

# Of Myth and Reality: Andean Interpretations of Their History

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## Introduction

With the Spanish Conquest of the New World, native groups, which remained ethnically distinct under both the Inca and Mexican conquest states, were reduced to a category of *Indian* which contrasted with the category of conquering *Spaniards*. Ethnic strife between Indians and descendants of the Spanish—known as *ladinos* in Chiapas and *mestizos* in the Andes—has been a factor in both regions since. Policy in both regions concentrated Indians in highland regions that were marginally productive for agriculture. Spanish settlers were able to prosper financially through exploitation of more lucrative lowland and coastal regions. A sophisticated colonial system was established by the 1700s, demanding Indian labor on Spanish and *mestizo*-administered *encomiendas* and *haciendas* which were established in the more economically productive coastal and *sierra* slopes (Morner 1985, Stavenhagen 1975). Although this system has been abolished, Spanish-speakers have maintained political and economic dominance.

The Aymara- and Quechua-speakers of the central and southern Andes and the Tzotzil and Tzeltal-speakers of Chiapas are concentrated into highland areas which Aguirre Beltran has termed Indian "regions of refuge" (cf. Stavenhagen 1975). In these areas, Indian identity and solidarity have been reinforced through a religion that incorporated both native and Catholic concepts. A major facet of this syncretized religion is a system of fiesta sponsorship known as the cargo system in Mesoamerica and the "fiesta complex" in South America. This system consists of community members agreeing to finance a festival for a patron saint for one year. The process of sponsorship requires that the sponsor (*mayordomo*) incur debt, proving in part his commitment to the community (Carrasco 1961, DeWalt 1975). Many anthropologists working in Latin America today have

argued that the cost of these festivals keeps Indians poorer than their Spanish-speaking counterparts.

The historical events that shaped this reality can be analyzed from three perspectives: Spanish official history, *ladino/mestizo* accounts, and the folklore of the Indian communities. Watchel (1979) has stated that in order to understand fully a group's history, the perspective of the working man—in this case the Indian peasant—must be analyzed as well as the official accounts of history. In both the Andean and Mesoamerican regions discussed here, we have, through examination of the drama known as the "Dance of the Conquest," the opportunity to witness how different communities perceive their own history.

In both areas, ritual dramas reflect ethnic conflicts between Indian groups. Additionally, these Indian groups reenact the Conquest, which shaped their current economic, political, and social subjugation to their Spanish conquerors. The displeasure the Indians feel toward their situations has manifested itself over the years in repeated uprisings. At present the Indians are not rebelling, yet "Dance of the Conquest" festivals, a form of Scott's (1986) everyday resistance, manifest—in a noncombative manner—Indian dissatisfaction with their subordination. This paper reviews the existing research on this issue. We shall begin by examining the Peruvian case.

### Peru: Historical Background

The Spanish execution of the thirteenth Inca ruler Atahualpa in 1532 effectively weakened the Inca Empire, a conquest state composed of as many as one hundred different ethnic groups (Murra 1986:49), although a post-Atahualpa state survived in Vilacamba until 1572. The decapitation of its ruler Tupac Amaru in Cuzco inspired a myth which states that his severed head, buried beneath Cuzco, will grow a new body. When this happens, the Andean Indians will be able to rise up and restore their world. This myth is closely related to that of *inkarri*, in which an Inca creator will return, restoring harmony to the world through the return to an Inca *utopia* (Campbell 1987:113, Stern 1982).

