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“Tupac Amaru as a Symbol of Peruvian Nationalism”

The evolution of Túpac Amaru II as a national symbol provides insight into the changing national consciousness of Peruvian society. In the eighteenth century, the Spanish officials branded Túpac Amaru as an outlaw, executing him in the Plaza de Armas of Cusco and sending his remains throughout Peru as a lesson to others who might attempt rebellion. Today, however, he is embraced by Peruvian officialdom as a hero, a champion of indigenous rights and a precursor to the independence movements of Latin America. Monuments portray him as a glorious soldier, streets bear his name, and children learn about him in school. Has the state finally embraced its Indian population and Peru's Inca roots? The answer to this question is complicated, and requires a historical exploration, both of the Túpac Amaru revolution and of how the leader's image has changed over time. National heroes are often adopted to serve the needs of the present, and Túpac Amaru is no exception. For this reason, he is frequently misrepresented and misunderstood, celebrated by whatever political party needs him in order to accomplish its goals. The evolution of his image from 1780 until now reflects a change in Peruvian consciousness in favor of placing higher value in indigenous culture. However, the motivation for adopting Túpac Amaru has not always been to promote indigenous rights; rather, it has been used as a tool to co-opt peasant groups in order to build popular support. What is more, the use of the symbol has caused profound historical distortions by oversimplifying what was truly a complex revolution. It is important to understand these misconceptions, as well as

how the image of José Gabriel Condorcanqui evolved after his death, in order to make sense of his place in Peruvian national consciousness

Despite some recent strides towards social integration, Peru, as a nation, has had a lengthy history of racial and class-based subjugation. The legacy of Spanish colonization has not been kind to the native people of the Andes. They gained little from the independence movements of the early nineteenth century, which simply replaced their Spanish oppressors with an equally dominant creole elite. Stark divisions between Peru's affluent coastal population and the impoverished Indians of the highlands led to a massive internal conflict in the 1980s, claiming tens of thousands of lives. Amnesty International cited racism as a major factor in the human rights abuses, as government forces indiscriminately targeted Andeans who often had no relation to the Shining Path or the other revolutionary groups (15-16). Today, divisions remain strong between the coast and the highlands, as demonstrated by the cultural separation between Lima and Cusco. A tourist walking the streets of Lima is more likely to see the changing of the guard in the Plaza Mayor or a statue venerating Simon Bolívar than a representation of indigenous culture. In Cusco, on the other hand, a statue of the great Inca emperor Pachacutec commands attention in the city center, and tourists from all over the world come to see Inti Raymi, a traditional festival venerating the sun. A visitor would naturally assume that Peruvian society has embraced its indigenous roots. Yet valuing Indian culture as a means of marketing and truly aiming for racial equality are entirely different, and Peru still has a long way to go in the latter department. An analysis of Túpac Amaru as a symbol must be understood in the context of the racial and economic divisions which have characterized the country since before its inception.

Túpac Amaru has been made a symbol of social revolution, indigenous rights, and Andean pride, and has been credited as being a precursor to the successful independence movements of the early nineteenth century. The problem with simply accepting him as a natural symbol of all these ideals is that we risk distorting history. National heroes are often some of the most misunderstood historical figures, because their image becomes so reflective of the present. Peruvians who champion social causes want to view Túpac Amaru as a social revolutionary, when this was not, in fact, the case (Garofalo). He did not seek a dramatic restructuring of the social hierarchies, redistribution of land, or any of the sorts of social reforms that would characterize Latin American movements in the 20th Century. In fact, Túpac Amaru, as a member of the indigenous aristocracy, had little to gain and much to lose from a re-distribution of wealth. A prosperous merchant in the Cuzco region, his movement arose from a very specific set of economic circumstances caused by the Bourbon reforms. As one historian writes: "...it's necessary to forgo any explanation that reduces the phenomenon to abstract notions such as 'colonial exploitation.'... The uprising didn't take place at just any moment: it had a precise date and setting" (Flores Galindo 84). The stringent colonial policies instituted by the Bourbons had had devastating economic effects on the Andean region. These policies, coupled with flooded markets from increased mining and textile activity, made it very difficult for Indians to pay their mandatory *repartos* (Starn, 150). It was not just Indians, however, who suffered from the reforms. As new customs houses were constructed and heavy taxes were imposed on previously untaxed goods, widespread discontent became rampant: "...the Bourbon reforms angered virtually every group in Peru" (Walker 23). It was these widespread economic frustrations that made the revolution possible. Túpac Amaru may have made the increase of indigenous rights a

part of his platform, but his rebellion arose from economic conditions which had affected all sectors of society.

