

# Inca Women Before and After Spanish Colonization of the Andes

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Extra digging is often required to unearth the female side of history for any era. Inca Peru is no exception. With primary sources consisting of Spanish priests and conquistadores or Andean men who learned Spanish, the experience of Inca women can easily be missed.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, “the database is narrow” on colonial Native American women’s history, especially lower down the social ladder.<sup>2</sup> However, Inca women’s experience speaks to their people and era of history at large. Their pre-contact role in society and marriage represents a society closer to gender equality than European counterparts. In addition, Inca women’s broad labour options and extensive and exclusively female religious sphere suggests a range of female experience that was quickly stomped out by Spanish contact. Through examining the Inca Empire before, during, and after European contact with a focus on its female population, concrete changes on both the large and small scale can be perceived in areas such as societal structure, labour, domesticity, and spiritual outlook as represented by these women’s historical experiences.

Pre-contact Inca women had more autonomy than European women. This was partly due to the gender division of property and status in the Andes. The Inca considered men to be descended from men, and women descended from women. Inca women inherited land or titles from their female ancestors and thus had the potential for independent self-maintenance.<sup>3</sup> This matrilineal system contributed to Inca women’s “relatively high degree of autonomy.”<sup>4</sup> This included the household, an important aspect of Inca life that defined peasants from elites. Women’s roles both in and outside the household were not seen as lesser, due to the parallel male and female spheres in Inca society. All contributions, male or female, received the same value and respect. An elite example of this gender parallelism can be found in the *Coya*: the sister or wife of the Inca Emperor who governed elite women and ruled while the Inca was on military excursions. However, this does not mean there was absolute gender equality in Inca

times. Men had exclusive rights to the highest positions, but Inca women still had influence.<sup>5</sup> However, Spanish arrival substantially changed Inca women's roles and rights.

There was no gender parallelism under Spanish colonialism. By the end of the sixteenth century, the autonomy created by Inca women's distinct spaces and structures had disappeared along with approved female political and religious roles. It could be argued the Spanish removed half of the Inca political system, namely, the female half. The "dual hierarchies" became "male-centric."<sup>6</sup> Inca women were also excluded from the schools Spanish friars had opened for elite Incas. This exclusion from a new male world must have been distressing for Inca women. In fact, the heightened patriarchal system the Spanish brought over to Latin America sometimes invaded Inca households, with indigenous men imposing the same restrictions and lack of respect to the women they had once honoured and valued. Karen Vieira Powers described the phenomenon as Inca women "being colonized twice."<sup>7</sup> Class was another factor that determined Inca women's experience in the new colonial world, with detriments for the lower orders.<sup>8</sup> By the seventeenth century, many Inca women were servants or concubines in Spanish houses.<sup>9</sup> This shift from the important position Inca women once held in their own households to serving in Spanish ones is a vivid example of the changes colonialism brought.

Native American women's participation in the 1780-83 Great Rebellion in Peru reflects both Spanish colonial perceptions of Inca women, as well as indigenous views. Native women's role as "protectors of the culture and progenitors of (Inca) nationalism" organically led to their roles in the uprisings against the Spanish regime, with Leon G. Campbell going as far as to call the rebellions "family enterprises."<sup>10</sup> Native women served as both advisors and combatants, and the Spanish reactions of shock and surprise suggest that Spanish women were even more limited than native ones. The native women were reprimanded for their "excessive masculinity" and

“extreme cruelty,” and Francisco de Molina, a Creole scribe, described Micaela Bastidas, wife of Tupac Amaru, as “more cruel, rebellious, arrogant, and despotic” than Amaru.<sup>11</sup> Resistance was one thing both native Peruvian men and women refused to give up.

Labour was another crucial aspect of Inca women’s lives before and after European contact, and a primary part of that was agricultural. Although Inca women were considered the property of their family and then their husband, they could also own property and work as chiefs (*cacias*), farmers, or traders.<sup>12</sup> In fact, trade between communities was a primarily female field. Inca women were responsible for household economics and cooked not only for their nuclear family, but gave food to their female neighbours as well.<sup>13</sup> This gave Inca women both an occupation and a work-based female community. They were also concerned with childcare and sowing crops. Both men and women were expected to work in the harvests, to the extent that the state did not make citizens pay tribute until they got married, and thus had a marital working unit. Inca women could claim land and employ relatives to work on it. Some of the prime Andean real estate was passed down through elite Inca matrilineal systems, and the involved women received tribute payments.<sup>14</sup> Inca women’s business life, so to speak, had options.