The Manco Inca rebellion of 1535 was the first of many highland anti-Spanish rebellions. The eighteenth century was marked by repeated uprisings in the highlands, culminating with the well-known Tupac Amaru Rebellion of 1780. It was led by a wealthy *mestizo* descendant of Indian nobles, who symbolically adopted the name of the last Inca. The brutal end of this rebellion, with the execution of many Indians, suppressed further rebellions for more than twenty years (Pike 1967). It marked a change in colonial attitudes toward the Indians,

forging a new Indian identity: to claim Indian descent was no longer prestigious. At this point, the image of the Indian and peasant became synonymous with one who worked in agriculture (Molinie-Fioravanti 1986:342-4). The Indian communities of the Andean highlands are mutually distinguishable, although they share a common language and similar culture. While Indians recognize each other as *runa*, the people, this recognition is more an acknowledgment of similar socioeconomic status than an ethnic identification (Osborne 1952:231-2).<sup>1</sup>

### Dance of the Conquest

The "Dance of the Conquest" is distributed in communities throughout the central and southern highlands of Peru and into Bolivia, the region near Cuzco where Burga states that Indians struggle with their identities (1988:27). It is not reported in the northern Peruvian highlands where weak community traditions predate colonial times, the result of the Inca Empire disrupting traditional culture there (Mallon 1987:251). Nor is there a national production of the dance, although the Indian past has been glorified through the recreation of the festival of the sun, Inti Raymi, in Cuzco.

In spite of minor regional variations, the format for the "Dance of the Conquest" is similar in each community. It is performed in four acts, which span an afternoon and a night. The following description of the dance is taken from Watchel's description of the Bolivian Chamara (1977).

In the first act, the Inca Atahualpa and his priest have premonitions of the Spanish arrival on the coast. Atahualpa promises to fight the conquistadors to the death. A chorus and an Inca soothsayer, Huaylla Huisa, announce the arrival of the Spanish.

Two preliminary meetings occur in the second act, the first between Pizarro's assistant, Almagro, and the Inca soothsayer. A later meeting takes place between an Inca noble and Pizarro. In both meetings, communication between the Indians and Spanish cannot be accomplished without a translator; neither can the Indians understand the letter Pizarro has written them. Moreover, Almagro and a Jesuit missionary disagree about their ultimate purpose. Almagro's translator relates that they have come for gold and silver, while the missionary insists that they have come to save souls. Pizarro threatens to kill Atahualpa in the second meeting, then is directed to Atahualpa's palace by an uncomprehending Inca noble. Atahualpa is warned of Pizarro's approach by Indians who agree to fight with him against the Spanish.

The confrontation between Pizarro and Atahualpa occurs in the third act. Initially, Atahualpa threatens Pizarro but then surrenders, offering Pizarro gold and silver in exchange for his life. When it becomes apparent that Pizarro will have the precious metals and his head, Atahualpa sends his son to Vilacamba to plan the reconquest of the Inca Empire. He then curses Pizarro and all Spaniards forever and refuses baptism by Valverde, claiming it would be meaningless. As he pushes away the Bible Valverde has thrust in his face, Atahualpa is murdered by Pizarro. The Indian chorus begins lamenting the death of their ruler and their empire.

The play concludes with Pizarro's return to Spain and Charles IV's condemnation of Atahualpa's murder. After hearing his king praise Atahualpa and curse Pizarro's participation, Pizarro curses himself and dies. The Indian chorus continues grieving the death of their king and his empire.

### **Interpretation**

Two major interpretations of the "Dance of the Conquest" have been undertaken. In his analysis, Nathan Watchel attempts to isolate general themes as performed in different rural communities in both the Bolivian Andes and Middle America (1977). Manuel Burga analyzes the transformations in the dance in three Andean communities (two are considered here) from the seventeenth century to the present as a means of exploring Indian consciousness as it pertains to ethnic identity (1988).

Spanish attempts at destruction of Incan economic, political, social, and religious institutions led to the development of the peasant consciousness of contemporary communities. The Indian response to the upheaval that followed the conquest was, as Watchel put it, "limit-ed acculturation with an adherence to tradition" (1977:141); new elements introduced by the Spanish (foods, religion, social organization) added to the existing system.