In addition to applying contemporary views of social revolution to Túpac Amaru in an ahistorical manner, it is common to define the revolutionary as a pre-cursor to Latin America's successful independence movements, incorporating him into the broader nationalist narrative. In the house of Garcilaso de la Vega, a building in Cusco which has been converted into a museum, a room has been entirely dedicated to Túpac Amaru. Paintings of him being drawn and quartered, along with poems dedicated to his glory, adorn the walls, and a segment of the 1984 film *Túpac Amaru* plays for the steady stream of visitors. A plaque on the wall reads: "Los países de América nunca han dejado de rendir homenaje a José Gabriel Tupaq Amaru... precursor de la Independencia americana que murió en el holocausto del 18 de mayo de 1781." Walker addresses how various historians and statesmen have tried to incorporate Túpac Amaru's movement into a broad national narrative, crediting the indigenous population with the spark that later ignited throughout Latin America. The problem with this model is that it downplays the vast differences between Túpac Amaru's rebellion and the following creole-led revolutions: "These interpretations straitjacket the Tupac Amaru rebellion... The rebellion is seen as a mass forerunner to the overthrow of the Spanish and the creation of a Creole-led nation state, a very different social movement in a very different context" (Walker 19). By 1820, with the invasion of Napoleon, the Bourbons had lost their control of the colonies, and the revolutionary ideas of the American and French Revolutions had given rise to new political options and ways of thought which had not been available to Túpac Amaru in 1770s. What is more, Túpac Amaru did not seek independence from the Spanish crown, as did the Creole revolutionaries of the nineteenth century. Although his exact plan for the organization of the state did not become

completely apparent, it is clear that his ideology and historical context was vastly different from the following independence movements (Walker 19). He should not, therefore, be characterized as their precursor, at the expense of historical accuracy.

The romanticization of Túpac Amaru as a symbol of peasant resistance has also led to a series of misconceptions and generalizations which do not hold up historically. Chief among these is the belief that his movement was comprised almost exclusively of impoverished peasants. But as Flores Galindo points out, “These towns do not seem to fit the image of the relentlessly miserable colonial conditions that some go out of their way to propagate... in some areas peasants could successfully resist the colonial system” (93). Indeed, Túpac Amaru relied on his extensive connections with a network of caciques (which were often cemented by ties of kinship) in order to make the revolution possible (Walker 42). The towns of Acamayo and Acos were “first-rate districts” which produced large quantities of agricultural products and had a flourishing coca trade. Both these towns supported the revolution (Flores Galindo 93-94). While it is also tempting to characterize the uprising as a great clash between the Spanish and the Indians, this does not accurately reflect historical realities. Andean peasants and elites had varying loyalties, as many of them relied on the royalist system. Indian elites had a long tradition of negotiating for their rights within the Spanish courts, not to mention a strong investment in the maintenance of the political order. For this reason, most indigenous elites, along with many peasants in the Cusco region, fought on the side of the Crown. As Garrett points out:

The Great Rebellion was, in many ways, a civil war within Indian society, and as such it was profoundly political. To suggest that the loyalists were somehow backward-looking defenders of the *ancien régime*, and the rebels precursors to a nationalist future, imposes a problematic teleology on colonial political consciousness (616).

Historians and politicians have attempted to place Túpac Amaru into a national narrative that reaffirms certain basic assumptions about the dynamic between various groups. The colonial reality, however, proves much more complex.

