"Noble Lady" | "Sumaq Ñusta"

Text Information
Author | Anonymous
Language | Quechua
Period | 17th Century
Genre |
Source | Comentarios Reales de los Incas
Collection |
URL | http://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/inca_garcilaso_noble_lady/

Transcription by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. Translation by Leonardo Velloso-Lyons.

Introduction to the Text
This Quechua poem first appeared in the Spanish-language *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (1609), a history of the Pre-Columbian Inca empire, authored by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, the son of a Spanish conquistador and an Incan noblewoman. Scholars know very little beyond what Inca Garcilaso himself relates in his history about the poem. It appears in a chapter dedicated to the poetic accomplishments of the Incas, in which Inca Garcilaso accounts for the role that poetry played in how the Incas kept records of their achievements, cultural traditions, and beliefs. According to him, Inca poetry comprised "few verses, so that they could be memorized; but they were also very condensed, like cyphers to be decoded." This description befits the poem translated here, "Sumaq Ñusta" ("Noble Lady"), in which few verses construct a whole narrative about the different forms of precipitation in the Andes (rain, thunderstorms, snow, hail). For Inca Garcilaso, poetry was the medium by which the Incas communicated not only their history, but also their knowledge about the natural world.

Inca Garcilaso writes that Blas Valera, another mixed-race intellectual from colonial Peru, transcribed the poem from ancient *khipus*, the traditional system of record-keeping used by the Incas. (The *khipu* system recorded information using cords of different colors, into which small knots were tied, which could represent words, numbers, or concepts.) Valera translated the poem into Latin, keeping the original spondaic syllable structure of Quechua. In the *Comentarios Reales*, that Inca Garcilaso argues that Inca poetry was much closer to the poetry of the great ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome than it was to the Spanish culture of his own time, and he musters this poem as evidence. Both the Quechua and the Latin versions appear in the *Comentarios Reales*, to which Inca Garcilaso adds his own translation into Spanish, in which language he is unable to preserve the original spondaic meter. The English translation presented here is a direct translation from the Quechua original.

The poem relates a story of the many forms that water takes when it falls from the sky, contrasting the violent rain during thunderstorms with gentler, and more useful, rain. The addressee of the poem is a woman of noble ascent—a *ñusta*, like Inca Garcilaso's mother—who was chosen by the gods to regulate the various natural phenomena of precipitation. Although there is a predominant tone of gratitude towards the *ñusta*, whom the speaker thanks for sending water only in beneficial, unthreatening forms, the first half of the poem is an indirect, somewhat accusatory address. The accusation is not directed at the ñusta, but at her brother, whom the speaker credits with causing thunderstorms. It is because he breaks the *ñusta*'s water jug, instead of gently pouring water from it, that such storms occur. The story of these siblings features a binary idea of gender, which is mapped onto them: the brother is violent (he breaks the jug) and disrespectful (he usurps his sister's role as trustee of the jug), whereas the sister is gentle and caring, even though she sends hail and snow at times.

Moreover, this short poem constitutes a good example of how pre-modern Quechua culture relates to the material world by ascribing consciousness and intent to the rules by which the world is governed. While the *ñusta* and her brother are both of presumed royal ascent, they are not necessarily deities in the same way as, for example, the gods of the Greek pantheon (e.g. Zeus, Hera, Athena, etc.) were thought to be. The Incas believed that mountains and rivers had as much power and agency as human beings (if not more), and the nameless *ñusta* and her brother may fit better into this category of agents of nature. Although the gods Pachakamaq and Viraqucha chose the *ñusta* to govern precipitation, it is interesting to consider the importance of the object from which the water stems: the clay jug. The noble lady's power is curtailed

since the jug may be manipulated by others (i.e. her brother), suggesting that the jug itself may control the waters falling from the sky, and the *ñusta* and her brother simply guide the water's form.

