

Entry for “Tragedia del fin de Atawallpa”

The *Atau Wallpaj p'uchukakuyninpa wankan*, or *Tragedia del fin de Atawallpa* [*Tragedy of the Death of Atawallpa*] (henceforth *Tragedia*), is one of the most well-known and yet enigmatic works of literature in Quechua, the most widespread family of indigenous Andean languages. It was first published by the Bolivian Quechuaphile, Jesús Lara, in 1957, in a bilingual Quechua/Spanish edition, followed by a subsequent Spanish translation by Teodoro Meneses in 1983. Lara, born in the town of Muela in 1898, published diverse works of poetry and prose in both Quechua and Spanish until his death in 1980, including his own creations as well as several Quechua texts which, like the *Tragedia*, he claimed to have acquired from ancient manuscripts. Along with Peruvian writers such as José María Arguedas, Ciro Alegría, Gamaniel Churata and Manuel Scorza, he formed part of the political and cultural movement of *indigenismo*, which sought to place contemporary indigenous society on an equal footing with the dominant European culture, by reasserting the intellectual achievements of an Incan Golden Age.

The *Tragedia* is the most cited example of a widespread genre in the Andes that is generally known as “muerte del Inca” [death of the Inca]. This genre comprises folkloric dramatizations of the events leading up to the execution of Atawallpa (also Atahualpa), the last Incan emperor, at the hands of the Spanish invaders in 1532. Within these general parameters, the specific plot and characters vary considerably, and the dramatizations are, on the whole, relatively unconcerned with historical accuracy. The most common theme discussed in scholarship is the role of the genre as an implied criticism of the persistent inequality that has its roots in? the Spanish invasion (e.g. Chang-Rodríguez 1999; Millones 1988, 1992; Pigott 2014; Wachtel 1977), whereby poverty is overwhelmingly to be found among the rural, Quechua-speaking population.

The genre is typical of a wider tendency to idealize the Incas which has been pervasive all across the central Andes ever since Garcilaso de la Vega described the monarchs as *huacchacuyac*, or “loving and kind towards the weak” (Murra 1978:176) (cf. Flores Galindo 1988). Other scholars have, on the other hand, seen the genre as reproducing Andean (Burga 1988) or Christian (Saignes 1990) epistemologies. It is likely that such dramatizations are the product of influences from both sides of the Atlantic, particularly: the *danza de los Moros* [dance of the Moors] which depicted the Christian victory over the Moors in Medieval Iberia and found its way to Peru via Mexico (cf. Millones 1992:26); the *taki unquy* (or *taqui oncoy*) messianic movement of the 16th century which predicted the defeat of Christianity by ancient Andean religion; a series of neo-Incan rebellions against Spanish rule (most notably that of Tupaq Amaru II in 1780); the Quechua concept of *pachakuti*, or “world-turning”, which denotes a rupture in the historical process.

The earliest record of such dramatizations is found in Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela’s *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* (c. 1705), in which he cites a bilingual representation of the *Ruina del Imperio Inca* [Ruin of the Incan Empire]

performed around 1555 in Potosí, Bolivia (1975 [1736]: 219-220). Arzáns de Orsúa states that eight dramas were enacted as part of a popular festival, and that four of these depicted successive episodes of Incan history culminating in the death of Atawallpa. The first concrete example of a dramatization was collected in the eighteenth century by Baltazar Jaime Martínez Compañón y Bujanda, Bishop of Trujillo. No text survives, but there are two illustrations of a drama entitled *La degollación del Inca* [The Garrotting of the Inca] (Millones 1992:34).

While no two representations are identical, the genre is an established aspect of local folklore across the central Andes, and is commonly performed during patron saint festivals in both urban and rural localities. Some of the texts which have been published or studied include those documented by Balmori (1955) and Beyersdorff (1993) in Bolivia, and by Burga (1998), González Carré & Rivera Pineda (1982), Kapsolí (1985), Flores Galindo (1988) and Millones (1988) in central Peru. The text published by Lara is by far the most well-known, largely because of the claims which Lara made in the introduction, namely that it is an “exceptionally old text”, which may well “have been written during the first years of the conquest by an amauta [indigenous learned man] who had survived the catastrophe” (1989 [1957]: 48, author’s translation). However, as shall be discussed below, this statement has been the focus of considerable contestation.