To understand Túpac Amaru as a symbol, one must also understand the utopian Inca vision which was promoted during his time, and continues to be prevalent today. According to certain interpretations of Inca prophecies, 1780 marked the time when Spanish rule would end and the Inca empire would be restored (Flores Galindo 102). Galindo explains the extreme violence against Spaniards by Amaru's more radical followers as a product of Inca traditions involving ritual battles and human sacrifice: "the fights concluded with the victors taking young women and virgins, opening them up like furrows in the fields; they needed to spill blood to become fertile. Human and agricultural fertility appeared closely related" (102). However, as Walker points out, colonial visions of Inca utopia were in themselves invented, based on an imagined past. "The interpretation that emphasizes Inca identity correctly stresses it as the most important symbol for the rebellion. Yet, this symbolism needs to be viewed as an 'invented tradition' rather than as a primordial memory" (51). This idea of the Inca utopia aptly demonstrates how symbols are used to develop national and proto-national consciousness. The Inca Empire was, in reality, a hierarchical society with its own elites, castes, and systems of exploitation. However, this reality has not prevented leaders from using the imagination of an Inca utopia as an effective means for achieving unity around a common cause.

The Spanish understood the power of symbols. After Túpac Amaru's rebellion had been crushed, they destroyed the leader both physically and symbolically. "According to one witness, horses were unable to quarter his body, and so the executioner was forced to finish the job" (Flores Gallindo 117). They tore him into pieces and scattered his remains throughout the

surrounding regions, undermining religious beliefs that he could not be killed. “For those who viewed Túpac Amaru as an Inca, however, the body was not that of a prisoner. Rather, it stood for the Indian nation. To quarter and burn Túpac Amaru’s body was to destroy symbolically the Inca empire” (Starn 154). By sending Andeans this brutal message, the Spanish authorities hoped to crush the very idea of the Inca utopia, and to terrorize any who might attempt another rebellion. In the following years, they sought to root out all remnants of an Indian proto-national consciousness, destroying art, banning cultural practices, and curbing the use of Quechua (Walker 53-54). For years, it was prohibited to even speak of José Gabriel Concorcanqui and his movement (Personal Correspondence). Spanish writers of the period characterized the rebellion as a result of Indian primitiveness and lack of civilization. Viceroy Agustín de Jáuregui, for example, wrote that colonization had been a failure because “the Indians are generally and commonly inclined to their ancient barbaric customs and also to the veneration of the Incas” (Flores Gallindo 119). Such modes of thinking would continue for centuries to come. In their attempt to destroy Túpac Amaru’s legacy, the Spanish emphasized racial divisions in order to further oppress Peru’s indigenous population, and undermine their culture.

Nearly two centuries passed before Túpac Amaru was reinstated as a national hero, under the administration of Juan Velasco Alvarado. Frustrated with the failures and economic shortcomings of the Belaúnde administration, General Velasco Alvarado led a military *golpe* against the president in 1968. Unlike many regimes who came into power through military coups, Velasco Alvarado’s government espoused a platform of land reform and increased rights for peasant communities (Skidmore 208-209). Viewing himself as a “defender of the poor,” he sought the creation of large state-run organizations known as the National System of Social Mobilization, the nationalization of foreign business interests, and a system of agrarian reform

where former peasants would take control of land from large estate owners (Starn 264). In his speech on June 24, 1969, Juan Velasco spoke of the importance of the peasant communities:

Today, for the Day of the Indian, the Day of the Peasant, the Revolutionary Government honors them with the best of tributes by giving to the nation a law that will end forever the unjust social order that impoverished and oppressed the millions of landless peasants who have always been forced to work the land of others (Starn 265).

Through the creation of a corporatist state, involving the participation of peasant and their incorporation into the national economy, he expected to progress towards equality while revitalizing the country's industry. The importance of ending social injustice is a prominent concept in Juan Velasco's speech, as he recognizes the "basic and unjust social order, under which the majority of our people have been an exploited majority, a majority in misery, a majority dispossessed" (Starn 265). He finishes the speech with a celebration of José Gabriel Concorcanqui and his legacy: "To the men of the land, we can now say in the immortal and liberating voice of Túpac Amaru: Peasant: the Master will no longer feed off your poverty!" (Starn 269). Velasco Alvarado reinvigorated the symbol of Túpac Amaru because he saw his own project of incorporating peasants into the national fold as representative of the revolutionary's ideals.