About this Edition

This poem was transcribed from the original edition of *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (1609), printed in Lisbon. The John Carter Brown Library holds a copy of it, whose digitized version can be accessed here: https://archive.org/details/primerapartedelo00vega. Inca Garcilaso's original spelling of Quechua has been modified to reflect modern-day spelling of the Ayacucho-Chanca variant of Quechua. The main difference here is the substitution of "q" for "c" to represent the guttural phoneme (non-existent in English), and the use of "k" instead of "c" for the voiceless velar stop phoneme (like the "c" in English, as it is pronounced in the word can). The translator has recorded a reading of the poem in Quechua for the Society of Renaissance and Baroque Hispanic Poetry, which can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvubEwuraZE&t=7s.

Further Reading

Julien, Catherine. "Inca Historical Forms." *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 3: 1400-1800*, edited by José Rabasa et al., Oxford Univ. Press, 2012, pp. 620–39.

- *A study of how Inca historical forms appear in histories penned by indigenous historians.*

Mazzotti, José Antonio. *Incan Insights: El Inca Garcilaso's Hints to Andean Readers*. Iberoamericana ; Vervuert, 2008.

- *Authored by one of the most prominent Inca Garcilaso scholars, this study focuses on Inca Garcilaso's use of indigenous sources in the Comentarios Reales.*

Ostenfeld-Suske, Kira von. "A New History for a 'New World': The First One Hundred Years of Hispanic New World Historical Writing." *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 3: 1400-1800*, edited by José Rabasa et al., Oxford Univ. Press, 2012, pp. 557–74.

- *General introduction to the writing of histories in Hispanic America.*

Valle, Ivonne del. "Playing with Fire: Mestizaje Run Amok." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, Sept. 2021, pp. 195–208.

- *Specialized article that discusses the topic of mestizaje, comparing the work of Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma de Ayala.*

Zamora, Margarita. *Language, Authority, and Indigenous History in the Comentarios Reales de Los Incas*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

- *Very influential book examining how Inca Garcilaso uses his position as an authoritative source of knowledge on Quechua language and culture in the Comentarios Reales.*

"Noble Lady" | "Sumaq Ñusta"

Sumaq Ñusta[1]
Turallaykim[2]
Puñuykita[3]
Pakirqayan[4]
Hinamantara[5]
Kunununun[6]
Illapantaq[7]
Qamrí Ñusta[8]
Unuykita[9]
Paramunki
Maynimpirí
Chikchimunki
Ritimunki[10]
Pacharuwaq[11]
Pachakamaq[12]
Wiraqucha[13]
Kay hinapaq[14]
Churasunki
Kamasunki[15]

Noble Lady!
It is definitely your brother
Who shatters
Your clay jug.
Because of this
It thunders,
While lightning falls from the sky.
However, it is you, Lady,
Who rain your waters
Down upon us.
And sometimes
You send us hail,
You send us snow.
It is for this purpose that
The maker of the world,
The ruler of the world,
The Wiraqucha,
Will have put you there,

Critical Notes

Transcription

1 *Ñusta* is the Quechua word used to describe a woman of Inka (royal) ascent. Inca Garcilaso's mother was a *ñusta*.

2 Quechua is an agglutinant language. Words and sentences are formed by adding suffixes to them. In this case, *tura* is the brother of a woman, *lla* is a suffix that means "only" and is sometimes used as emphasis, *yki* is the suffix that indicates the second-person possessive. Finally, the *m* at the end is a suffix that indicates a strong assertion. I chose not to use "definitely only" to convey the sense of *lla* and *m* because this kind of emphatic repetition, though normal and even desirable in Quechua, is not very organic to either English or Spanish.

3 *Puñu* is a clay jug, used for storing water, *yki* is the possessive explained in the previous note, and *ta* is the suffix that indicates the direct object of the action, which comes in the next verse.

4 This unusual form is original to the source text, the *Comentarios Reales*. It could be a different spelling of the verb *p'akirqariy* (in the Cuzco-Collao variant) or *pakirqachiy* (in the Ayacucho-Chanca variant). It means "to shatter", and is conjugated in the third person present indicative. The order of object-verb is switched in the translation to make it easier to understand; in modern and premodern Quechua, much like Latin, sentences normally end on a conjugated verb. Given the language's agglutinant nature and the presence of suffixes that demarcate the syntactical role of each word, word order is less important in Quechua than in either Spanish or English.

