



Journey to the Heart

Hosted by Vanishing Cultures Foundation in the Cusco region of Peru, Will Gethin visits two indigenous communities where the charity is helping to preserve precious traditions of an ancient civilisation

Approaching the community village of Pacca, green plains sprawl beneath soaring brown mountains, capped with snow, as our car drones along a gravelly track, passing primitive adobe houses. As we emerge onto a large courtyard overlooked by a white church bell tower, some 50 teenage girls queue excitedly in bright red tracksuits, their faces alight with ebullient smiles.

Emerging from our vehicle, a procession of abundant love begins – as one after another, these warm-hearted, indigenous youngsters hug and kiss us affectionately as we work our way down the line. ‘Buenos Dias’ the girls’ voices sing. Now I know how exhilarating it is for Ammachi, the hugging saint of India, who tirelessly hugs thousands of people everyday!

Welcome to CRFA Virgin Navidad at Pacca, a girls school some 60 miles north of Cusco city, which was founded in 2004 by the Vanishing Cultures Foundation (VCF), an American- and Peruvian-run charity that aims to assist the indigenous people of Peru by ‘preserving their spiritual lineage and supporting their economic development’. VCF was initially established in 1994 by Denise Kinch, a zoologist from Massachusetts, to support the Q’ero, a waning mountain tribe in the Cusco region of Peru, feted for their shamanism and for living in balance with Nature. Later, VCF will guide me on an expedition to the high Q’ero villages, where I will stay in the family home of shaman Nasario Quispe.

Kinch discovered the beauty of indigenous simplicity in the 1970s while working as a Peace Corps volunteer in sub-Saharan West Africa. ‘Here I learnt the difference between manipulation and truth, about education versus agenda and about integrity,’ she recalls. In subsequent travels through the mountains, jungles and deserts of Peru, she has befriended many indigenous people and their medicine men. Studying their healing prac-



Opposite: Will Gethin prepares for the Pacca 'hugging' queue.
 Left: Chua Chua Village, Q'ero Territory (see pages 9–10).
 Photos: Will Gethin.

tices and listening to their stories and songs, she felt inspired to keep their traditions alive – and thus VCF was born.

Standing for the national anthem, sung in native Quechua, the Pacca girls hold their hands over their hearts, as sunlight dapples through bulbous clouds, illuminating the surrounding mountains. The Pacca community is extremely poor and, before VCF discovered it, education in the area was very basic. Rallying support from schools in the USA, VCF began to amass supplies and donations for the new Pacca school and four years later it has 100 students, aged 11–16, and is a hive of creative and entrepreneurial activity.

Most students arrive speaking Quechua and a little Spanish, but with classes conducted entirely in Spanish, students soon master both. The curriculum covers the basics of mathematics, language, sciences and arts, as well as the necessary skills to create positive lives in rural Peruvian communities. Many of the girls come from poor mountain families and students can travel up to five hours to board at the school. Due to space restrictions, only 50 girls can currently stay at the school at any one time, so two groups share the space, swapping over every two weeks.

Heart-felt welcome

A welcoming ceremony begins, as VCF guide Carlos and myself are hoisted from our seats by two girls for a dance, serenaded by the communal singing and rhythmical clapping of the surrounding entourage. As we resume our seats, my dancing partner, Mirian Cardes, takes centre stage and begins a song in Quechua, holding a hand over her heart.

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Singing impassioned, eyes closed, she raises her hands skywards as if summoning a higher power and, as her body starts to flow in rhythm, she beats time with her hands.

Three more girls then give theatrical singing performances, brimming with life and natural artistry. Each performance comes straight from the heart, authentic and emotive, in touch with raw emotions in a way we seem to have

lost in the West. They call on something primal and powerful deep within, pure theatre of the naked soul. 'They wrote the songs themselves, expressing their happiness that we have come and their thanks to VCF,' Carlos informs me.

One of the singers, Flor de Rosa, explains that each student has a personal project they are working on, for which VCF has provided funds and assistance. She shares the success of her guinea pig project (these animals being a gastronomic delicacy in Peru!), which she began just a few weeks earlier with 20 guinea pigs. 'Now I have 116!' she beams. 'I give them to people in the village and I want to make a business selling them and exporting them abroad, but I need more money to take the project forward.' As with most of these projects, Flor's efforts will help her family and give work to people in the community.

Eager to celebrate and sustain local indigenous traditions, VCF has funded a series of flourishing artisan projects at the school and we are given a guided tour of the best of these: intricately sewn skirts and dresses laid out on tables; colourful earrings, bracelets and necklaces displayed on boards; knitted jumpers, cardigans and baby wear are exhibited by



Top: Pacca schoolgirls perform the Wara Wara dance. Above: Pacca student Marian Cardes displays textiles made by her and other students. Photos: Will Gethin.

women in traditional Andean high hats – mothers of the schoolgirls, funded by VCF to receive knitting training, who now teach it at the school.