Another important avenue of labour for Inca women was weaving. “Judging from abundant archaeological evidence,” textiles were a big deal in pre-Hispanic Peru.<sup>15</sup> Fine clothing was required for Inca religious ceremonies, from the priest’s outfit to the garments burned for sacrifices. Because of these high-sphere endpoints, weaving was not only considered work, but religion, politics, and economics.<sup>16</sup> While peasant women weaved the cloth for these occasions, elite Inca women were also involved in the occupation. This suggests its prevalence and importance to Inca society.<sup>17</sup> The craft was quickly appropriated to the detriment of female Inca weavers by Spanish officials and priests upon European contact.<sup>18</sup>

Inca women's talent for weaving did not go unnoticed by the Spanish. Fray Bernabé Cobo observed, "The Indian women spin not only at home, but when they go outside...As long as they are not doing something else with their hands, walking does not interfere with their spinning."<sup>19</sup> Men like Cobo approved of weaving as women's work, along with making *chicha* (corn beer), cooking, and working in the fields. The Peruvian economy swiftly changed over the sixteenth century under Spanish colonialism. There is evidence to suggest that men also weaved in pre-Hispanic times, but the occupation was quickly feminized by "a combination of European perceptions, economic demands and indigenous communities' strategies."<sup>20</sup> Weaving developed low class connotations, and the Spanish underpaid Inca women weavers, especially widows and unmarried women.<sup>21</sup> The demand for homespun textiles dwindled as cloth became cheap and tribute was replaced by coin.<sup>22</sup> Inca women's meaningful craft had been turned against them, and then completely eradicated by the European colonial economy.

Weaving was not the only part of the Inca economy that was dramatically changed by colonization. Whereas women held professional status as weavers and other occupations under Inca rule, they were forbidden from artisans' guilds under colonialism and largely stayed at home, in line with Spanish ideas of a woman's proper place.<sup>23</sup> When tribute and *mita* (forced labour) were introduced, native women were not exempt, but completed work such as spinning and weaving within their villages. They were essentially "a captive labour force."<sup>24</sup> During the Bourbon Reforms in the eighteenth century, many indigenous men were sent to the army or mines for long periods, sometimes forever.<sup>25</sup> Native women then had to complete the harvest alone and sometimes resorted to prostitution.<sup>26</sup> Andean women lost any occupational autonomy upon colonialization.

As in any society, marriage was a key aspect of Inca women's lives. In pre-colonial times, marriage was expected of both men and women, perhaps because Inca people only paid tribute after marriage.<sup>27</sup> The elite Inca also used marriage with neighbouring groups to cement political relationships.<sup>28</sup> But marriage was not synonymous with losing independence for Inca women. The institution had a more equal power balance than in Europe, and "Andean marriage rites did not contain elements of female subordination."<sup>29</sup> However, elite Inca were known to have multiple, or "secondary" wives.<sup>30</sup> That permission from the State was needed to enter into bigamy suggests that it was not commonplace and perhaps reversed for higher-ranking men.<sup>31</sup> Upon Spanish contact, polygamy was steadily eliminated, with the first wife keeping the husband, but this often left the other wives and their children destitute.<sup>32</sup> This was just one of the many changes to Inca marriage introduced by Spanish colonization.

Inca women continued to experience marriage as a political tool, but this time with Spanish men. Inca Emperor Atahualpa's half-sister, Quispe Sisa, evangelized as Dona Inés Yupanqui, was offered as a wife to Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro later had another "marriage-like relationship" with Cuxi Rimay, evangelized as Dona Angelina, a woman also from the Inca nobility. Pizarro adapted to these Inca marriage alliance practises to undermine the potential for uprisings. He gained indigenous loyalty through his elite Inca wife-like figures and thus cemented his place in the colonial Andes. But that did not mean women like Sisa and Rimay were passive players: they were aware of their position of power and were "active agents in the main historical events" of the period. Inca women like Quispe Sisa who were married to Spanish settlers influenced political alliances and claims to power. They used their connection to the native population and the Spanish's respect for their elite status towards their own desires.<sup>33</sup> It was less than ideal circumstances, but Inca women made use of the power they did have.

Another reason for the marriages between Inca women and Spanish men was logistical. Prior to 1560, Spanish women consisted of less than 30 percent of the entire European population of the Americas.<sup>34</sup> Elite Inca women deemed worthy by the Catholic Church were baptized and married Spanish men. A marital culture clash occurred between the Inca and the Spanish, especially on the topic of sex.<sup>35</sup> While the Inca were relatively relaxed about premarital sex, with some religious exemptions such as the *acllakuna*, the Catholic policing of sexuality led to “elaborate legal codes which defined any form of extramarital sex as criminal.”<sup>36</sup> This was especially pertinent to Inca women. The sudden and intense Christian stress on female virginity changed the sexual social dynamic for Inca women.

