Folklore and the Politics of Region and Nation Building: Cuzco 1920-1950

Zoila S. Mendoza (UC Davis)

This paper is part of a much larger work[1] where I aim to disrupt some of the main assumptions made, on the one hand, about the important political, social and cultural movement known as *indigenismo*, and, on the other, about the relationship between this movement and a type of art that flourished during the same period. This art is most commonly known as "folkloric", or simply folklore. I want to challenge the idea that this important movement that materialized during the first part of the twentieth century and that still has important ideological and political implications today, was mostly an elite project. Instead, through exploring the fluid world of exchanges among artists and intellectuals from different rural and urban social sectors of Cuzco, I have found that this exchange led to the development of strong Cuzco regional identity and to important proposals of Peruvian and American identity identified as *indigenismo*. Moreover, I contend that these proposals, which put highland Andean identity at the core of regional, national and continental identity, were inspired and largely materialized by what has been called folkloric art.

In trying to contest the underrated role that performance and in general "art" has been given in social analysis, I have used a few concepts proposed by Raymond Williams (1977) to argue for the crucial role that the artistic-folkloric activity that took place in the first part of twentieth century in Cuzco had in forging *indigenismo*, Cuzco regionalism and *cuzqueño* (from Cuzco) proposals of national and continental identity. I look closely at the world of folkloric music, dance, dramas and public ceremonies during the first part of the twentieth century in Cuzco to understand the set of "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" (structure of feelings) shared by Cuzco people and to get close to what was "actually being lived" (practical consciousness) during the time that such important social processes were taking place (Williams 1977: 131-132). Putting at the center the important and inspiring artistic-folkloric activity of the first part of the twentieth century and understanding "thought as felt and feeling as thought" (leaving behind the dichotomy "feeling against thought"), I seek to understand the qualitative changes that took place in Cuzco society during that period of history.

I concentrate on the period 1920-1950 which corresponds to a particular development within *indigenismo* called *neo-indianismo* that put the highland mestizo or the *cholo* identity at the center of the construction of regional, national and continental identities. Contrary to what has been said about the folkloric art that flourished during that period, I insist that such creation was not the result of a simple manipulation and stylization by intellectual and artistic elites of cultural elements that belonged to the rural and popular urban classes.[2] This creation was instead the result of a complex interaction of members of high, middle and low rural and urban sectors in the Cuzco region.

---

[1] I refer to my book *Crear y Sentir Lo Nuestro: Folklore, Identidad Regional y Nacional en Cuzco, Siglo Veinte* (Lima, Peru: Fondo Editorial of the Pontificia Universidad Católica, 2006), later published in translation as *Creating Our Own: Folklore, Performance, and Identity in Cuzco, Peru* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

Cuzco—its culture and pre-Hispanic, and colonial monuments—has inspired proposals of national identity since the beginning of the Republic. It was more clearly during the first part of the twentieth century, however, when Cuzco artists and intellectuals had the most important opportunity to provide specific forms and contents to such Peruvian identity. The social and cultural interaction that took place among artists and intellectuals of different social sectors of Cuzco during that period led to the prolific artistic-folkloric production of the time, giving shape to strong regional identity and to appealing proposals for Peruvian identity. This interaction took place as Cuzco was emerging as a center of international archeological and tourist interest. The "discovery" of the Machu Picchu archeological site in 1911 by the North American Hiram Bingham, the declaration of Cuzco as the "Archeological Capital of South America" in 1933, and the celebration of the IV centennial of the Spanish foundation of Cuzco city in 1934, made Cuzco people who participated in artistic- folkloric production of the time very aware of their important role as representatives of regional and national traditions.

