

The Music of Quechua: Language, Identity and the Inca Tradition in Cuzco

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Abstract

Quechua is a language of poetry, music and nature; hence, music, dance and song are integral media of traditional communication in Quechua. In this paper, I explore how traditional forms of music, dance and singing are being used by people within the Quechua speaking community to revitalize the Inca language in urban Cuzco. This case study forms part of a larger research project on grassroots strategies to revitalize endangered languages. A documentary on the revitalization strategies forms part of the research output. In Cuzco, traditional Inca culture also blends with global cultural trends. There is, then, a need to identify how people are using modern technologies to promote language and identity.

Introduction

In this paper, three examples of how people are using traditional forms of music, dance and singing to engage with the community are presented. This paper will also discuss how technologies and the concept of 'cool' are underpinning revitalization strategies. These case studies are the result of my ethnographic research into revitalization strategies and my forthcoming documentary '*The Incas dance again*' is part of my research project.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with two musicians, two singers and two organisers of the 'Quechua hour', an initiative from Centro *Guamán Poma de Ayala*, a non government organisation, which had the purpose of developing cultural awareness of which the objective was for people to value the Quechua language again. I present here my preliminary analysis of five interviews and reflect on the global reach of Quechua through new technologies.

This paper concentrates on Cusco, one of the central case studies of my project. Here, I extend my earlier research where I found that people were embarrassed to follow Andean music and sing the lyrics in Quechua due to the pressures of globalisation and modernity (Funegra, 2011).

What I wanted to investigate was how things have changed and how Andean music and songs are used as a strategy to engage younger generations in singing, dancing and being proud of their Quechua heritage.

Background

The relationship between music and endangered languages has been particularly important in

many parts of the world and several studies have shown how music can be an extremely important way to preserve and promote minority languages even when their use as everyday spoken language is in crisis. Heather Sparling's (2001) Study of the Canadian Gaelic singer Mary Jane Lamond, for example, demonstrates how the use of Gaelic in her music can create a value for this language even when the majority of listeners do not understand the literal meaning.

As the historian Emma Christopher has described, in extreme cases, as with the African languages used in several Cuban ritual traditions, music has the potential to preserve languages that have entirely fallen out of use in everyday speech within a community (Christopher 2013).

Maher (2005) describes his term 'metroethnicity' as an exercise in emancipatory politics (p.85) in which the examination of a hitherto repressed identity as the site of historical struggle is transformed into the potential achievements of individuals.

What he argues, linking metroethnicity to the principle of 'cool' is replacing definitions of identity with new potentials of becoming: "Cool is personal. Cool is a demand for self-sufficiency. It is an attitude deployed by the 'ethnic' an attitude undistorted and unheated by the emotions of past struggle, lacking interest for 'the struggle' a form of personal rebellion that eschews 'ethnic violence' by minimizing commitment to ethnicity whilst at the same time recognizing ethnic affiliation as something that can be useful deployed in music, fashion and lifestyle and so on.

Case Study 1: Omar and Gladys

Not everyone has had an opportunity to learn Quechua when they were young, but some have found links to the language and culture through their music. For example, Omar and Gladys are well-known Quechua musicians who cannot speak Quechua, but they are able to share their culture through their singing and music. Gladys explains that Quechua is in her heart and that when she sings she can feel that part of her identity. Gladys and Omar perform their music in theatres and live performances throughout Peru.

Omar's parents are Quechua speakers, so Omar has experienced the same generation gap as myself. Quechua is now taught in schools but it wasn't when Omar, Gladys and I were at school, so the language has skipped a generation. Nevertheless, it is impossible to separate them (and even us) from Quechua even if they/we don't speak it.



Figure 1: Omar and Gladys in recording studio.

Omar states:

It is impossible to distance myself from Quechua, because Quechua is a form of communication, and it is also a way of thinking. It is like a part of my brain, so I can never get rid of that.

Omar identifies himself with the oral culture, since music is culture. It is a natural way of expressing the human, much like any other art.

Omar adds:

Our music offers possibilities to sound beautiful and at the same time chimes with our identity since we don't have anything to do with occidental cultures, that is to say is our affinity, our way of thinking, even if you're not speaking Quechua maintains a form, an idiosyncrasy that is sometimes unreadable for others but within and among us we understand.

Gladys says:

I don't communicate in Quechua, but Quechua is part of me in some way. There is definitely something of it in me.

Quechua was never instilled in Gladys; it was only when she was around 16 years old that she found the motivation to learn. Right now, she doesn't speak fluent Quechua, at least, not yet.

But for Gladys it was like she was looking for a good medium, then for her that medium was music. For Gladys the most important reason to learn Quechua, was having heard her mother sing in Quechua during her childhood. That was her most immediate connection, because she found it so beautiful to listen to her singing. In her adolescence she started becoming interested in Andean music and it was as though her mother came back to life through these musical forms. Then it's out there! She has the initiative and the desire to continue studying Quechua but through songs. She thinks it is not only a matter of identity but also a link with her mother's culture and language.

