from the narrows, taking advantage of the following wind to make Puno before dusk. After nightfall, when the wind reverses itself, the fleet will run before it and make for the tiny villages that lie along the shore.

Titicaca is the name of this lake. The word means "hill of lead" or possibly "stone shaped like a cat", but no one really knows. As the guide book will tell you, it is the highest navigable body of water in the world. Approximately 12,545 feet above sea level, covering over 5,625 square

The shore near Chimú: titora



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near the shore, and men in balsas are cutting the reed and spreading it out on the land to dry in the sun. In a plot of ground belonging to one family, two balsas are being constructed. Using grass ropes, the men bind two bales of totorá into sausage shapes. The bales are roped together, forming the hull of the craft. Then two smaller cylinders of reed are bound over the hull to make the bulwarks. The finished boats will be about nine feet long. Being new, they will ride high in the water, but in a few months, the reed will become heavy and the amount of freeboard will decrease rapidly. These two are fishing balsas, built small for easy handling in the weed beds and shallows. They will be propelled by a pole, or perhaps the blunt end of a fish spear.

All along the shore, families are busy repairing nets, building balsas, or gathering water weeds for their livestock. The younger children herd cattle and pigs into the water to graze, and the fat bulls stand deep in the Lake with strings of weed hanging from their mouths. The Indians plough their shore fields carefully, taking advantage of every square inch, and their women follow them down the furrows swinging the clod crushers in long, slow strokes. The dry season has been long, and the earth turned up by the wooden plow is little more than heavy dust.

Agriculture is the basic activity near the Lake, and stock raising runs a close second. But fishing, always an important part of the villagers' economic life, is on the increase, as more and more trout are put into the Lake by the big hatchery in Chucuito. In the twenty years or so since the rainbow trout was first introduced, the submarine life of Titicaca has undergone a radical change. As the rainbows grew, they greatly reduced the population of native coarse fish. Within a few years, the trout were without competition in the Lake. Ideal water temperature and an abundance of food resulted in an incredibly rapid rate of growth. Today, no one can guess at the size of the biggest rainbow in Titicaca, but the Chucuito hatchery manager netted a thirty-four pounder last year in the Bay of Puno.



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Titicaca cliffs
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Equipped with primitive nets, the Indian fishermen are now hauling in catches which would have been impossible in their fathers' time. But for a long time, the campesinos believed that trout was a fish which only the white man could eat. The belief was caused by the ignorant practice of keeping fish for days in the markets and then trying to eat the rotten flesh of those trout left unsold. Several Indians died, and the rest swore off until the Ministry of Education officials showed them how to salt their fish properly or else eat it immediately. The addition of trout to the meager diets of the Titicaca Indians has been a true blessing.

As is true of all men who live near a great body of water, the Indians of Titicaca look upon the Lake as a living thing - a place populated with demons and spirits, a benevolent friend and a terrible enemy. Even in today's world of western religion and customs, there are men in the ayllus who remember the names of the Lake spirits and the legends of the past. There was a time, they say, when there was no Lake. In the great depression of Titicaca there were beautiful palaces and gardens belonging to a godlike race and ruled by the god Paa Zuma. But then, as decreed by divine authority, there came a day when a great rain fell on the land, and the flood waters rose to cover the paradise.¹ Later, say the old men and the magicians, Manco Ccapac and his sister-wife, Mama Occllo, rose from the Lake to build their empire in the mountains to the north. The Lake spirits were there then, and they are there still. They control the lives and the luck of the balsa fishermen who cross the long reaches of deep water to catch the big trout in their nets.



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 The water pastures

there seemed to be smoke. This was because the katari and the big frogs were about. When any fish or frog lives for a long time, it turns into a katari."

To satisfy the wishes and needs of the Lake spirits, whether they be kataris or confused versions of Saint Peter or San Lorenzo or San Vicente, the shore Indians make offerings and hire magicians to perform rituals. The bones of the most perfectly formed (or deformed) fish in the catch are burned with coca leaves in the family stove as an offering to the supernatural beings of Titicaca. According to one Tschopik informant: "The fisherman and his family tell the bones that they have eaten the fish, that they were good, and that they were hungry. Then they say, 'Go and tell San Lorenzo c'uwalaka (mouth of pure water); go and tell San Vicente acacila² (spirit)'. They tell the wind to carry the fumes back to the fish in the Lake so that the other fish will know that they have been well treated.

1. Emilio Romero, Monografía del Departamento de Puno, Lima 1928
2. Harry Tschopik, Jr., The Aymara of Chucuito, Perú - I. Magic
 Vol. 44: Part 2, Anthropological Papers of
 the American Museum of Nat. History N.Y. 1951
3. Pronunciation: "c" equals "ch".

Then they thank the fish. If you don't do this for the fish bones, you will never catch any more fish, and all your nets will tear apart."

At times the mystery of the Lake takes on the shape of a "spirit clothed in white" who lives on an island in the Lake and travels to the mainland in the storm clouds "surrounded by sheets of hail and by souls of unbaptized children who accompany him to see their parents and to take revenge on them for their negligence." (Tschopik, see 2.)

To the rational westerner, these superstitions amount to so much nonsense. But Titicaca is decidedly not rational. There is the silence, the silence that you find only in high places. You see animals grazing on the slopes in the clump grass, people working in the fields. But you hear no sound. And after a while, you think you must be deaf. Then, about you, are the rock shapes of the cliffs, carved by the silent wind. Benito Mussolini juts a rock jaw toward the Lake above the village of Chimú, and a death's head lies cocked at a wierd angle. The water of Titicaca moves in color as the clouds move, but here, inland, there is only the vastness and the silence and the smell of dust. The sun of the days burns deep beneath the skin, and the winter nights are biting cold. They say that in winter the streams freeze over, but the Lake is never skimmed with ice. And that is another mystery.

The immense solitude of the place leaves its mark on the people of Titicaca. They are silent and silently hostile. To get away from the starkness they get drunk during the fiestas. But the alcohol doesn't seem to help much in the face of the silence and hostility of the land. There are always the mysteries and the spirits to contend with - the kataris and the gate-gates, the flying human heads who feast on blood. To live with the mysteries, the people make their offerings, burn their fish bones and send blazing balsas to float aimlessly on the Lake until they sink in deep water.

Sincerely,

William H MacLeish
William H. MacLeish