5 *Hinamantara* sounds like an archaic form of a consequential clause, *chaymanta*, meaning "from that" or "because of that." *Hina* is a very interesting word, still in use in modern Quechua, which can have different meanings. It is used as a particle for comparisons between two elements; it can function as a particle to trigger the subjunctive mood, much like the phrase "as if"; and it can also simply be used to refer to something previously mentioned, which is the case here. *Manta* is the suffix that functions as the ablative of origin or cause in Latin, used to refer to both time and space.

6 *Kunununuy* means "making a strong sound." See following note.

7 *Illapay* is a verb that Inca Garcilaso comments on extensively in the *Comentarios Reales*. He translates it as having three meanings, all referring to the phenomenon we call thunder: the thunder as a sound, the lightning bolt that appears, and the way it hits something on the ground. For Inca Garcilaso, this verb shows an important feature of the Quechua language, namely that words normally have multiple meanings. This makes translating from Quechua particularly challenging for historians and scholars of Andean culture.

8 *Rí* in modern Quechua means "and," in a vocative context. It is normally used in conversation to turn the focus to the other person, as in "I am well, and you?" In this case, however, *rí* seems to both turn attention to the *ñusta* to whom the poem is addressed and also to create a sense of contrast between her benevolent role in generating natural phenomena (like rain or snow) and her brother's violent one, which brings about storms.

9 *Unu* means water. Modern Quechua speakers could also say *yaku*. *Yki* is the possessive, again, explained in the first note, and *ta* is the suffix that indicates a direct object to the following three verbs: *paramunki*, *chichimunki*, and *ritimunki*.

10 Today *paray* means "to rain", *chikchiy* means "to hail" and *ritiy* "to snow". However, Inca Garcilaso's transcription says *chichimunki*, from the verb *chichiy*, which means to germinate. As the poem is about different forms of water that fall from the sky, I chose to correct the verb to *chikchiy*, using the modern spelling. The suffix *mu* indicates the direction of an action. It is often accompanied, in modern Quechua, by another suffix (*wa*), and it means in the direction of the speaker.

11 *Pacha* is a complex word in Quechua, with many different meanings, including: earth, Earth, the world, time, clothes. In this case, it probably means "the world," as it refers to the deity that made the world. *Ruwaq* comes from the verb ruway, to make. The *q* is a suffix added to verbs to turn them into an adjective, in this case, "the one who makes," or "maker, creator." Although the original says *ruraq*, I have chosen to modernize the spelling of the verb.

12 *Pachakamaq* is one of the Quechua names for the deity who created the world. For Christian Quechua speakers, it means the Christian God. Inca Garcilaso dedicates a whole chapter of the *Comentarios Reales* to this word. *Kamay* means "to create, to invent, to discover."

13 *Wiraqucha* or, in Spanish, *Viracocha*, is the name of a specific Inca deity, who is sometimes described as a historical character. There are extensive commentaries on *Viracocha* in the *Comentarios Reales*. In modern Quechua, *wiraqucha* is used to describe someone who has attained distinction through their actions or leadership.

14 *Hina* is explained in a previous note. Here, as in the previous case, it refers to something that was previously mentioned (like the particle *chay* in modern Quechua). *Paq* is the suffix that indicates purpose, meaning "because of that" or "for the benefit of," somewhat equivalent to the dative case in Latin.

15 These two last verbs, *churay* and *kamay*, are in the third-person future form but have the suffix *ki* added to them to indicate that, though the action is carried out by the third person, it impacts the second person. Future conjugation in Quechua is relatively complex when it includes, as it does here, directional particles that include the other persons within the scope of the action. It is interesting that Inca Garcilaso's Spanish translation of the last two lines of the poem gives both these verbs in the past not the future: "*Ya te colocaron / Y te dieron alma*" ("Have already put you there / And have given you a soul"). To reflect the insight that Inca Garcilaso may have had into this grammatical form, I have chosen to use the future participle; in this way, I have sought to convey the future tense present in the original while also giving the impression that there is something already consummated about the action (*churay*, which means to put, and *kamay*, which means to create).