During the 1920-1950 period the most important canons that would influence Cuzco artistic production throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century crystallized. These canons took shape in the spaces promoted by members of private institutions who based in Cuzco city devoted themselves to creating such spaces for the production and practice of folkloric art. That is why my exploration centered on those institutions and spaces which because of the massive and enthusiastic support and participation of self-taught popular musicians, songwriters, playwrights, dancers and actors from rural and urban Cuzco, thrived and succeeded in becoming key centers of cultural and social life in the region. Looking closely at the history of these institutions and spaces such as contests, radio programs, on-stage presentations and public rituals one finds the eagerness of such popular performers and creators to participate and to take the leadership in the consolidation of the field that was called folklore. One can also see the dynamic exchange of aesthetic preferences and styles that took place in such realm. In these contexts artists and intellectuals developed a perception that the merging traditions and the new one crystallizing had all been shaped by both the pre-Hispanic Quechua and the Colonial Spanish heritage. This gave inspiration and the very material to those Cuzco intellectuals and artists who proposed with force that it was the highland mestizo identity, more specifically, the *cholo,* identity the one that should provide the base for the consolidation of regional and national identities

Neo-indianista artists and intellectuals like Humberto Vidal Unda and José Uriel Garcia, the latter the main leader and author of the book *El Nuevo Indio* (1930) which gave the name to this movement, proposed the highland "cholo" or mestizo identity as the one that needed to be assumed not only by the people of Cuzco but also by all Peruvians and other Americans as the future identity of the continent. As other authors have shown, the *neo-*

---

[2] See for example De la Cadena 2000 and 2001 for this kind of perspective. I must also say that in my earlier work I took for granted that there had been a sort of simple manipulation of this type (Mendoza 1998 and 2000, chap. 2). I have certainly changed my mind after a more thorough research.

indianistas were not alone or the first to propose the mestizo identity as the symbol of the nation and American identity (De la Cadena 2000, Wade 2000) but what I try to show in my work is that their proposals of mestizaje were strongly inspired and took shape thanks to the rich and complex cultural reality of the artistic-folkloric production in which they participated. The complexity of the performative practices that predominated among the rural and urban populations made them feel and think Cuzco and Peruvian identities as resulting from the merging of both pre-Hispanic and European traditions. In promoting the spaces for the exchange among artists from different urban and rural social sectors, the *neo-indianistas* contributed to consolidate canons and repertoires that Cuzco people (*cuzqueños*) from different social sectors have been able to identify and feel as their own.

In 1928 José Uriel García, wrote in one of the main Cuzco newspapers:

> "The internal fight of both souls -the autochthonous and the hispanic to displace each other- has already been resolved in the arts and in folklore;… art and folklore, form and language, are the fusion of the new Andean world." [3]

Jose Uriel García, key intellectual and political activist of the time, felt that the mixture of traditions in Cuzco and in general of Andean popular art and folklore was a strong base for building a proposal of national identity that would put the highlands at the core of such national identity. Garcia's political activism and intellectual production is for the most widely recognized regionally and nationally.[4] However, what has not been acknowledged much is his commitment to create spaces for the production and performance of folkloric art and his active participation in them.

As part of his belief in the necessary connection between artistic and political processes he led the foundation in 1937 of the Cuzco branch of the American Art Institute (*Instituto Americano de Arte de Cuzco, IAA*), a key institution that created and promoted many of the above-mentioned spaces. Even though this institution was initially founded as a result of an international accord with other Latin American countries, it flourished and succeeded in Cuzco because of the important social and cultural role that it fulfilled for many sectors of that society.[5]

This institution was actually the second one to be founded in Cuzco city to promote spaces for the practice of the art called folkloric by diverse sectors of Cuzco society. However, the first one, The "Qosqo Center of Native Art" (*Centro Qosqo de Arte Nativo*) founded in 1924 had declined and was dormant at the time. The *Centro Qosqo*, had been mostly constituted by artists and intellectuals that belonged to middle and upper social sectors of urban Cuzco. This membership, as we will see below, would change after

---

[3] "Neoindianismo", José Uriel García, *El Sol*, Cuzco, 28 de Julio, 1928, p. 3

[4] José Uriel García was a key leader during the 1909 Cuzco University strike that led to its deep reform, in 1933 he was jailed in Taquile island in Puno for his oppositional political ideas, and in 1939 and 1950 he represented Cuzco as a senator in Lima.

[5] Having participated in the II International Congress of American History in Buenos Aires in 1937 where this accord was made, José Uriel García led the foundation of the Cuzco branch of this institution later the same year.

1951 when the *Centro Qosqo* was led to its definite revival by another institution formed by self-taught popular artists.