Characters, Plot, Structure and Form

The first page of the play – the only copy of what Lara claims to be the original handwritten manuscript – lists the characters in diametrical opposition between *Inkakuna* (Incas) and *Auqasunk’akuna* (bearded enemies, i.e. the Spaniards). This layout is indicative of the central theme of the play: the construction of a rigid, impermeable dualism between two ethnic communities. The *Inkakuna* comprise: Atawallpa (the reigning Inca); Waylla Wisa (the chief shaman); Sairi Túpaj Inka; Challkuchima Inka; Khishkis Inka; Inkaj Churin (the Inca’s son); Ñust’akuna (princesses, the chorus); Qhora Chinpu (a princess). The *Auqasunk’akuna* comprise: Pisarru (Pizarro, the leader of the conquistadors); Ispaña (King of Spain); Almagru (Diego de Almagro, a conquistador); Padre Walbirde (Fray Vicente de Valverde, a priest); Fillipillu (Felipillo, an Incan subject who learned Spanish and translated for the conquistadors). All of these characters are based on historical figures.

The play opens with a dialogue between Atawallpa and two *ñustas*, in which the Inca reveals a disturbing dream that he has had: the sun was obscured by smoke, the sky and mountains were burning, and men clad in iron had come to overthrow him. He summons Waylla Wisa, his shaman, who has had a similar vision and prophecies that it will come true. At the behest of Atawallpa, the shaman goes into several deep sleeps in order to harness the explanative power of dreams, but each time emerges more confused and unable to interpret the events. Meanwhile, the Spaniards have arrived. Atawallpa, on waking the shaman, orders him to meet with them, and to ascertain the purpose of their visit. The Spaniards, silent in the play, speak through the interpreter, Felipillo. Almagro states that they represent the King of Spain, the most powerful lord in

the world. Waylla Wisa replies that the Inca alone is supremely powerful, having control over the sun, moon and stars. Felipillo deliberately mistranslates the shaman's response as an insult. Almagro then states that they have come in search of riches, and Valverde emphatically retorts that their true purpose is to spread the word of God. Waylla Wisa is entrusted with a written message for the Inca, but nobody can understand it, since the Incas did not know writing. Atawallpa then orders Sairi Túpaj to meet with the Spaniards, but neither Sairi Túpaj nor Pizarro understands one another. Pizarro states that he is here to take the Inca – either whole or just his head – to the King of Spain. Sairi Túpaj still doesn't understand and suggests that Pizarro meet with the Inca himself.

A battle ensues, and Atawallpa surrenders as he is tied up by the Spaniards. The Inca offers great wealth in exchange for his life, but the Spaniards are determined to kill him. He distributes his regalia among the attendant princesses and Incan noblemen, affirming that he will live on in his subjects' memory, and prophecies the eventual demise of the Spaniards. He tells his son, Inkaj Churin, to lead his family to refuge in Vilcabamba. Atawallpa then curses Pizarro, who will be haunted by remorse until he too dies an agonizing death. Valverde offers baptism, but the Inca affirms that he cannot "hear" the Bible speaking and is accused of blasphemy. Valverde, in response to Pizarro's request, absolves Atawallpa of this "sin" by baptizing him anyway, after which Pizarro decapitates the Inca with his sword.

The chorus of *ñustas* lament the Inca's demise, likening him to a great tree that offered protection to his people, describe a series of earthquakes and storms that follow his death, and curse Pizarro. The closing scene takes place in Spain, between Pizarro, Almagro and the King, who is at first silent with shock at Pizarro's crime, then accuses him of boundless greed, larceny and treason, praises the virtues of Atawallpa, and orders Pizarro to be executed and his body burned. Pizarro curses his own sword and the day he killed Atawallpa before he too dies, thus fulfilling the Inca's prophesy. In this way, "Atahualpa's death and Pizarro's punishment go beyond the violent rupture evident in their historic and literary representations and become paradigms of the justice owed, then and now, to the Andean people" (Chang-Rodríguez 1999:56).

