

Hail to the Son

For as long as I've been aware of different cultures and different peoples, I've been fascinated by the mixing of opposites, and it seemed to me this mixing was most apparent in the rich hotchpotch melting pot of South America. I remember as a young lad in London, my grandfather moaning about the mixing of the races and how one day we would all be "coffee coloured". I marvelled and thought 'how cool, as long as we're coffee coloured on all levels, external and internal.' So I've been drawn since a young age to the fault lines of the earth where continental plates and different peoples mix. Sometimes they collide and sometimes they slip harmoniously into each other. I call it life yoga.

Over the past four years I've visited energetic centres around this globe. All told tales of the clash and subsequent dance of cultures mixing. Mount Kailas has the Tibetans and the Chinese; Jerusalem, Christians, Jews and Muslims; the Pyramids of Egypt, Arabs and Africans; Stonehenge, Celts and Saxons and then there's Uluru. This continued exploration had me sitting by Gate 15 at Sydney International Airport waiting to board a flight that would take me to Peru and Machu Picchu. I was stashing my cash down my boots as a precaution against the rampant theft I'd been warned about in South America, when horror of horrors I realized there were no inner soles in me boots. "Eh by gum laddie," a walking holiday with sole-less boots. I knew this was to be a soul-searching mission but that kind of life-speak is just too literal. I could feel the blisters forming already.

I was to walk the Inka Trail, the pilgrim's path to Machu Picchu. It felt like collecting the final football card from the cereal packet series. Fortuitously, I was to be there during the winter solstice when the people re-enact the major Inkan annual festival of Inti Raymi, literally Sun Party, in the ancient imperial capital of Cuzco. Although we commonly refer to this culture as the Inkas or Incas, this is a misnomer. The name Inka was the title of their leader, the king. The wise people at the time believed all people were and are the sons and daughters of the sun. Perhaps as in these days, the common folk did not believe that they were as great as these great teachings told. And so the Inka was able to hold himself above the people as the lone son of the sun. The people were able to believe this of him if not of themselves. The sun was their closest, most prominent and obviously influential celestial body. High in the Andes the weather is bleak within seconds of the sun slipping behind a neighbouring peak. Few places in the world is the sun's appearance in the sky so obviously associated with personal comfort - just one of many reasons to worship him. For the common man Inti became the focus of worship and the Inka, his instrument on earth, the holder of absolute power. Although the belief systems of the truly wise men, like the true shamans, were much more sophisticated and accurate - the beliefs at play in everyday life; the beliefs of the everyday man who did not have access to teachers or time to meditate, made them easier to herd and manipulate, much as is the case today. For sure there were sophisticated astronomers and amazing architects at this time, but the truly wise, those who embody spiritual

virtue, do not seek power and influence over their brothers, at least not for personal gain.

As I travelled around Peru, I was fascinated to see the mix of indigenous and catholic beliefs. Churches proliferated and the shrines and idols inside were a strange mix of indigenous gods and deities and Christian saints. Virtually every church had Jesus on the altar with the sun shining down above him. Throughout the year the townspeople take down the idol of their church's patron saint and parade it in the streets. In town's with many churches, all the districts descend upon the main cathedral for the battle of the saints, where each church attempts to outdo the other by the most gaudily decorated and dressed saint. Even on the saints paraded around there's a fusion between local fables of mountain spirits or Inkas blended with Christian stories. From day one the Spanish mixed with the Indian people, and today there are virtually no pure western and few pure Indian people, the bulk of the country are what are called mestizos, or mixed race. Of all the places in the world, South America seems to be the place where the dance of life yoga is most advanced.

So to the festival: June 21 is the winter solstice in the southern hemisphere, the day when the sun spends the least time in the visible sky, the shortest day of the year. Through expert observation, the Inka's priests and advisors built sundials that recorded the phase of the year and built temples whose windows aligned perfectly with the sun's direction at each of the solstices; there were also rocks that made amazing shadow projections at this exact time each year, for example, the profile of a Condor (eagle/vulture), a puma (jaguar) a celestial being and a map of the Southern Cross (a famous Inkan symbol) all to chart the heavens or pay homage and respect to Inti who makes the crops grow and warms our faces. Then came the Spanish and in an attempt to prise the indigenous people away from their "primitive" beliefs, the day of Inti Raymi was changed to June 24 to coincide with St Juan's Day, the day Herod had St John the Baptist beheaded. Later the festival was banned altogether and was resurrected by Indigenous activists in 1944.

