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WOMEN OF THE INCAN EMPIRE:  
BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONQUEST OF PERU

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The day Pizarro set foot in Peru the Incas found their world forever altered. Within a few short years, the Spanish had conquered the Incan Empire, rearranging the life of an entire nation. While the Spanish conquest touched every Incan person, women were profoundly affected by this shift in power. In pre-conquest Peru, Andean women were part of a highly structured society, and held a complimentary role to their male counterparts. However, after the Spanish conquest, women had to navigate through an entirely different society.

To understand how Spanish rule altered the lives of Incan women, one must first know what roles women played in the empire before the conquest. Incan society was meticulously structured, and everyone had a distinct social niche. Though Andean society was a hierarchical patriarchy, it was not as extreme as the Spanish patriarchy, and women occupied a complimentary, rather than subordinate role to men.

At the top of the feminine hierarchy was the Quoya, or queen. As the Inca, or king's primary wife, she bore the title "Queen of all women." Far from a mere consort, the Quoya held political power, could inherit land, and oversaw some of the feminine religious orders. The king's secondary wives, though well respected, had less power than the Quoya. Below the Quoya and secondary wives were spouses of noblemen and royal administrators. Next in line were *acllas*—or chosen women. Similar to the vestal virgins of ancient Greece, *acllas* were chosen for their beauty and purity to become priestesses of the Sun and other deities, and made up an integral part of Incan religious institutions. The majority of women were commoners, and worked as farmers, weavers, and housewives, forming the backbone of society.

After the conquest, this carefully ordered social structure was replaced with a wholly patriarchal Spanish model. The Quoya was dethroned, and the *acllas* order was destroyed,

considered pagan by the Catholic Spanish. Some semblance of Incan hierarchy remained among noblewomen, who were recognized by the Spanish as being of noble blood, and thus retained some status. The Spanish treated the common women as little better than slaves.

In the pre-conquest years, every woman belonged to an *allyu*, or extended family unit. Members of the *allyu* were required to marry within it, and the size of an *allyu* determined the amount of tribute the family paid to the empire. While men occupied a higher social status in the *allyus* than women, their gender roles were complimentary. All married men were required to fulfill a *mita* or labor tribute by working for the empire for an allotted time. Women were exempt from this requirement, as their place was at home.

All married women were expected to have children, often gave birth alone, and raised their children without aid of a nurse, regardless of social status.<sup>1</sup> First-born sons were celebrated, but daughters were not.<sup>2</sup> Girls were considered women after their first menses, when they were given an official name, and took up mature duties of the household.<sup>3</sup> Mothers were expected to teach their children their roles and responsibilities within the community.

While the *allyu* structure survived the conquest, it soon began to fracture. During the conquest, thousands were killed in battle or epidemics, wreaking havoc on the indigenous population. In efforts to better control conquered peoples, the Spanish forcibly consolidated nearly 1.5 million Andeans into European style towns, forcing them from their traditional homes.<sup>4</sup> The Spanish also exploited the *mita* system, taking many men away from home, and leaving women to make up the difference. These strains undoubtedly disrupted family life. Some

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<sup>1</sup> Juan de Betanzos, Roland Hamilton and Dana Buchanan, *Narrative Of The Incas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega *Royal Commentaries Of The Incas, And General History Of Peru*, 210.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Andrew Malpass, *Daily Life In The Inca Empire* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Mark A Burkholder and Lyman L Johnson, *Colonial Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127.

women lost their *allyus* altogether, either by moving to urban areas for work, or by becoming romantically involved with a Spaniard. Single mothers became common, especially those of Spanish-fathered mestizo children. Considered illegitimate unless claimed by their European fathers, mestizo children were a sign of shame, even if fathered by rape.<sup>5</sup> In urban areas, these single mothers often formed makeshift families, sharing income and child-care responsibilities. Though a far cry from pre-conquest *allyus*, these social units provided women with security and structure in uncertain times.

The institution of marriage itself was effected by the conquest. Before Pizarro's arrival, marriage was a requirement for all Inca women, with the exception of the *acllas*. The Inca or a government official performed most marriages. All the eligible women and men in a village or province would be lined up, facing one another, paired, and then pronounced married by the official.<sup>6</sup> Each new couple was granted a house by their village.<sup>7</sup> Women held some autonomy within marriage, and could bequeath dowry properties to whomever they wished. In rural regions, trial marriages were a common practice, and a woman could decide to split from her trial husband without stigma if the relationship did not work. Trial marriages did not apply for the women of the upper class, as there was a major emphasis on a noble woman's virginity. It was customary for the Inca King to marry his sister, in order to preserve the divine blood of the Sun, of whom the Inca was believed to be a descendant. They believed the "majesty of being queen should not be granted to any woman unless she inherited it in her own legitimate right, and not as the king's consort."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Socolow, *The Women Of Colonial Latin America*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Terence N D'Altroy, *The Incas* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 304.

<sup>7</sup> Juan de Betanzos, Roland Hamilton and Dana Buchanan, *Narrative Of The Incas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 214.