The conviction on the part of the leaders of the American Art Institute that the political and the artistic went necessarily hand in hand, in other words that those realms fed intensely into each other, is also exemplified by a speech given by its president in 1941, Alberto Delgado, during an important public event in Cuzco city. In that speech he also revealed the creative spirit of the time. In a very poetic way he expressed the pressing need that *cuzqueños* felt to create, to be part of the historical moment by creating something new that could channel such a powerful energy felt everywhere.[6] He stated that it was in the domain of what he called the "aesthetic emotion" ("*emoción estética*") where *cuzqueños* and Peruvians could find the "paradigm" for a "sense of nationalism and democracy."[7]

The members of the Cuzco branch of the American Art Institute emphasized from the beginning their important role as promoters of popular art and folklore. Again, this was not a unique or novel example within Latin America since in other parts of this region the promotion of the live culture of populations considered indigenous or simply popular majority had become part and parcel of the construction of national identities (Rowe and Schelling 1991, López 2004 and Forthcoming, Mendoza in Press). However, what we need to analyze in Cuzco, and elsewhere, is why this kind of promotion was successful and/or resonated among all sectors of society. We also need to know how the artistic creation and performance was interwoven with the political proposals that were emerging and materializing during those moments.

In the case of the Cuzco branch of the American Art Institute it was clear that this institution prospered thanks to its connection with the force and creative inspiration that was being lived in Cuzco during that period. This connection shaped their activities making this institution, according to one of its president's, different from other branches in the Americas. Reflecting back into the last 10 years of existence of this institution, Roberto Latorre, its president in 1947 and a well-respected journalist and political activist of Marxist orientation, wrote in a letter to a "comrade" in La Paz, Bolivia stating that:

> The Argentinean and Mexican institutes were converted into councils of academic debate, in my opinion untranscendental. They never became known by the popular masses, they did not do anything in favor of the popular artist who is so disdained in our world. The Cuzco Institute, was not concerned about debating. Nobody was interested in reaching wisdom or demonstrating his or her capabilities and knowledge. We devoted ourselves to stimulating the popular artists and the others, to helping them accomplish things, promising them small remunerations in the form of awards.

---

[6] Delgado, Alberto, " Nuestro Arte Nativo, Es La Expresión Original En Que Se Trasunta La Visión de América Vista Por los Ojos Americanos" Discurso Pronunciado por el Dr. Alberto Delgado" *El Comercio*, Cuzco, 31 de Octubre de 1941, pp.1 and 6.

[7] Ibid.

Clearly in the first decade of its existence, the Institute put emphasis in promoting what was labeled by them "popular" music, dance, theater and handicrafts.[8] By using the term "popular" to define the material and the artists that took part in the events that they organized, the leaders of the Institute tried to be inclusive of artists from all different social sectors of Cuzco society. Even though for these promoters the term "popular" was still associated to the idea of belonging to the lower socioeconomic classes or to the large populations in the region that were not formally educated, its definition was wide and included artists of different social classes. They defined a "popular artist" as one that was not considered a professional in its given skill and "popular regional art" as one that was inspired and realized with regional themes and materials.

Under this wide definition of the "popular" we then find that very few Cuzco artists, only those widely recognized regionally and nationally, were excluded from participating in these events. Some of the artists, songwriters and playwrights who participated in them belonged to high and mostly middle sectors of Cuzco urban society and had received formal education. However, they were still amateur at the practice of this emerging type of folkloric art in the sense that they were just starting to be known or in the sense that they had not have any formal training in the music or instruments they practiced.

The majority of the participants in those events were groups and individual artists who came from lower and not formally educated sectors of rural and urban Cuzco. We can also often find in these contests, as in other spaces of folkloric production and practice during this period, groups that combined both types of artists and also different types of instrumentation and aesthetic preferences. It was not uncommon to find in these events, for example, one ensemble that combined the piano, the *quena* (Andean end-notched vertical flute) and the harp and that played traditionally indigenous genres such as *qhaswas* and *waynos* and more mestizo genres such as the *yaraví* and the *marinera*.[9] In those kinds of ensembles one could see performing together upper class intellectuals who were also amateur musicians, acknowledged self-taught musicians originally from rural Cuzco but who resided in the city, and rural dancers or musicians who had just come to the city to become part of the ensemble.