Different communities emphasize the major structural themes in different ways. Watchel argues that the play clearly demonstrates that Indians see the Spanish Conquest as a direct result of miscommunication between the Inca and Spaniards (1977:39). He also observes that the play ends differently in the three communities he examined. He suggests these differences reflect varying degrees of ethnic integration at the local level. For example, the Aymara-speakers of Oruro, Bolivia, pray at the end of the dance for Atahualpa's rebirth; local lore has replaced the head of Tupac Amaru with that of Atahualpa.

Burga examined both the patron-sponsored fiestas of three neighboring Peruvian Andean communities (1988). In Mangas, a traditional Quechua-speaking community, he was able to trace the transformation of a pre-Spanish dance (*taqui*) through the colonial era into the present. This is the only community where the festival continues.

Due to the increased fervor of the Catholic Church in the second half of the seventeenth century, the festival was secularized into the *Masha*—the objective became the organization of collective labor that would lead to the construction of the local church by the members of the different *barrios* of the town (*ibid*). Besides integrating the community through communal labor, the introduction of Peruvian flags (date unspecified) to the festival has created a "modern version of old rituals" (1988:23; translation mine).<sup>2</sup>

Within this community, the trauma wrought by the confrontation between the Inca Atahualpa and Pizarro is observed in the dance known as the Inca-Capitan *comparsa*. Originally, the role of the Inca was central, and he continues to perform the most. However, Burga attributes the inversion in the desirability of these two roles to the social transformations of the past two centuries. Following the second Tupac Amaru rebellion, many Indians began to associate being *Indian* with poverty. A number of acculturated Indians in the community began to sponsor the costlier Spanish role, leaving the more impoverished Indians to portray Atahualpa (1988:29-30).

In the *comparsa* Inca-Capitan of Mangas and Chiquian, another town studied by Burga, Atahualpa is not executed. Burga describes this as a scaled-down version of *inkarri* in which the savior can return. A national symbol, the Peruvian flag, has been incorporated into the play in Chiquian, where there is a higher *mestizo* population. The flag adorns the plaza and is wrapped around the axe that Atahualpa carries as a status symbol. The Mangas *comparsa*, on the other hand, does not utilize national symbols. Although Indians have been unified in the *Masha* and see themselves as Peruvians, it appears that they are still searching for an identity in relation to Spaniards and *mestizos* who are also part of the nation. Now let us turn to the case of the Chiapas highlands.

### Chiapas: Historical Background

Like the Conquest of Peru, the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the first quarter of the sixteenth century entailed the conquest of many different ethnic groups in different regions (Bricker 1977:228). Three major groups which were conquered include the lowland Maya of Yucatan, the Aztec Empire centered in the central valley of Mexico, and

the Quiche kingdom of highland Guatemala, which then dominated the Maya-speaking areas of contemporary Guatemala and Chiapas. The Quiche king Tecum Unam was defeated by Pedro de Alvarado and his troops in 1534 (Carmack 1981), and in 1824 the state of Chiapas split from its culturally similar southern neighbor and entered the Republic of Mexico.

The rebellions of the Chiapas highlands, directed by Indians against *ladinos*, are attributed to both the usurpation of Indian communal lands and the ridicule of native religious practices. In the local folk Catholicism, the lay officials of the Indian religious hierarchy sponsor fiestas to the saints. These festivals are more important to the Indians than the Catholic masses led by *ladino* priests, and serve as ethnic markers. Wasserstrom states that the Indian communities of Chiapas use these festivals to proclaim themselves Indians (1978:80). The festivals recreate through myth and drama the way in which Indians perceive the historical events that terminated Indian self-determination, resulting in the subjugation which exists today.