Some of the songs that Gladys writes have much to do with the oral stories transmitted to her: what her great grandfather passed on to her grandfather, her grandfather to her mother, and her mother to her. Oral storytelling is a major component of what she composes.

Like Omar and Gladys, I never had the chance to learn my mother tongue during my childhood as my parents never wanted to teach it to me, but I could see them enjoying Andean music (*huaynos*) every Sunday morning. They used to listen to a radio station that played Andean music. My mother would sing along and I could feel how happy they were when they danced along to it at parties with live music, especially the harp. I always remember my mother swinging her skirt along the '*huayno*' music and my father behind with his hands behind his back dancing. Seeing all these happy expressions of feeling brought on my desire to learn Quechua.

Case Study 2 'The Quechua Hour'

Another event that I observed was the 'Quechua Hour'. This is a community initiative in the town square of Cuzco. Here, music, dancing, riddles and language are presented to the community every Sunday. This is an interactive approach, which enables people of all generations to celebrate their Quechua culture. It is also an opportunity for children and families to hear the language being spoken and sung in a public forum.

The event used to be called '*Runasimta Acllay*' and had a very profound impact on the people that watched it. After that it was proposed that the name be changed to '*La Hora del Quechua*' 'Quechua hour'. What does this mean? Seems as though when the name of the program was in Quechua it was very popular, but then they changed the name to Spanish, perhaps to widen their audience? We still have to work on the independency of Quechua from Spanish. I argue that the two languages don't have, in principle, any ties with each other. It is just an accident of history, of colonialism.



Figure 2: Quechua Hour activity at main Cusco square.

The idea behind the project was the activity in Cusco Square, the center of the city, for one hour, but because the audience was so captivated, they extended it to two or two and a half hours.

The program initially included interactive participation with the public through Quechua, with riddles and mainly music and songs, but also whatever the public wanted to talk about or communicate.

To enrich the event Ines and Yovany also performed dances from other regions wearing regional costumes while singing songs from the different regions, so the public could truly identify with the program.

This strategy has brought Quechua directly to the people through music and dance onto the streets of Cuzco.

Holding such an event in Cuzco Square was very significant since it is a place, which is full of memory, commemoration and resonance; it was the center of the Inca Empire. Indeed, it marked the re-appropriation of the space from simply a tourist attraction to a site for the active creation of cultural knowledge.

This was a very motivating activity, incredibly dynamic, cool and above all, had behind it the objective to spread the Quechua language through performance.

Ines Quispe says:

When you speak Quechua you can express all of your feelings, because this language is so rich, not only in pitch but it also can express emotions in only one word; something you cannot do in other languages. Quechua has its waves in which you can raise, lower and say so many things and express yourself.

Quechua offers a different point of view and also a different sensibility. The songs, the way people speak with syntactic and semantic particularities help us to understand and be closer to the culture. This sensibility is very important because we can learn a lot from Quechua. Its culture has many things to offer.

According to Maher (2005, 89) a new cultural track for minorities has emerged from the younger generation's corpus. It is in cultural flows, the ethnic boom, genres of literary work and ethnic rock and pop. It involves coming out rather than staying in: liberation. This pathway is cool. And Cool, I suggest, is now the main operating principle of cultural hybridity.

Yovany concludes:

Thanks to the Hora del Quechua, the people involved are interested in reversing things, now I can say that Quechua has gained strength, it's like the '*Incari*' returned because they do not look at you like a weirdo anymore when you speak Quechua. On the contrary, they think is 'cool' as they now look up to you because you are fluent in two languages.

This has shown enthusiasm for the Quechua hour reaching all aspects of society, and I will show now as we look in detail at the transmission of Quechua aided by music, how the emotion expressed by Gladys and Omar earlier, can be harnessed into a major project that can have widespread influence.

Case Study 3 Music and Quechua

My third case study explores a strategy about how the Quechua language can be taught through music and song. This provides a different perspective on how languages can be taught outside of a traditional classroom. Jorge Chuquehillca is a famous Quechua musician. He teaches the language through music, as he believes that the two cannot be separated and that in order to understand the language you have to feel the music. He uses this approach to teach children the traditional cultural practices.

Jorge Choquehuilca Huallpa comes from the community of Ikaparte in Cusco. He lives half of his life in his native town and the other half in the city of Cusco.

His sons are at university in Cusco. He enjoys both his time in his native town and his time in the city. Jorge thinks that it is driven by a matter of getting used to different things.

Music is part of his life and when he teaches it is like sharing his life and experience with his students. He is a master musician yet without any formal music education.

He plays and sings Andean music since he thinks that the way to express music depends on where we are from, our way of expressing music and thus is genetic.