Using the term "popular" was not the only way in which the organizers of these events were trying to include a wide variety of participants. They also made it explicit in their calls that "indigenous" and "mestizo" folklore and artists were encouraged to participate in them. Even though those categories were supposed to be used for classifying the contestants and for evaluating them, this became an almost impossible task for the judges when they had to give out the prizes under a particular category. This would be for example the case of the ensemble mentioned above which combined piano, *quena* and harp, had as its director and acknowledged self-taught musician of rural origin but who lived in Cuzco city and had as dancers a couple of children from the countryside dressed in traditional indigenous attire.[10]

---

[8] In that first decade they also sponsored painting, sculpting and literature contests.

[9] See "Tercera fecha del Concurso de Música y Danzas Populares" *El Comercio*, Cuzco, 18 de Febrero de 1938, p.4. The *marinera* originated on the Peruvian coast out of Spanish and afro-Peruvian musical influences. The *yaraví* most commonly characterized as an evocative, nostalgic and sad genre and which was already recognized as a genre in eighteenth century colonial Andes, combined the pre-Hispanic *harawi* (of similar characteristics) and Spanish musical, mostly religious, influences.

It was in one of the contests organized by the Cuzco branch of the American Art Institute in 1945 that the *wayno* “Valicha” was first presented by its composer Miguel Ángel Hurtado from the rural district of Acopía, province of Acomayo. This *wayno* is considered by many *cuzqueños* as the alternative to the official Cuzco anthem or the number two Cuzco anthem. It was also in the context of these events that what became known as the “Typical Cuzco ensemble” crystallized. This ensemble most commonly incorporates: the *quena*, the violin, local variations of the mandolin and/or the *charango* (small Andean guitar), the Andean variations of the harp and sometimes the harmonium or “*pampapiano*”. Finally it was also in this context that Andrés Alencastre, the well known Quechua poet and songwriter, became recognized as a playwright and main representative of a new genre of popular theater called “*Comedia Costumbrista*” (Regional Customs Theater or Comedy).

While the initiative of organizing the contests that I have been referring to reveal the interest of Cuzco city middle and upper class artists and intellectuals to promote folklore, there are ways in which one can see that rural and urban artists coming form lower socioeconomic and less formally educated sectors, were also very much interested in becoming central actors in this new kind of creation. For all of them, creating and performing what was considered folklore was a way of actively becoming part of the emergence and consolidation of a regionalist and a nationalist feeling. One obvious way to find this interest is by looking at the quick and massive response of these artists to participate in the events organized by the city-based institutions. We see, for example, that time and again the contests had to add the number of preliminary rounds in response to the increasing participation of individual and group contestants. The prizes offered were in fact modest but the recognition of their local styles or of their individual or group creations as sources of regional and national identity was what had the most value.

Another way to see the active participation of self-taught popular artists in the development of regional and national identity is by looking at how they capitalized on the resources offered by the private institutions of Cuzco city. Take for example what Ricardo Florez Tupayachi, a self-taught musician who played the *quena*, said to the members of the American Art Institute in a letter requesting support for a music ensemble that he had formed. Directing it to the President he said:

> You and the gentlemen that are members of the American Art Institute understand the relevance of a task that despite being modest has a **deep nationalistic orientation**; no other institution is called to propitiate and even encourage the cultural manifestations of our artistic world, and for

---

[10] Ibid.

> these reasons I ask again for the effective help of the notable institution that you so accurately direct.[11]

As Florencia Mallon has suggested in studying closely the case of Mexico and Peru, if we want to understand the different ways in which local groups have participated in the consolidation of nationalistic proposals we need to start by accepting that there is no "single 'real' version" of nationalism (Mallon 1995, 4). According to her we need to begin seeing "nationalism as a broad vision for organizing society, a project for collective identity based on the premise of citizenship – available to all, with individual membership beginning from the assumption of legal equality" (Idem).

Like Florez Tupayachi many other popular rural and urban artists wanted to participate actively in what was being defined as "typical" or "traditional" of Cuzco and in what was supposed to give the base for a national identity based on highland culture. Like him, they formed ensembles that not only participated in the contests or events organized by urban institutions but that continued to function throughout the year providing their own version of *cuzqueño* and Peruvian identity to tourists and to the rest of the nation. In order to survive and succeed, however, like Florez Tupayachi had done, they actively sought the support of the American Art Institute. Such was the case of the "*Asociación Folklórica Kosko*" (Kosko Folkloric Association) founded in 1945.

