

## To Walk with the True People

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I lived with an indigenous group of people known as the Tsa'chila, or Colorado Indians, three hours west of Quito outside of Santo Domingo. I resided in the community of El Poste working on developing economic alternatives to unsustainable agricultural practices. I worked with an agro-artisan association that was looking to move away from farming and support themselves solely from revenue derived from tourism and the sale of handicrafts. It was definitely a wild ride, differing day to day, offering experiences and glimpses of a world I knew very little about.

Tsa'chila means "true group of people" in their native tongue, Tsafiki. I struggled long and hard to get a better handle on this esoteric language. At times, it was discouraging to know that only the remaining 3,500 Tsa'chila living in 7 communities around Santo Domingo actively spoke the language. I asked myself, why should I spend all this time learning this excruciatingly difficult language (where there are different dialects in each community) if it couldn't be applied on a broader scale after my two year service was complete? It was only for a few relationships, such as with my 65 year old host grandmother Mimanka, that I struggled to improve on the mere 150 words I knew. She did not speak any Spanish and it was the only way we could communicate.

The majority of the men in my community had a decent handle on Spanish. If it wasn't for this I would have probably learned much more Tsafiki. We had weekly *mingas*, or collaborative work efforts, and tried to hold a meeting every Sunday. At times I felt dazed and lost, aimlessly floating about in a sea of strange clings and clangs; verbal profusion. "*Me puedes explicar*" – can you explain? – I had to repeat time and time again so that the meetings could be broken into two halves, one in Tsafiki and the other in Spanish.

Looking up, breaking out of my distant haze, I noticed the natural surroundings of the village. The wind blew through the leaves of the giant bamboo as it creaked with weight and the lemon-rumped tanagers flew about on wing through heliconia leaves. Sometimes I forgot that my hair too, wasn't permanently streaked in red with the tincture of the aciote's seed, for the men in the association all donned a unique hat-shaped bowl spreading out over shaved temples. The Tsa'chila believe the aciote helps protect them from evil spirits and have painted ever since a yellow fever epidemic threatened to decimate the majority of the population. The "fever" has always been personified, and by painting their body and hair red, they believed they were able to hide from the spirit. Today, only the tradition of painting the hair red has persisted and for this, Colonists to the region gave them the name Los Indios Colorados or The Red-Colored Indians.

Part of what made my experience so meaningful was the opportunity to support not only conservation activities but to foster a needed positive change that was expressed by host

country nationals. One afternoon I sat with Grandfather Aguedo, picking his brain about everything he had experienced and the changes he had seen take place over the years.

"One thing's for sure," he said in bad Spanish, "it used to rain a lot more. I remember when the only way to get to Manto (Santo Domingo) was by mule, and even that could take the large part of the day depending on how much mud was on the trail."

"What were your parents like?" I asked him.

He answered by saying that they were both very true to their cultural roots: his father never passed a day without painting his hair and his mother spent the majority of her time tending to the children and cooking over the fire in little more than a ragged tunan, the traditional skirt striped in rainbow colors. His father was a rubber tapper and once a month would bring his harvest down to Quevedo via the Rio Baba in a hallowed out balsa wood canoe. There, he traded with other merchants for goods like rice, sugar, and cotton and later fought his way back upstream in the same canoe.

"I used to watch my father tap the rubber trees. He had this harness he made from woody vines that he would use to inch his way up the trunk. First, he'd make deep lateral cuts into the bark with his machete, then hang a tethered receptacle to collect the latex. He would do this all the way down the tree and then set off across the forest for his next extraction."

Aguedo held out his hand revealing a long, thin, woody vine. "This is pari'shili, the vine my father would use to make his harness and my mother her tsala."

"Tsala?"

"Yes, you've seen the tsala, haven't you? The women hand-weave baskets we use to carry fruits and yucca around in the farm. These are woven from pari'shili, but the problem is that the vine is becoming really hard to find. I've had to walk a good hour and a half from here to find it."

This is, of course, a result of the region's diminishing forest cover. Here, the correlation between an intact forest and a vibrant culture is readily pronounced. This, along with the encroachment of the city, has driven the culture to near extinction.

Listening to Aguedo always brightens my mood. Reminiscing about the past, he never fails to perk up and he glimmers like a scintillating star. There is no doubt he is proud of where he comes from, but it is sad to see his shoulders fall and lips pout when he thinks about the future. There is nothing positive about the way he thinks about what is happening to his culture.

In old age, it is too easy to become embittered by the repetitive actions of people. There comes a point, where one sees the behavior of others so frequently - and this behavior never changes

- that to expect anything else would be completely irrational. This is how Aguedo thinks about politicians, fellow Association members, and his Tsa'chi kin: a dying wave of indigenous spirit, succumbing to the strangling homogenization of the world.

But as a young man, I still have hope. I tell Aguedo that my generation is a legion of green minds; the fighters for a restoration of the aboriginal reality; the seekers of harmony between man, culture, and nature. He shrugs and looks low and I shout my praises and hope with a smile and a firm embrace.