Some elite Inca families started to seclude their daughters after the Spanish tradition, but such a step was less prevalent in rural populations. As it was, “a Hispanicized gender system that...place[d] the honor and purity of women at its center” took root in the Andes.<sup>37</sup> Spanish colonization brought the patriarchal favour towards the husband, the Church, and the State.<sup>38</sup> Autonomy was stripped away from Andean women and given to their husbands and fathers. The Inca concept of “parallel authority” divided between men and women was gone by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>39</sup> By 1780, the *mestizas* captured during the Rebellion of Túpac Amaru II were pardoned because, according to Diego Tupac Amaru, “they are incapable of having an opinion and cannot disobey their husbands.”<sup>40</sup> This points to Andean women’s colonially subordinated position beneath their husbands.

Within the system of “gender parallelism and gender complementarity” in Inca societies, women had their own, separate religious hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> They only confessed to women confessors, and could become priestesses. Likewise, Inca men had their distinct religious practises. Men considered themselves sons of the sun, whereas Inca women saw themselves as daughters of the

moon. While the male gods “were political forces that emanated from the heavens and mountains,” Inca women worshiped female gods “of procreation and regeneration.”<sup>42</sup> This was connected to the work Inca women performed. As they planted seeds, they would pray to the “earth mother” for a fruitful harvest and offer her *chicha* (corn beer) they had brewed.<sup>43</sup> A religious lens was also put onto Inca women in medical domains. They filled socially critical roles such as midwives, healers, and herbalists. These women “were renowned as medical specialists,” and those who traveled to treat people sometimes had a following.<sup>44</sup> Irene Silverblatt explained that Andean midwives were perceived as holy, for they were “standing for and facilitating sacred powers of fertility.” When she traveled to the village of Hualcán in the 1980s, local midwives were still being referred to as *pachacomadres* (godmothers of the earth).<sup>45</sup>

Another avenue of female Inca religion can—sometimes—be found in the *acllakuna*. The discovery of female skeletons at Machu Picchu once prompted a theory that it had been a religious site for *acllakuna* in Inca times. Although debunked in favour of new evidence, that the quintessential symbol of Peru could have been synonymous with feminine spirituality speaks to the importance of religion to Inca women.<sup>46</sup> Picked out from a young age, the *acllakuna* could end up as “secondary wives” of the Inca ruler or be used to cement political alliances in marriage, or they could become “expert weavers” who created fine cloth for religious or state occasions.<sup>47</sup> The *acllakuna* facilitated Inca marriage, work, and religion. Concerning the latter, “the most prestigious” *acllakuna* served Sun cults, or dedicated themselves to Inca gods in other fashions. Although the women who became *acllakuna* were often chosen because of their lack of social connections, the Andeans saw them as holy and “treated them like goddesses.”<sup>48</sup> Even Spanish colonizers approved of *acllakuna*, as they were in service to the husband-substitute

figures of the Inca or the Sun.<sup>49</sup> But that was perhaps the only aspect of feminine Inca religion that received the Spanish stamp of approval.

In the early 1600s, Bernardo de Noboa sentenced five indigenous women for idolatrous behaviour. Their crimes were being confessors, teaching Inca traditions, and encouraging worship of Inca gods despite colonial laws. Noboa is quoted as sentencing Isabel Yalpay “to be whipped one hundred times astride a colored llama through the public streets of this village, as the voice of the town crier makes known her crime.” As long-term retribution, Yalpay was to serve four years in the Christian church in Acas, and “to be for a period of ten years at the disposition of its priest.”<sup>50</sup> As such instances make clear, peaceful co-existence of Inca religion and Christianity was rare in colonial Latin America.

The colonial introduction of Christianity was especially harmful to Inca women. Alongside Spanish law and politics, it would “all but destroy the gender-parallel spheres” that Inca men and women had previously existed in. In fact, there was no place for Inca women in the new religious order of Christianity. Spanish priests were “indignant” and “shocked” at Inca female confessors, and condemned midwifery as “the work of the devil.” After generations of female religious roles being essential and respected in Inca societies, the Spanish condemned them as a sacrilege that would send women straight to hell. Inca women were reduced to male mediation “with a male god and mostly male saints.”<sup>51</sup> However, as the example of Isabel Yalpay proves, Inca women’s response to such a religious upheaval was not entirely passive.

Like Yalpay and her associates, additional Inca women continued their religious traditions in secrecy. A “syncretic form of Catholicism” developed among Inca women who “understood and practiced Christianity through an Inca lens.”<sup>52</sup> Adapting their pre-conquest rites and practices to Christianity as much as the Spanish authorities would allow was perhaps Inca

women's only option of religious resistance. They also infiltrated new Christian roles, such as the *cofradías*, who were dedicated to certain saints and acted as spiritual leaders to their community.<sup>53</sup> Thus, whether they were aware of it and accepted it for some religious autonomy, Andean women played a significant role in cementing and spreading Catholicism in colonial Latin America.<sup>54</sup> But they were also capable of weaponizing Christianity. During the Peruvian rebellions of the late eighteenth century, Micaela Bastidas, Tupac Amaru II's wife, utilized Catholic churches for her husband's proclamations and had rebels pray before battle at the church of Tungasuca to cement their "fervent Catholicism."<sup>55</sup> Inca women lost most of their pre-conquest religion, but their adaptation of Christianity became an important part of their identity.