‘Almost every female in the village, young and old, is now knitting,’ Denise Kinch later fills me in. ‘In the afternoons the ladies sit around sharing stories as they help each other knit – it’s a truly beautiful sight!’ The resulting

sweaters are sold through VCF as well as in the surrounding cities, contributing to the village’s independence.

In a barn, lots of beautifully woven textiles festoon the walls. Girls busily practice their craft, perched before large traditional, wooden looms. Weaving students here have only made small blankets to date due to time constraints, as there are only three looms to share

between 30 students. With all the artisan projects, the girls need more machines to enable them to have quality, individual time, and they need better tools and equipment for their projects to grow. Kinch hopes that teaching these young women artisan skills will lead them to create personal businesses selling their wares in the cities, helping them to become financially independent while supporting their families.

Positive aid

VCF’s Pacca project is a shining example of positive, humanitarian aid – supporting a community without intruding and encouraging the village to be involved in every step of the process. The artisan projects are helping to sustain and finance the Pacca community as well as support its neighbours. They are also helping to keep the indigenous culture alive and thriving, and steer their economic success.

We are shown the new greenhouse, largely built by the villagers, which is enjoying its first harvest of parsley, carrots, beetroot, spinach, onions, lettuce, cauliflower and various other plants – enough to feed the entire school. Up until now, fathers of the girls have contributed around 22 Soles per week toward their children’s food (about £4), which they work hard to provide, normally from farming, and they also bring corn and potatoes they have produced. By the greenhouse, a new school campus is being built, following initial VCF funding, and the charity is collecting more donations to complete the building, as well as for a medical clinic. When the new campus is finished all 100 girls will be able to study at the school together full time.

The guiding principle of VCF is *ayni*, a Quechua word from the Andes meaning ‘reciprocity’, or an exchange to maintain balance in the flow of energy from one source to another. *Ayni* is the cornerstone of the Andean relationship with the universe. ‘The girls are already sharing their knowledge with the surrounding area,’ says Kinch, ‘which is what we require as a form of *ayni*. It’s working great and people are getting paid for their services. Pacca has taken on a wonderful dimension because they are growing beyond what VCF ever imagined.’

The day concludes with a Wara Wara dance by girls resplendent in crisp white shirts and brightly coloured skirts, sashes adorning their waists. They flourish flowing white scarves as they swing their hips to Andean pipe music, their skirts spinning high into the air as

they twirl, scarves swirling above their heads.

After a final round of hugs, a flurry of smiley faces flicker across my mind as our taxi slips past brooding mountain silhouettes on the road back to Cusco. I feel deeply touched by my visit to Pacca and by the amazing work VCF has done to create such happy and inspired lives, so clearly visible in the joyful eyes of the whole community.

Harsh nomadic life of the Q'ero

A few days after the visit to Pacca, I set off from Cusco for a VCF expedition to Chua Chua, the highest of the Q'ero villages, at 18,000 feet.

Here in the Vilcanota mountain range in the remote Paucatanbo province, the Q'ero – a tribe of around 1,000 people, scattered across eight villages – eke out a self-sustaining existence of agriculture and pastoral nomadism, cultivating potatoes and herding llama and alpaca.

VCF came to the Q'ero's aid when the late Don Manuel Quispe (who died in 2004) – the last celebrated *altomestayog* (higher shaman) among the Q'ero – asked Denise Kinch to help his people. Known as the Dalai Lama of the Andes, Don Manuel travelled extensively throughout Peru and the USA, well into his nineties and Kinch was his favourite student; he asked her to help with his people's health, children and animals and to remember their traditions, and since 1994 she has visited the Q'ero villages 13 times with her support team.

I am honoured to be guided on this expedition by Don Manuel's son, Nasario, a *paqo* (shaman) living between Cusco and Chua Chua. Swathed in a poncho, his wise eyes grin beatifically beneath his knitted *ch'ullu* hat, surmounted by an Andean trilby banded with beaded thread. Heading south east out of Cusco, our cab winds northwards into the mountains, where gaping valleys tumble above snaking rivers. Reaching Ancassi five hours later – a derelict town at the end of the road – we hire a couple of ponies to carry our bags for the remaining five-hour hike into Q'ero territory.

While some Q'ero have moved to Cusco, the tribe remain largely cut off from the outside world because travel to the high Q'ero is unpredictable and dangerous, hypothermia and altitude sickness are real threats and few outsiders go there. As we climb through an endless precipitous valley of wailing winds, sheep and alpaca graze above gurgling streams. Breathless from the altitude when we finally reach the top of



Alpacas and llamas in parasite control tanks in Q'ero territory. Photo: Vanishing Cultures Foundation.

the mountain, it's a short walk downhill before the scattered stone dwellings of Chua Chua become visible amid a haze of rain clouds drifting in from the Madre de Dios jungle.

Reminiscent of the Scottish highlands of the 14th century, a visit to the Q'ero is like stepping back in time. Each family lives together in small huts built from stone, mud and grass. Guests at Nasario's home, we are greeted by men in ponchos, women wrapped in Andean bonnets and alpaca skirts, and raggedy children, eyes wild with excitement. The family gather round as we dispense gifts in respect for *ayni*, including luxury food supplies like rice and sugar.