The text is presented in verse-form with the Quechua parallel to its Spanish equivalent. The verses follow Quechua poetic norms in being relatively free, insofar as they are unrhymed and vary from four to eleven syllables. The *ñustas* function as a chorus, conveying a depersonalized voice that describes events objectively or speaks for the general Incan (and contemporary) population. There is no separation into stanzas or dramatic scenes. Instead, "the action moves continuously and rapidly from one place to another" (Lara 1989 [1957]: 44, author's translation), such as the immediate transition between the Incan palace, the location of the conquistadors, and the Spanish court, and the chorus of *ñustas* who materialize spontaneously in various settings.

Lara's Quest for Authenticity

If there is one word which best sums up the central theme of the text, Lara's motivation in disseminating it, and the controversies permeating its critical reception, it is *authenticity*. Lara, in common with the general *indigenista* movement, was very much concerned with finding examples of pure, original, literature that truly reflected Incan culture. In his lengthy introduction to the *Tragedia*, Lara explains how his quest for the manuscript was instigated by Mario Unzueta's novel, *Valle* (1945), which includes a chapter based on a dramatization that Unzueta witnessed in the Andean settlement of Tocó. The original manuscript of Tocó was not to be found, but Lara did come across two similar texts which he describes as "plagued with notable deformations" (Lara 1989 [1957]: 19, author's translation), referring to the hispanization of the "original" Quechua. The *Tragedia* itself, states Lara, came into his hands through a fortuitous encounter with a certain Santiago Estrada who, following him into a library in La Paz, claimed to be in possession of the "treasure" (*op. cit.*: 22) he was searching for. After various lengthy financial negotiations, Estrada agreed to Lara copying out the verses, but did not permit them to take a copy of the manuscript itself. According to Lara, the last page of the manuscript featured the place and date of its creation: "Chayanta, March 25th 1871" (*op. cit.*: 23).

Comparing the text to the other examples of the genre, Lara affirms that the Chayanta manuscript stands out in having a title, and in that "the Spanish language does not intrude and the language of the Incas presents itself as clean and austere" (*op. cit.*: 28, author's translation). By contrast, Lara describes another text as "regrettably deformed, contaminated with Spanish grammatical forms and even words that are foreign to the language...much akin to the Quechua currently deployed by the Bolivian mestizo population" (*op. cit.*: 24-25, author's translation). Lara's purism nonetheless coincides with a tolerance for the diversity *internal* to the Quechua language-family, in contrast to many Peruvian *indigenistas* who often continue to cite Cuzco Quechua as the only legitimate variety. Indeed, he argues that the text probably originated in a northern variety of Quechua and was then modified by Cuzco Quechua as it travelled south through the Empire (*op. cit.*: 29).

Lara describes the text as a *wanka*, which he states is one of two theatrical genres that were performed by the Incas, the other being *aranway*. While the latter could be on any topic, the former "was of an eminently historical nature and was concerned with commemorating the feats of monarchs and heroes" (*op. cit.*: 15, author's translation). Given the tragic conclusion of the drama, Lara is content to include the term *tragedia* [tragedy] in the title's translation. But he takes pains to point out the imperfection of this translation, emphasizing that the *wanka* did not necessarily involve a tragic ending and, being a celebration, was often more similar to the Greek comedy (*op. cit.*: 16).

Itier, however, affirms that Lara had no basis for classifying the play as a *wanka* in the first place, since this term denotes "a plaintive song connected with rituals of the agricultural cycle" (Itier 1992:118, author's translation). Lara probably chose this designation after reading Anchorena's equally un-referenced claim that the "wanka and aranway are dramatic poems,...the first corresponding to the [Greek] tragedy and the second to the comedy" (Anchorena 1987:140-141, in

Itier 1992:118, author's translation). Choosing to locate the work in a classical genre (however historically suspect) and translating it as *Tragedia* was probably more a political than an academic move, serving Lara's purpose of placing indigenous heritage on an equal footing with European culture in the eyes of the social and political establishment.