The Inti Raymi Festival was towards the end of my trip, after I had sampled the delights of Machu Picchu and Nazca. After a series of amazing experiences it was fitting to finish with a festival of praise to the people and deities important to this land. For several days leading up to the celebration, parades and mini carnivals crowded the streets and town centre, schools, churches and all kinds of groups had people dressed in colourful traditional costumes dancing in long lines and perfect formation. It seemed as if the whole region were focused on the proceedings ahead. For the three weeks I had spent in the high altitude of the Andes Inti had been truly kind, bestowing us with his presence; each morning heralding clear blue skies which remained throughout the day. But on the morning of June 24, as we gathered by Qoricancha, the Temple of the Sun, in downtown Cuzco, Inti was nowhere to be seen, hidden behind a dense forest of clouds accompanied by light drizzle. So much so, the proceedings were delayed by an hour. The festival eventually began with about 300 colourfully dressed locals in traditional garb; playing priests, the Inka's

advisors, governors of the four regions (Suyus) of the ancient Inkan empire, the Inka's many wives and the full royal retinue all dancing and stepping in formation with guards in the background waving the rainbow striped Inkan banner. When finally the Inka appeared on the balcony of the temple and sang out his salutation to Inti in Quechua (the language of the Inkas and still spoken by most rural Peruvian people), the sun broke open the clouds and smiled down on the participants and hordes of tourists and locals gathered around the square. The participants then broke from the temple gardens and formed a procession with the throngs following close behind and clouds looming above, the procession headed to the main square of Cuzco, the dancing and promenading continuing for several minutes. When the Inka, carried in his chariot high on the shoulders of the bravest soldiers, arrived, he stood aloft and repeated his cry to Inti, the sun once more deigned us with his presence, parting the clouds, albeit briefly. I looked around to see if others had noticed this "coincidence". Either the "actors" were oblivious to it or so certain of the effects of their performance that they did not bat an eyelid. Once finished in the main square, and in what I assumed to be a deviation from ancient Inkan proceedings, the participants crowded into mini buses with spears, shields, headdresses and bright rainbow banners crammed in every corner. Us spectators followed up the steep hill to the main royal and temple complex of Sacsayhuaman (pronounced much as a Mexican bandit would say "sexy-woman") where stood the temples of the sun, moon, lightning bolt and rainbow and all looking down on the "Puma" city of Cuzco the capital of the Inka's Empire. (A recent addition only 200 metres away is a replica of the statue of Jesus Christ in Rio De Janeiro, which gazes out across the city, arms stretched out in a gesture of peace and surrender.) This was where the main body of the ceremony was to take place. The gringos (as Latin Americans call westerners) sat in bucket seats and benches on the temporarily erected stands directly in front of the action, whilst mainly locals crowded the slopes of the Temple of the Rainbow built into an adjacent hill – this was the best place to soak up the authentic atmosphere and view the colourfully dressed performers tracing their mandala like dance formations. The initial proceedings were much like those that we had witnessed earlier, then came a series of rituals with the governors of each of the four Suyus supplicating before the great Inka and then Inti. After each supplication the sun again briefly popped out from behind the clouds. I was now bursting with intrigue about this phenomenon and started talking to those around me to see who else had noticed. I discovered most had, but many were too embarrassed to point it out, while the Quechuan people on the hill would oooh and ahhh in joy and deep appreciation. The ceremony concluded with the Inka's high priest mock sacrificing a Llama (the main cattle/livestock of the Andes, a cousin of whom had donated their wool to perch upon my head in the form of a very natty hat) and extracting its heart in order to predict and divine the fortune of each region's crops, trading and armies and finally the health and well being of the Inka himself. Apparently the reports of the Inka were propitious (I had the feeling this might be the case each year) and with an incredibly passionate and believable show of appreciation the Inka this time knelt and then bowed flat, head to the floor in the direction of the sun shouting a most powerful chant of supplication sending a ringing

sound though the sound system. Inti did not just show himself, on this occasion the clouds that had hidden him throughout the day vaporized in what seemed like moments. As 10,000 spectators sat transfixed at the spectacle before them, the snap of camera shutters and the murmur of conversation dropped. My heart pounded and my skin tingled. Then a gasp passed out amongst the crowd, like a Mexican wave in each direction, instinctively my body turned the way the crowd was focusing. The most beautiful and clear rainbow I have ever witnessed was almost within touching distance. I could taste the rainbow's luminescence in the vapour. I looked down and the arch of the rainbow was directly above the statue of Jesus. I clearly saw where the rainbow started, it touched the ground in an explosion of tantalising colour far more beautiful than any pot of gold, and more amazing still it was directly, plumb line perfect, in line with the statue. It took off into the sky arching over Jesus like a bridge of love. People just looked at each other and then looked back to check what they were seeing was real. Ten thousand people walked down into the town calm and almost silent.

As I journeyed back to the (other) land of the Southern Cross I reflected on the message portrayed in the rainbow. The rainbow, a timeless symbol of hope and peace was over the statue of the man who most embodied its virtues, and the bringer of this higher truth that, as many of the ancient civilisations have concluded, we are the Sons and Daughters of the Sun and more than that we are the Sons and Daughters of our Sun's creator. For me this was a message of unity, told in a land well advanced on this path, with the backdrop of ancients holding aloft their flag – the rainbow.

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