Inca women's experiences throughout Spanish colonialism offer a new perspective that expands on and complements the traditional male-centric textbook starting-point. The different and often more open Inca societal attitudes towards women develops dimensions of gender relations in the pre-contact Andes and enhances the cultural eradication experienced by native peoples and women in particular. In addition, the process of Inca women's respected occupations being first exploited than eradicated by the Spanish demonstrates the economic upheaval in the conquest-era Andes. Native women's roles as political bargaining chips in colonial marriages, and how they adapted to and sometimes benefited from these unions is an example of a female struggle for autonomy within the patriarchy. Finally, the enormous upheaval and annihilation of female religion under Spanish colonialism is perhaps the most dramatic example of how European conquest attempted to snuff native populations out. However, as native women's resistance in all the above-mentioned fields prove, this enterprise was never entirely successful.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup>Irene Silverblatt, "Andean Women in the Inca Empire," *Feminist Studies*, 4, no. 3 (1978): 38.
- <sup>2</sup>Leon G. Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru, 1780-1783," *The Americas*, 42, no. 2 (1985): 163.
- <sup>3</sup>Karen Vieira Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards in the Contact Zone," *American Indian Quarterly*, 24, no. 4 (2000): 512.
- <sup>4</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 166.
- <sup>5</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 511-512.
- <sup>6</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 521.
- <sup>7</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 520-522.
- <sup>8</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 166.
- <sup>9</sup>Frank Salomon, "Indian Women of Early Colonial Quito as Seen Through Their Testaments," *The Americas*, 44, no. 3 (1988): 325-326.
- <sup>10</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 167-168.
- <sup>11</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 170 & 190.
- <sup>12</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 167.
- <sup>13</sup>Silverblatt, "Andean Women," 43-44.
- <sup>14</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 516 & 518.
- <sup>15</sup>Karen B. Graubart, "Weaving and the Construction of a Gender Division of Labor in Early Colonial Peru," *American Indian Quarterly*, 24, no 4 (2000): 538.
- <sup>16</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labor," 539-541.
- <sup>17</sup>Silverblatt, "Andean Women," 42.

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- <sup>18</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labor," 538.
- <sup>19</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labour," 543.
- <sup>20</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labor," 543-545.
- <sup>21</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 167.
- <sup>22</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labor," 555.
- <sup>23</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 533.
- <sup>24</sup>Graubart, "Gender Division of Labor," 537 & 554.
- <sup>25</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 167.
- <sup>26</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 532 & Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 169.
- <sup>27</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 514.
- <sup>28</sup>Sara Vicuña Guengerich, "Capac Women and the Politics of Marriage in Early Colonial Peru," *Colonial Latin American Review*, 24, no 2 (2015): 147.
- <sup>29</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 514.
- <sup>30</sup>Salomon, "Women of Early Colonial Quito," 327.
- <sup>31</sup>Silverblatt, "Andean Women," 49.
- <sup>32</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 529.
- <sup>33</sup>Guengerich, "Capac Women," 147-151.
- <sup>34</sup>Guengerich, "Capac Women," 151.
- <sup>35</sup>Guengerich, "Capac Women," 151-153.
- <sup>36</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 526-527.
- <sup>37</sup>Powers, "Andeans and Spaniards," 528.
- <sup>38</sup>Campbell, "Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru," 164.

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- <sup>39</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 530.
- <sup>40</sup>Campbell, “Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru,” 187.
- <sup>41</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 511.
- <sup>42</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 513 & 518.
- <sup>43</sup>Silverblatt, “Andean Women,” 44.
- <sup>44</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 517-518.
- <sup>45</sup>Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 31.
- <sup>46</sup>Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 81.
- <sup>47</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 515.
- <sup>48</sup>Silverblatt, “Andean Women,” 48-50.
- <sup>49</sup>Graubart, “Gender Division of Labor,” 543.
- <sup>50</sup>Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches*, 31.
- <sup>51</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 520-524.
- <sup>52</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 525.
- <sup>53</sup>Powers, “Andeans and Spaniards,” 525.
- <sup>54</sup>Mónica Díaz, “Native American Women and Religion in the American Colonies: Textual and Visual Traces of an Imagined Community,” *Legacy*, 28, no. 2 (2011): 205 & 212.
- <sup>55</sup>Campbell, “Women and the Great Rebellion in Peru,” 175.

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