Lara claims that

“only an indigenous author could have reflected, in such an extraordinary manner, the fateful meaning of the Spaniards' presence for Atawallpa and for the people of Tawantinsuyu [the Incan Empire] as a whole, and only he [or she?] could have achieved such an admirable depiction of the fall of the Incas and the desolation which later took hold of the Incan nobility”. (Lara 1989 [1957]: 47, author's translation)

Itier (2000), however, proposes a different theory. In a brilliant piece of detective work, he pieces together diverse strands of evidence to argue that the author can be identified as a single individual: none other than Lara himself.

Some of the many clues he draws upon are: the strange disappearance of Estrada; Lara gives no information about the state of the original manuscript; there is no historical record of the *Tragedia* ever having been performed; the Quechua spelling of Spanish names (e.g. Almagru instead of Almagro) seems highly artificial and redolent of Lara's purist ideology, as does the complete absence of Spanish throughout; certain Quechua phrases are a direct translation of passages in Unzueta's novel; the language displays characteristics common in modern Bolivian Quechua but absent in early colonial Quechua; the Quechua “is purist at the level of the words but profoundly influenced by Spanish at the semantic and syntactic levels, to the point of infringing the grammar” (Itier 2000:112, author's translation). These clues strongly indicate that “we are not in the presence of a traditional, indigenous and ancient work that has been periodically re-quechuized by a scholar.... It is entirely the work of an educated bilingual whose intellectual activity was carried out mainly in Spanish” (*op cit.* 112, author's translation; see also Husson 2006). Few people other than Lara fit this description.

The Authenticity of Incomprehension

While claiming to have unmasked Lara's apparent sleight-of-hand, Itier is careful not to judge him negatively. Lara's “intellectual activities were not located in a philological, academic context, which did not exist in Bolivia. He aimed, rather, to defend the ‘indigenous’ people and their culture, in a society which did not consider Quechua and those who spoke this language as bearers of culture” (Itier 2000:120, author's translation). If Itier is correct, it is highly ironic that Lara's preoccupation for crafting an *authentic* text would result in this self-same text being considered highly *inauthentic*. Ultimately, however, the irony dissolves when one realizes that different understandings of authenticity are at stake. For *indigenistas* such as Lara, authenticity was about finding a pure, original, prototype (even if that prototype had to be reconstructed on the basis of

“degraded” contemporary elements). For modern scholars, by contrast, authenticity concerns the documentation of a cultural phenomenon as it occurs in real life. Authenticity is paramount for both, and for both it is ultimately about “freeing” that phenomenon from imposed “foreign” distortions. However, each group has very different criteria, and what, for one, is an act of liberation, for the other is an unwelcome imposition.

Lara’s *indigenista* understanding of “authenticity” also distinguishes itself from that of the modern scholar by arguing from the same ideological standpoint as the text itself. That is to say, Lara’s goal of discovering relics of an untarnished Incan *past*, and using these to reveal a glorious but eroded Incan “essence” in *contemporary* Quechua-speaking communities, is identical to the periodical actuation of a historical moment – the “death of the Inca” – in contemporary communities, in that both seek to reinforce an artificial divide between two entirely “separate” cultures. Given the intense genetic, cultural and linguistic mixing of Andean societies since the early days of the Colony, this separation is largely a fiction, but this may be why it is reinforced so emphatically.

It is understandable that Lara, sharing this ideology, would search for the “pure” form of the genre that epitomized his convictions. But there is something self-defeating about seeking the “purity” of a genre that has purity as its main motivation, because, in such a genre, the referent is largely empty: the *content* of the category (Inca) is subordinated to the *category* itself. This makes the quest not just circumstantially difficult, but logically contradictory. In Lara’s text, the vacuity of the category of “Inca” is evident when pre-Hispanic methods of interpretation (dreams, divination etc.) fail to afford the necessary clarity, and, indeed, the shaman figures less and less as the play proceeds.