<sup>8</sup> de la Vega, 208.

After the conquest, in addition to the Quoya losing her position, women, even those of noble birth, became second-class citizens, the legal equivalent of children under Spanish law.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic church did away with upper class polygamy and trial marriage, and placed major emphasis on a woman's virginity and honor, no matter her class. Ideally, sex was to take place inside of a formal marriage or not at all. Priests sometimes charged high prices for officiating marriages, so some indigenous couples were not able to formally wed.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of Spanish men affected indigenous women significantly. While some interracial marriages occurred, such as the marriage of Atahualpa's half-sister Quipse Sisa to Pizarro, relationships with Spaniards were usually informal and coerced or forced.<sup>11</sup> Many women, including the virgin *acllas*, suffered terrible abuse at the hands of Spaniards. In an attempt to quell prolific sexual abuse, the Spanish government decreed that only married men immigrate to Peru.<sup>12</sup> These informal relationships robbed indigenous women of the chance to have a legitimate marriage or respect in colonial society.

Another aspect of women's lives affected by the conquest was their role in the Andean economy. The Incan chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala described several socio-economic "paths" of women, organized by age and ability to work, which were monitored by government officials. Married women looked after their homes and wove and spun. Widows acted as house servants for noblewomen, and wove cloth for general community use. Women with disabilities were not marginalized by the community, but were given land, a means of livelihood, and if

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<sup>9</sup> P. J Bakewell, Jacqueline Zuzann Holler *A History Of Latin America To 1825* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 208.

<sup>10</sup> Burkholder, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Vicuña Guengerich, 'Capac Women And The Politics Of Marriage In Early Colonial Peru', *Colonial Latin American Review* 24, no. 2 (2015): 147-167, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Socolow, 38.

possible, a husband.<sup>13</sup> Girls helped with weaving, farming, and household chores. Incan officials kept records of happenings in the community, and would provide government assistance to widows or those in need.<sup>14</sup> Women enjoyed some economic autonomy and were able to inherit property, and in some cases, were in charge of household finances. They would often sell their surplus domestic goods in market places, which helped them build community connections, and boost their own income.<sup>15</sup>

After the conquest, the introduction of new occupations, like mining, heralded the switch from a trade-based economy to a capitalist one. The path system disappeared, women found work wherever they could, and the Spanish commercialized many traditional occupations such as weaving.

Weaving was the central occupation of Andean women and cloth was a key commodity in the Incan economy. In the pre-conquest years, clothing defined social status, acted as a form of currency, and played an important role in religious practices. The *acllas* wove fine garments for state and religious ceremonies. Women of lower status wove garments for their families, in addition to surplus items to be used as tax payments—each family had to pay a tax of one garment to the empire per year.<sup>16</sup> Weaving was so central to a woman's economic role, that whenever she went to visit a friend, she would take work with her. If visiting a woman of higher rank, it was considered an honor to be asked to help her weave.<sup>17</sup> Textiles also served as

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<sup>13</sup> Guaman Poma De Ayala and David Frye, *The First New Chronicle And Good Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Pedro Cieza de Leon, *The Second Part Of The Chronicle Of Peru*, ebook, 1st ed. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1883),

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1540cieza.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Malpass, 91.

<sup>17</sup> de la Vega, 215.

chronicles for the empire. Women often wove patterns into the cloth, which recorded important historical events.<sup>18</sup>

In colonial society, cloth was accepted by the Spanish as tribute though they generally required higher amounts than the Incan government had, working women to the extreme.<sup>19</sup> Spanish Viceroy Toledo called for higher cloth production because he believed it kept women “moral” and from having mestizo children.<sup>20</sup>

Farming was a major economic sector in the pre and post conquest eras. However, before the conquest “everyone, men and women, joined in working the land and helped one another.”<sup>21</sup> All land in the Incan Empire was divided into three sections—one for religious use, one for the government, and one for the people. Women were able to claim pieces of land through laws of parallel descent.<sup>22</sup> Women occupied an essential role in agriculture and were in charge of conveying agrarian knowledge to the next generations. The Quoya Chimpu Urma introduced corn to Incan society and taught other women how to cultivate it. In honor of this tradition, state land was set aside for the Quoya to supervise seed cultivation. She and other women would experiment to see which seeds would produce the best crop, and then transmit the knowledge throughout the empire.<sup>23</sup>

After the conquest, the Spanish implemented the *encomienda* farming system, similar to the feudal system of medieval Europe. Plots of land, and the indigenous people who lived on

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<sup>18</sup> Silverblatt, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Socolow, 127.

<sup>20</sup> Karen B Graubart, 'Indecent Living: Indigenous Women And The Politics Of Representation In Early Colonial Peru', *Colonial Latin American Review* 9, no. 2 (2000): 213-235), 228.

<sup>21</sup> de la Vega, 214.