### Dance of the Conquest

When Alvarado conquered this region, he announced that he had come to Christianize the Indians. Spanish priests and missionaries who entered the area introduced to the Indians a variety of morality and historical plays. One of these, the drama of the Moors and the Christians, evolved into a "Dance of the Conquest" drama, which portrays the defeat of Tecum Unam. Only in Guatemala does this drama pass from generation to generation as a form of written history (Bricker 1977).<sup>3</sup>

The Guatemalan "Dance of the Conquest" is described by Watchel as differing from Andean folkloric presentations in that the Quiche and Spaniards are reconciled at the end through baptism (1977). In this reenactment of Tecum Unam's defeat at Alvarado's hands, the conflict between Spaniard and Indian is evident. The Quiche king, like Atahualpa, has refused to accept baptism and is killed by Alvarado; today he is revered as a national hero. In this production, a former Quiche ruler, King Quiche, has been introduced as a contemporary of Tecum Unam; following Tecum's death, King Quiche accepts baptism, and the Spaniards and Indians are united.

Bricker presents the variations of the plays of the Moors and Christians that exist in the Tzeltal-speaking community of Chamula. In both Guatemala and Chamula, this play is performed during Carnival, the week before Lent. This time is traditionally considered unlucky in the region because of: (1) the repeated attempts at Spanish

conquest made during this time; and (2) the suppression of the Cancuc revolt during this time in 1712. Bricker shows how the villagers have adapted the drama of the Moors and Christians to reflect their own version of local history. In a prophecy read before the plays, the history of the region from the time of the Conquest until the present is recounted. In addition to the Conquest, this time span includes the French invasion of Mexico in 1862, the Cancuc rebellion of 1712, the attempted Tzeltal Rebellion of 1848, and the Chamula uprising of 1867-1870.

As in the Andean dramas, the ethnic conflicts portrayed in Indian communities of highland Chiapas form a part of local oral history. Because of structural similarities, Bricker argues that a variation of the Guatemalan "Dance of the Conquest," thought to be missing from the Chiapas highlands, is performed in Zinacantan during the festival of San Sebastian in late January. As in the Peruvian case, ethnic conflicts between Indian groups existed prior to the Conquest. In Zinacantan, the additional ethnic strains arising from the Conquest have become a part of the dance yet do not obliterate entirely ethnic tensions between Indian groups. Representatives of the central Mexican god Quetzalcoatl, for whom Cortes was initially mistaken, join the cargo holders portraying Spaniards. Lacandon Indians, with whom Zinacantecos warred for more than 200 years, are represented in both colonial and modern times.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to summarize similar representations of the historical events that shaped contemporary ethnic cleavages in two plural societies. In both the Andean and Chiapas highlands, Indians have reacted violently in the face of overwhelming political, economic, and religious oppression, although Wasserstrom alleges that the Indians resort to rebellion only when any other option has been exhausted (1978:8).

What is fascinating is the way in which we can see, by examining folklore, how the Indians in both regions have come to internalize their subordination to the Spanish by making the roles of Spaniards more prestigious than those of Indians. In both regions discussed here, there is a strong correlation between fiesta sponsorship and ethnic identification, and the Indian is always placed in an inferior position. Burga (1988), for example, states that the role of Capitan in the Mangas *comparsa* has become so costly that only the wealthier members of the community may sponsor it. Discussing the Chiapas case, Vogt states that during San Sebastian, Indians recognize their

subordinate position by allocating the roles of the Spanish to the senior members of a sponsoring pair while the junior members play the inferior Indians (1976). Through oral transmission, history and mythology in both the Andes and highland Chiapas have merged. While today's dramas are transformations of localized pre-Columbian dramas, in both regions the dramas reflect native views of local history and give the Indian perspective of ethnic relations.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In addition to the melding of Indian groups of different ethnic affiliation before Spanish colonization, the leveling of status among Indians was a major social change. An example of this is the chewing of *coca*, which was prohibited to all but the elite during the Empire. Today *coca* chewing is common among all highland Indians and is an ethnic marker (Allen 1981).
- <sup>2</sup> Today's Masha signifies that despite occupational differences within the community, the Indians now recognize themselves as Peruvians.
- <sup>3</sup> The drama is so important to Guatemalans that mask and costume production has developed as a profitable "folklore industry."

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