In this way, the “European invasion of the Andes is presented...as a complete semiotic incompatibility between cultures” (Howard 2002:33; cf. Cornejo-Polar 1990:194-5), and it is precisely this incomprehension which becomes the new standard of truth. At no point does the play attempt reconciliation. Instead, it revels in the gulf which is emphasized at numerous moments throughout the text: the inability of anyone to make sense of the Spaniards’ arrival; the silence of the Spanish characters who only speak through Felipillo, and even then the messages are distorted; the incomprehensibility of the written word (the paper message and the Bible); the continual inability of each side to understand the other; the King’s speechlessness as he learns of Pizarro’s crime. The only Spaniard who empathizes with the Inca is the King, but his role is so minimal that his panegyric serves only to stress the Incas’ innate superiority, as if existing in a class of their own. The *Tragedia* may turn out to be unique in terms of authorship, but, through its paradoxical articulation of incomprehension, it is typical of more folkloric (authentic?) dramatizations across the Andes. These have one central theme in common, that of conflating past and present to achieve the impossible: the maintenance of fixity in a changing world.

Works Cited

Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela, Bartolomé. *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí*. La

Paz: Biblioteca del Sesquicentenario de la República. 1975 [1736].

Balmori, Clemente Hernando. *La conquista de los españoles*. Tucumán: Universidad Nacional de Tucumán. 1955.

Beyersdorff, Margot. "La 'puesta en texto' del primer drama indohispano en los Andes". *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 19/37, pp. 195-221. 1993.

Burga, Manuel. *Nacimiento de una utopía: Muerte y resurrección de los Incas*. Lima: Instituto de Apoyo Agrario. 1998.

Chang-Rodríguez, Raquel. *Hidden Messages: Representation and Resistance in Andean Colonial Drama*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press/London: Associated University Press. 1999.

Cornejo-Polar, Antonio. "El comienzo de la heterogeneidad en las literaturas andinas: Voz y letra en el 'Diálogo' de Cajamarca". *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 33, pp. 155-207. 1990. Available here in a re-publication: <http://dcsh.izt.uam.mx/publicaciones/filosofia/index.php/SLIT/article/viewFile/830/796>

Flores Galindo, Alberto. *Buscando un Inca: Identidad y utopía en los Andes*. Lima: Editorial Horizonte. 1988.

Gonzalez Carré, Enrique & Rivera Pineda, Fermín. "La muerte del Inca en Santa Ana de Tusi". *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Etudes Andines* 11/1-2, pp. 19-36. 1982. Available here: [http://www.ifeanet.org/publicaciones/boletines/11\(1-2\)/19.pdf](http://www.ifeanet.org/publicaciones/boletines/11(1-2)/19.pdf)

Howard, Rosaleen. "Yachay: The Tragedia del fin de Atahuallpa as Evidence of the Colonization of Knowledge in the Andes". In Stobart, Henry & Howard, Rosaleen (eds) *Knowledge and Learning in the Andes: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 17-39. 2002.

Husson, Jean-Philippe. "¿Testimonio histórico o invención? La cuestión de la autenticidad de la Tragedia del fin de Atawallpa". *Pacarina uno*, pp. 24-37. 2006.

Itier, César. "¿Visión de los vencidos o falsificación? Datación y autoría de la Tragedia de la muerte de Atahuallpa". *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Etudes Andines* 30/1, pp.103-121. 2000. Available here: [http://www.ifeanet.org/publicaciones/boletines/30\(1\)/103.pdf](http://www.ifeanet.org/publicaciones/boletines/30(1)/103.pdf)

Kapsoli, Wilfredo. "La muerte del rey inca en las danzas populares y la relación de Pomabamba". *Tierra Adentro* 3, pp. 139-176. 1985.

Lara, Jesús. *Tragedia del fin de Atawallpa/Atau Wallpaj p'unchykakuyninpa wankan*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol. 1957/1989.