Gathering inside, Nasario's braided-haired wife, Martina, serves a straight

potato supper; with the absence of electricity, it's dark despite the two windows put in by VCF and the air is heavy with choking smoke. Children gather on alpaca rugs around the hearth, competing for space with charred pots and grimy buckets. While llama, alpaca and sheep provide some meat, the Q'ero survive primarily on potatoes; no other foods grow at such extreme altitudes.

While some Q'ero claim they have always lived here, many believe they reached these high mountains above Cusco to escape the Spanish conquistadors in the 1530's and preserve their traditions. Here they remained isolated from the modern world till their discovery by Peruvian anthropologist, Oscar Nuñez del Prado, in 1949.

Since then, they have been mythologised by Western writers and anthropologists as direct descendents of the Incas (celebrated kings of pre-Colombian America), legendary shamans and guardians of secret knowledge about natural laws. An ancient Inca prophecy foretells the end of the world as we know it in 2012 and the dawning of a new harmonious age. However, reliable sources, including Kinch, suggest that while the Q'ero do have a strong, shamanic ancestry and live in balance with Nature, the myths are largely embellished and today they are essentially humble, mountain people, whose greatness lies in their simplicity.

'Because of their innocence in dealing with the outside world, the Q'ero are being exploited as the last of the Inca,' Kinch laments. 'What a captivating story it is, but in actuality the Q'ero are amazing simply for being who they are, magical weavers and simple farmers.'

While part of me still wants to romanticise the Q'ero and uncover some sort of Shangri-La paradise in the perilous heights of the Andes, as I observe their harsh daily lives over the coming days, I face the stark reality that life here is an enduring struggle to survive against the extreme elements on land too dry for decent crops.

Improved education and medical care

Over the years, VCF has done much to improve the Q'ero predicament, greatly contributing to the education and well-being of Chua Chua and other Q'ero villages. VCF's mountain medical team has hugely reduced the infant and adult death rates, relieved painful septicaemia from infected teeth and helped alleviate prevailing muscle, stomach and respiratory problems. VCF has also supplied veterinary care for the Q'ero's animals, reducing their death rate, improving fertility and helping to improve wool production, thus generating economic development. In addition, the charity has supported Q'ero youths to attend school in Cusco and taken a census of the Q'ero people, tracking societal improvements.

Don Manuel also asked Kinch to help preserve the Q'ero's waning, shamanic traditions, lamenting that the desire to learn these ancient medicine ways was lost among the Q'ero young. Andean *pagos* are considered shaman-priests, who have traditionally maintained balance between their people and Nature and treated 'soul illness' through ritual, using plant and animal medicines and healing stones. Kinch is one of few



Above: Nasario Quispe with baby granddaughter, Chua Chua. Photo: Gillian Duffin. Below: Denise Kinch, founder of Vanishing Cultures Foundation, with the late Don Manuel Quispe in 2003. Photo: Vanishing Cultures Foundation.

Westerners to have received medicine teachings directly from Don Manuel and she and Nasario were the only people to receive his rites before he died. Since then, Kinch has been re-introducing the Q'ero medicine practices to the villages as well as to Western students.

Collating a curious assortment of sacred objects on his mesa (sacred altar) – such as coca leaves, dried fruits, incense,

out and she has been working to revive them.

As a symbolic act of reciprocal interchange with the earth, the *despacho* reflects the Andean principle of *ayni*, which – as with the people of Pacca – is essential for the Q'ero's survival, permeating all areas of their life, as they walk in balance and mindfulness with Nature and each other. And in our times of global environmental destruction, the Western world would do well to heed this pearl of Andean wisdom:

'Respect the Earth and she will give you abundance,' taught the late Q'ero sage, Don Manuel Quispe. 'Respect the Sun and you will receive light for your crops. Respect the mountains and they will protect you. Respect others and they respect you back. *Ayni* is from the heart, true and pure.' ☸

VCF relies on donations to continue its work in the Pacca and Q'ero communities. To find out how you can help, visit: www.vanishingcultures.com. For further reading about the Q'ero and Andean spiritual traditions, see JE Williams, *The Andean Codex: Adventures and Initiations among the Peruvian Shamans*, Hampton Roads Publishing Co, Charlottesville, VA, USA, 2005.



gold and silver paper (symbolising gold and silver) and a metal wheel (representing Sun and Moon) – Nasario performs a *despacho* ceremony, the cornerstone of Andean shamanism. He murmurs incantations to the *apus* (mountain spirits), summoning them to bless my life, work and health. Traditionally, this gift to Pachamama, 'Mother Earth', is orchestrated communally during the first 12 days in August (when the Q'ero let the earth go fallow) to bless their animals, harvest and fertility. Kinch says *despachos* are very effective for 'healing, abundance, protection and gratefulness'; when she first visited the Q'ero, they were dying

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