



# Peasants on the Edge: Crop, Cult, and Crisis in the Andes

*William P. Mitchell*

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Throughout Latin America and the rest of the Third World, profound social problems are growing in response to burgeoning populations and unstable economic and political systems. In Peru, terrorist acts by the Shining Path guerilla movement are the most visible manifestation of social discontent, but rapid economic and religious changes have touched the lives of almost everyone, radically altering traditional lifeways. In this twenty-year study of the community of Quinoa in the Department of Ayacucho, William Mitchell looks at changes provoked by population growth within a severely limited ecological and economic setting, including increasing conversion to a cash economy and out-migration, the decline of the Catholic fiesta system and the rise of Protestantism, and growing poverty and revolution.

When Mitchell first began his field studies in Quinoa in 1966, farming was still the Quinueños' principal means of livelihood. But while the population was increasing rapidly, the amount of arable land in the community remained the same, creating increased food shortfalls. At the same time, government controls on food prices and subsidies of cheap food imports drove down the value of rural farm production. These ecological and economic factors forced many people to enter the nonfarm economy to feed themselves.

Using a materialist approach, Mitchell charts the new economic strategies that Quinueños use to confront the harsh pressures of their lives, including ceramic production, wage labor, petty commerce, and migration to cash work on the coast and in the eastern tropical forests. In addition, he shows how the growing conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism is also an economic strategy, since Protestant ideology offers acceptable reasons for redirecting the money that used to be spent on elaborate religious festivals to household needs and education.

The twenty-year span of this study makes it especially valuable for students of social change. Mitchell's unique, interdisciplinary approach, considering ecological, economic, and population factors simultaneously, offers a model that can be widely applied in many Third World areas. Additionally, the inclusion of an entire chapter of family histories reveals how economic and ecological forces are played out at the individual level.

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