Meneses, Teodoro. *Teatro quechua colonial: Antología*. Lima: Ediciones Edubanco. 1983.

Millones, Luis. *El Inca por la coya: Historia de un drama popular en los Andes peruanos*. Lima: Fundación Friedrich Ebert. 1988.

Millones, Luis. *Actores de altura: Ensayos sobre el teatro popular andino*. Lima: Editorial Horizonte. 1992.

Murra, John. *La organización económica del Estado Inca*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI. 1978.

Pigott, Charles. "Foreign Encounters in the Pallas of Bolognesi, Peru". *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 28/1, pp. 28-53. 2014.

Saignes, Thierry. "Es posible una historia 'chola' del Perú: acerca de una utopía de Manuel Burga". *Allpanchis* 2.35/36, pp. 635-657. 1990.

Wachtel, Nathan. *The Vision of the Vanquished: The Spanish Conquest of Peru through Indian Eyes, 1530-1570*. Hassocks: Harvester Press. 1977.

Further Reading in English

The vast majority of relevant works are in Spanish, but the following enable a good overview in English:

1. Chang-Rodríguez, Raquel. *Hidden Messages: Representation and Resistance in Andean Colonial Drama*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press/London: Associated University Press. 1999.

An important book which compares four Andean texts in Quechua and Spanish, including the *Tragedia*. Through historical, cultural and philological analysis, the author exposes common themes that unite the texts, whilst also illustrating the specific contexts out of which each text has emerged. All of the works discussed display the paradoxes and contradictions of a colonial society where very different cultural traditions intermingle and are thereby reinvented.

2. Galindo, Alberto Flores. *In Search of an Inca: Identity and Utopia in the Andes*. Cambridge: CUP. 2010.

A canonical text for scholars of post-conquest Peru. It discusses how the concept of the "Inca" became redefined during the colonial period as a symbol of a lost utopia, and how various groups have used this symbol in support of diverse causes, largely in opposition to the social and political establishment. The book covers a broad historical span, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, and is essential reading for anyone wishing to fully understand the *Tragedia* in its historical and cultural context.

3. Howard, Rosaleen. "Yachay: The Tragedia del fin de Atahualpa as Evidence of the Colonization of Knowledge in the Andes". In Stobart, Henry & Howard, Rosaleen (eds) *Knowledge and Learning in the Andes: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 17-39. 2002.

This original publication explores how Quechua notions of seeking, gaining and processing knowledge are transformed in the *Tragedia*. The author illustrates how these changes convey the incomprehensibility between Incas and Spaniards that lies at the heart of the *Tragedia*, and the implications of this for Andean society as a whole.

4. Pigott, Charles. "Foreign Encounters in the Pallas of Bolognesi, Peru". *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 28/1, pp. 28-53. 2014.

This article discusses folkloric songs which form part of the "death of the Inca" genre. The diametric opposition between colonized and colonizer, evidenced in the songs, is contrasted with indigenous Andean notions of duality, in order to illustrate that very different ideologies underlie superficial structural similarities.

5. Soruco, Ximena. "On Bearded Men, Devils and Soldiers: (Post)colonial Dramas in Peru and Bolivia". *Dispositio*, pp. 227-247. 2005.

This article explores two Quechua dramatizations, one of which is the *Tragedia*, from the theoretical perspective of subaltern studies. Through the concept of "transculturation", the author discusses how both plays were received in their respective countries, explaining the differences in terms of distinct socio-political contexts.

6. Wachtel, Nathan. *The Vision of the Vanquished: The Spanish Conquest of Peru through Indian Eyes, 1530-1570*. Hassocks: Harvester Press. 1977.

Another important reference which discusses the "death of the Inca" genre in order to argue that rural Andeans continue to experience a post-conquest "trauma". The author discusses similar traditions in Mexico before focusing his attention on Peru. A key contribution of this book is the author's endeavour to look at colonial history from the point of view of the people colonized, rather than imposing a view from elsewhere or from just the winning side.