<sup>22</sup> Silverblatt, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



them, were awarded to Spanish conquistadors as fief-like estates. The *Encomenderos* owned whatever the Indians were able to produce, and used the *mita* system to run farms and mines, stripping indigenous peoples of their autonomy. Due to harsh *mita* requirements, many men worked away from the home, leaving women to make up the difference in fields and household chores. This essentially doubled the female workload. Agricultural practices like the Quoya's seed cultivation were lost in the confusion of conquest.

In the colonial era, Andean women began to work outside the home for the first time. Harsh conditions on the *encomiendas* led many women to seek better wages and jobs in cities. Eventually, there were more women than men in most urban areas. Colonial Quito had 53 men for every 100 women.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous women made up the majority of market vendors and domestic servants, though they were sometimes forced into these positions against their will. The public work such as running a market stall could make a woman an easy target for sexual abuse, especially if she were unmarried.<sup>25</sup> The Spanish ideal of an honorable woman was one who stayed at home and did not have to work in the public sphere.

In a few rare cases, the Spanish economic changes provided Andean women with more autonomy. Under Spanish law, a woman had ownership of her dowry estate, and she could legally defend her property in court if her husband tried to spend it without her consent.<sup>26</sup> However, Viceroy Toledo altered the tradition of inheriting land through mothers and parallel descent in favor of patriarchal inheritance systems.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Burkholder, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Guengerich, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Powers, *Women In The Crucible Of Conquest*, ebook, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, [https://books.google.com/books?id=HR\\_oZeu\\_b\\_DkC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=HR_oZeu_b_DkC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false), 61.

While Incan political structure was generally patriarchal, women did hold some legitimate power. The empire traced its roots to a woman—Mama Huaco, the first Quoya. She exercised considerable power, and ruled the kingdom in place of her husband.<sup>28</sup> The other Quoyas of the pre-conquest era enjoyed varying degrees of power. Quoyas presided over the kingdom in their husband's absence, and could act as tiebreaker if a royal council vote came to a stalemate. Women also presided over the *acllas* of the moon goddess, a strictly feminine religious order. Even women who were secondary wives could inherit land and use it as they wished. One secondary wife was reportedly given charge of 4,000 households and over 300 servants.<sup>29</sup> In the northern areas of the kingdom, some *kurakas*, or tribal leaders, were women and exercised considerable political power within their villages.<sup>30</sup>

Andean women were stripped of formal political power under Spanish rule. They became the legal equivalent of children, under control of their husbands.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Dona Francica Canapgina, a *karaka* of a tribe on the northern coast, was stripped of her power. Despite formal legal appeals to the Spanish government, her position was given to her husband.<sup>32</sup>

Pre-conquest women occupied an important, though restricted role, in Incan religion. The two main gods of the Incas were the sun, a masculine deity, and the moon, considered the sun's wife. The *acllas*, or chosen women, served the Sun and Moon Gods. Officially chosen for their beauty at around age 10, they would be taken to temples to be trained in weaving and other domestic activities. They also remained virgins and were not allowed to speak to men. The most

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Kellog, *Weaving The Past: A History Of Latin America's Indigenous Women From The Prehispanic Period To The Present*, ebook, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Migden Socolow, *The Women Of Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.18

<sup>30</sup> Kellog, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Powers, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Powers, 46.

prestigious *aclla* orders in Quito wove fine cloth for the royal family and the sun idols. The queen oversaw the *acllas* of the moon. Women chosen for the *aclla* order did not always become priestesses. The Inca could choose some for concubines, give them as gifts to his nobles, or use them to form marriage alliances with the leaders of conquered peoples. *Acllas* had little free will—if they were chosen, they had to go, and the penalty for disobedience or adultery was death.<sup>33</sup>

Women's religious roles changed significantly in the Colonial Era. The *aclla* order was destroyed along with the rest of indigenous religious practices upon the introduction of Catholicism. The church also placed a major emphasis on women's virginity, and did away with trial marriages. Despite vows of chastity, women suffered abuse at the hands of priests. De Ayala railed against the priests who abused women, especially those who kept women under the pretense of domestic servants, but used them as concubines.<sup>34</sup>

Indigenous women were also not allowed to become nuns until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> Some women circumvented this by creating informal convents called *beatas*, reminiscent of the former *aclla* institutions.<sup>36</sup> While some men were taught to read and write by priests, most indigenous women received no formal education.<sup>37</sup>

Examining women in conquest history provides an intimate look at gender and power relations, socio-economics, and the shifting familial and cultural roles within post-conquest Peru. Women were the foundations of society, and when their roles shifted, it had a ripple effect for the broader social constructs. The drastically altered roles of indigenous women reflected the

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<sup>33</sup> de la Vega, 199.

<sup>34</sup> De Ayala, 214.

<sup>35</sup> Bakewell, 209.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Nora E Jaffary, *Gender, Race And Religion In The Colonization Of The Americas* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 86.

shifts in Andean society as a whole, and the experience of indigenous peoples under Spanish rule. Though beset by abuse, discrimination, and inequality, they still managed to navigate their society with an inspiring spirit of resilience and strength.

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