The Túpac Amaru symbol became pervasive during Velasco Alvarado's administration as a political tool, a sort of stamp representing the new nationalist project. Writes Enrique Mayer,

Everything revolutionary and nationalistic during the Velasco regime had the name Túpac Amaru. New statues, plazas, and streets were dedicated to him in every city. The Ministry of Agriculture and its agrarian reform posters had Túpac Amaru on them. Expropriated haciendas with aristocratic Spanish names were renamed after him, and even the state-run food distribution system had a stylized stencil symbol of Túpac Amaru with a black-brimmed, tall top hat and a stern face (43).

By utilizing Túpac Amaru's image, Velasco Alvarado sought to gain peasant support by presenting himself as a successor in the narrative of indigenous struggles against inequality.

Túpac Amaru's face became prominent on Peruvian currency in the 1970s, as can be seen today in the house of Garcilaso de la Vega. By putting an Indian leader from the colonial period on the Nuevo Sol, Juan Velasco sent a message that Peru's indigenous were a legitimate segment of the national population, who had contributed in the anti-colonial struggle. Although, as discussed earlier, it was historically problematic to link Túpac Amaru with the creole revolutionaries of the early 19th Century, such a characterization worked well in the context of Velasco Alvarado's rhetoric of building an inclusive state.

Despite the fact that José Gabriel Concorcanqui was an indigenous noble, Velasco Alvarado sought to make him a symbol of *peasant* resistance in a class-based struggle. Because of the history of racism in Peru, the leader wanted to move away from an emphasis on indigenous culture by promoting class-based pride. As he says in his speech, his Agrarian Reform Law was meant to support the “great multitude of peasants who today belong to indigenous communities and from this day forward—abandoning unacceptable racist habits and prejudices—will be called Peasant Communities [*Comunidades Campesinas*]” (Starn 267-268). Reforms in education reflected this changing model, as primary school materials portrayed indigenous people in working-class situations: “Textbooks understood indigenous people primarily as peasants and workers, while the oligarchy emerged as the most important internal other” (vom Hau 140). At the same time, Túpac Amaru was re-instituted as a national hero in the classroom, as course materials portrayed a constant historical level of ground-roots resistance against Spanish rule. One textbook reads: “General San Martín declared the Independence of Peru, but the Peruvian people had already fought for many years to be free. The first great

revolution that took place in America against Spain was orchestrated by *José Gabriel Gabriel Condorcanqui Túpac Amaru*” (vom Hau 140). Velasco Alvarado attempted to institute a change in Peruvian national consciousness which converted indigenous shame into peasant pride, and he used the Túpac Amaru symbol to promote this change.

Juan Velasco’s appropriation of Túpac Amaru was problematic, not just for historical reasons, but also in the way that he used the unifying symbol to condense indigenous concerns into his own model. Skidmore and Smith contend that “the Peruvian military had genuine sympathy with of the long-oppressed peasantry” (209). Whatever Juan Velasco’s motivations were, however, his top-down, corporatist approach left little space for differing approaches and ways of thought. He did not want to enact a socialist revolution, as with the case with Castro in Cuba and Allende in Chile, but instead sought to appease various sections of society with the “reduction of class conflict” as his ultimate goal (Skidmore 210). Juan Velasco’s approach was rigid, and it often did not make room for variations in community structure at the grassroots level. In the Túpac Amaru II Cooperative in the Cusco region, peasants quickly became frustrated with the government’s inefficient policies:

“...all these people were lumped together into one single unit spread far and wide over three districts and told to “cooperate” (euphemism for compliance), to express solidarity with the agrarian reform principles that the military had developed for them in a top-down fashion (Mayer 153).

