

The necessity for an ethnographic approach in Peru

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A movement of people is rarely explained by environmental or climatic factors alone. Therefore an analysis which does not take into consideration the cultural consequences of climate change for affected societies is incomplete.

Most research into the links between climate change and migration does not sufficiently consider the perspectives of the affected societies. An ethnographic approach which takes into account the way that these societies represent climate change gives more rigour to the analysis and allows those who are working on the issue to better understand the challenges.

The Q'eros are an indigenous group living in three levels of altitude on the eastern slopes of the Andes in Peru, each with their own ecology. Over the past ten years large numbers of Q'eros have begun to migrate – for education, for work and in response to climate change. Some of them just leave and others move back and forth or extend their nomadic movements to include the city. The Q'eros are agreed that potato crop productivity has been diminishing and that its quality is also suffering because of the changing pattern of precipitation. They claim this change is also responsible for the spread of a parasite affecting the potatoes, and for hunger and deaths among their flocks of alpacas and llamas.

Although economic, social and environmental factors explain to some extent the migration of the Q'eros, the explanation is incomplete because it lacks the inclusion of the way that the Q'eros make sense of climate change. The standard Western approach is built on the dichotomy between people and their culture on the one hand and nature and the environment on the other. In that determinist perspective, migration can be seen as a form of adaptation; climate change in some sense leads to migration. In the Q'ero worldview, relationships between nature and people

are conceived as continuous, not disjointed. Most Q'eros explain the changing climate as the result of the breakdown of the reciprocal relationship they have with their divinities; some of them have turned to other religions and abandoned their traditional practices and others are using their reputation as shamans to turn a profit from tourists and city-dwellers.

So the Q'eros do see a link between climate change and migration but it is not the kind of causal link arising from the dichotomy between people and nature. They would say that their migration – away from their traditional areas, away from their rituals, or instrumentalising those rituals – brings about climate change. With them no longer keeping up the collective ceremonies that were designed to guarantee their harvest and the health of their animals, the climate has begun to change.

Taking into account the point of view of the Q'eros helps, firstly, to highlight the symbolic significance of climate change and, secondly, to posit an interaction between climate change and migration that is more complex and goes beyond classic causality. Besides, an analysis which does not take into consideration the cultural consequences of climate change for affected societies – putting the dominant Western discourse together with the viewpoint of the society involved – is incomplete.

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