Mass media is one avenue where there has recently been a significant shift towards the use of Quechua through radio, TV, newspapers and social media. These are the most common forms of media used. Radio has many advantages as it combines words and music and

provides language in the form of expression, improving speaker confidence and fluency (Hoberger & Coronel- Molina, 2004).

The interpretation of the Peruvian National Anthem in Quechua by Sylvia Falcon released on YouTube as part of the Peruvian Independence day commemoration was well received with more than 350,000 views.

On the other hand, the teenager Renata Flores, born in Ayacucho Peru, sings in Quechua 'The way you make me feel' by Michael Jackson with more than 7,000 views. Her parents used to have a band and since she was very young, Renata used to listen to songs in Quechua and that's the way she learned.

There are also several rock bands that sing in Quechua. A popular one is UCHPA, which combines rock, blues and jazz. Their songs are sung in Quechua and young people follow the lyrics even though they sometimes don't know the meaning.

Various media are now playing homage to minority groups. Icons include musicians, singers, dancers, writers and poets. The expression of cool as a means of social liberation is what Ben Rampton (Rampton 95) refers to as the adoption of West Indian cultural and speech by white kids in Birmingham and more generally in relation to a hybridity of Indian, West Indian and white cultural styles operating on the basis of the cool.

In this way, Jorge Choquehuilca was invited to the 'The Center for World Music' in San Diego as a Master teacher of traditional Peruvian music:

The Center for World Music is a nonprofit organization whose primary purpose is to foster intercultural awareness and understanding of the world's performing arts traditions through a program of performance and teaching, including study-abroad workshops.

Jorge and his family made 1000 pan pipes and they were shipped to San Diego. He ended up teaching 1000 students and it also was the year the Center for World music got the award of 50,000 dollars. Jorge was one of the most popular artist-teachers.

Jorge explained that to teach children it is easier, as they are audibly alert, which is where you connect with music, though it's not forced, they learn through very simple melodies. Using only 3 notes they can quite quickly learn to play Andean songs, dedicated mainly to animals.

When teaching children, Jorge normally increases the number of tones to 5 after a period of time, and with that children can play the music of the 'Tahantinsuyo'. From there they can enrich the *sicuris* or scale, which involves 7 tones and in one month they are playing fluently. Jorge thinks that everything is good as long as the instrument is related to the person or child, then,

they familiarise themselves with it, playing and coordinating songs.



Figure 3: Centre for World Music students, San Diego.

Another method Jorge uses is listening because children are capable of grasping sounds just from listening. That's the way Jorge taught his children. From an early age they would listen to songs in Quechua as Jorge use to play in a group at home, sometimes in other places and his children were always with him. One day the other members of the band couldn't make it and Jorge brought his children. They were still very young, however in less than a week, they were playing Andean music and singing in Quechua without any formal music education or Quechua lessons, just from listening to their parents.

As Quechua people were very discriminated against at the time in schools for speaking Quechua, Jorge didn't actually teach his children the language, but Andean music and songs in Quechua brought the family together, becoming their language as they would play in festivities and ceremonies related to their culture and their heritage, all in Quechua.

Jorge explains:

To get the feel for the language you must speak it and use it. I have a method like in music. I don't say: I am going to teach you Quechua, instead we just start doing things together such as cooking, dancing and singing, but all in Quechua. That's the way we learn it, there's no other way. It is the best way to learn, you have to do it.

Jorge really tried to involve his family in the culture and they have really taken it on. Not only have they taken on the music, but also their heritage, because they haven't lost the connection with their native town, *Inkaparte*. Jorge and his family always visit *Inkaparte* during carnivals and festivals. The music we play is not always festive, they also play songs to honour for example the rain, water, flowers and women.

Jorge adds,

Music is very potent like Quechua, my language: you don't always need to look at my face and eyes to understand what I am saying. It is enough to emit

sound, energy and intention. So, it works well... you connect with people.

Jorge, I believe, has the ability to see the flipside or alternative sides of things; an ability that multicultural-perspective people or ethnic minorities are uniquely believe to possess. (Maher 2005, 91) Quechua language, its songs, instruments, music, lifestyle, and the culture in general are now finding their place as significant participants in the metroethnic process of cool, perhaps paralleling the Japanese 'Empire of Cool'.

Conclusion

Overall, what has been discussed here is that there are three different approaches to how music, song and dance can be used as a vehicle for language revitalization. Each case study demonstrates that new values can be attached to a language, in this case Quechua, in ways that did not exist twenty years ago. The people I spoke to showed how music and song appeal to all generations and provide access points to the language and culture that other means of transmission, such as classrooms or print media, may not offer. For this reason, I found in this study that traditional forms of music and song, *in conjunction with* shifts in global culture and new media technologies, were successful in promoting a positive and "cool" image of the language. Progress can thus be shown in displacing the colonial hierarchy of languages (with Spanish as hegemonic in this case) that had parochialised and disempowered indigenous languages such as Quechua for the past generations of speakers.

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