In their effort to consolidate different factions and create an efficient corporatist state, the government was met with bitter opposition, not only from landowners and elites, but also from existing labor unions who did not agree with the regime’s stance. In 1975, there were 779 strikes in Peru, as opposed to only 414 in 1967 (Skidmore 212). By the time Morales Bermúdez took power in 1975, Velasco Alvarado’s ambitious program had been widely accepted as a failure. “By reaching into so many areas of Peruvian society, the military government succeeded in

alienating almost everyone” (Skidmore 212). Juan Velasco’s appropriation of Túpac Amaru as a symbol did not prove sufficient to rally Peru’s various indigenous communities behind his regime. His top-down approach did not allow for the flexibility which was so necessary in order for peasant groups to effectively improve their status in society.

The symbol of Túpac Amaru was not removed from the national stage with the end of the Velasco regime. Politicians and organizations continued to adopt the colonial revolutionary as the face of their various causes, regardless of whether these causes had any relation to José Gabriel Concorcanqui and what he fought for. For example, Morales Bermúdez instituted Plan Túpac Amaru in 1977, even though much of its content was actually aimed at undoing Velasco’s reforms (Skidmore 212). In the 1980s, Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru battled government forces in Peru’s internal conflict, as it attempted to institute a Marxist state. As Mayer aptly points out, “Heroic figures... live in narratives, deliberately manipulated by propaganda machines in the heat of conflict, and when the passionate issues lose their validity the narrative itself may be in need of severe editing” (43). It is for this reason that the narrative about national heroes, like Túpac Amaru, often says more about present circumstances than historical realities. “...a hero must be dead, lest his or her actions be contradicted by later unheroic behavior” (Mayer 42). As long as a national figure no longer exists in flesh and blood, his or her image can be appropriated to serve the needs of virtually any party in the promotion of its ideas.

As 20th Century Peruvian leaders attempted to make the transition to a modern industrial society, they were confronted with the issue of cultural plurality, and they attempted to propagate the idea of an Andean utopia in order to incorporate indigenous groups into the state system. By locating the ideal in the colonial or pre-colonial past, creole leaders could safely use heroes to

engineer their own discourse, thereby furthering their nationalist causes (Mosquera 135). “What emerged amid bitter debates was a dual Peru, but one in which “indigenous” was an abstraction. The idea of national unity was displaced from the past to a hypothetical future... Uniting the Spanish and the Indian was proposed as the path toward collective identity” (Flores Gallindo 245). However, as leaders continue to emphasize Peru’s Inca roots and glorify figures like Túpac Amaru, extreme inequalities persist. “Development” through the export of raw materials has only brought wealth to the few, and it continues to undermine the rights of Indian groups (Flores Gallindo 248). Impoverished shantytowns around Lima demonstrate the plight of an urban poor that has not been incorporated into an effective state system (Starn 278). Meanwhile, indigenous symbols continue to be appropriated for purposes of tourism, making money for wealthy elites and disregarding the lower classes. “The more that native Americans are ignored and exploited, the more their symbols are co-opted by nationalist ideologies and programs and by marketing schemes” (Mosquera 134). Ironically, leaders have used national symbols to pay lip-service to the cause of equality, while continuing to ignore the persistent social problems.

This is not to say, however that the re-institution of Túpac Amaru as a national hero holds no value. Just as José Gabriel Concorcanqui used the vision of an Inca utopia to gain support for his revolution, modern leaders use a distorted symbol of the colonial Indian to build unity. These modern movements, then, should be assessed based on their aims and effectiveness in the present day, and should not be automatically approved of based on the Túpac Amaru symbol. The Andean utopia continues to provide a way for underprivileged groups to find meaning and pride, challenging “a history that condemned them to the margins” (Flores Gallindo 247). The educational reforms which began under Velasco Alvarado, although limited, were a necessary step towards building a more inclusive nation. They helped set in motion a process which can be

seen developing today. As students learn about Túpac Amaru as an indigenous hero, they may not receive a thoroughly accurate historical account, but at least they have a chance to be proud of Peru's Indian past. An Andean man whom I interviewed on the streets of Cusco spoke of Túpac Amaru's execution with a proud smile on his face: "Era tan fuerte que los caballos no le pudieron romper (He was so strong that the horses could not break him)." This is the sort of hope and pride that a symbol can instill. It will take more than hope and pride to achieve equality in Peru, but an indigenous sense of self-worth may very well be the first step.

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