Among the members of this institution were tailors, firework makers, hat makers, shepherds, manual workers, and chapel organists who were also self-taught musicians, actors and dancers. From its beginnings the founders of this institution sought the support of the American Art Institute officially bringing into their membership some of their renowned members that were also artists or active promoters of folklore. They also brought into their membership artists from the *Centro Qosqo*, which, as mentioned above, was dormant at the time. This ensemble practiced and had their shows in the facilities of the American Art Institute until 1949 when they rented their own space. As the "*Asociación Folklórica*" started gaining regional and some national recognition the middle and upper class artists that had been part of the *Centro Qosqo* became increasingly active in this association.

In 1951, after the devastating earthquake that deeply affected Cuzco and that marked important social, political and economic processes in the region (see Mendoza 2000, ch. 2) , the leaders of the *Asociación Folklórica*, trying to capitalize on the past local prestige, national recognition and artistic resources of the old *Centro Qosqo*, proposed to their leaders that they fuse both institutions under the old name of *Centro Qosqo de Arte Nativo*. After some resistance from some of the more conservative members of the old *Centro Qosqo* this fusion took place and since then this institution became the most important of the region in the promotion of folklore. From that moment on it was very clear that the membership had changed to include members from a variety of rural and urban Cuzco sectors.

---

[11] Taken from the letter to "Señor Presidente del 'Instituto Americano de Arte' el 7 de Octubre de 1940, signed by Ricardo Florez T. President of the Centro Artístico Ollanta" (my emphasis) Institutional Archive of the Cuzco branch of the American Art Institute.

As stated above, this pursuit to define a strong regional identity that would serve as a base for a national identity with its center in the highlands, more specifically in Cuzco, must be understood in the context of the emergence of Cuzco as a site of international archeological and tourist interest. Also, as I explain in more detail elsewhere, it should be analyzed in the context of Peruvian and other Latin American nation state efforts to define national identities (Mendoza 2000, Chapter 2; Mendoza in Press). Nevertheless, in order to comprehend the force and the importance that the regionalist and the nationalist feelings that developed in Cuzco during the first part of the twentieth century have had throughout time, we should not loose sight of the motivations and desires of the different groups that participated in the crystallization of the collective projects that became part of what has been called *indigenismo*.

Final Thoughts

I would like to conclude this paper by stating at least three reasons why I believe we need to revisit and understand the complexity of the creative political-intellectual-sentimental-artistic process that took place in Cuzco during the first part of the twentieth century. In the first place, because we can learn an important lesson about the potential that the creation and promotion of spaces that allow an exchange among artists, intellectuals and politicians from different sectors of the society can still have in Peru and elsewhere. This would be fruitful, as it was for *cuzqueños* in the first part of the twentieth century, to materialize social and political proposals that include the voice and the feelings of more social sectors than those normally included in these proposals.

Secondly, to rescue from the sometimes too harsh and partial criticism, the great importance and impact at the regional and national level that the Cuzco artists and intellectuals had in their attempts to put at the center of the nation the feelings and the desires of a highland majority whose culture had been marginalized and silenced through different mechanisms. With all the contradictions and paradoxes that we could find in the discourse and actions of some *neo-indianistas*, we can not fail to recognize that they fought to put highland society and culture at the center of the political debate in a moment when the State was mostly identified with the criollo, coastal world. As part of the positive results of the efforts by the *neo-indianistas* we have that the productive field of creative action called "folklore" was validated and strengthened. In this contentious field of folklore, *cuzqueños* and other Peruvians have found an effective way to shape their individual and group sociocultural identities and realities.

And thirdly, in a more general or theoretical vein, I would like to point out that by understanding the complexity of the interaction among Cuzco artists and intellectuals which materialized what has been called *indigenismo* and *neo-indianismo* we would realize that, as Raymond Williams has suggested, the qualitative changes that took place in the first part of the twentieth century cannot be seen as "epiphenomenal" of institutional changes or as "secondary evidence" of changes in the social and economic relations among the social classes or within a social class (1977:131). In order to understand the complexity of what was happening in Cuzco at the level of proposals of regional, national and continental identities we need to penetrate the experience of the social actors, what they were thinking and feeling when they came together with the purpose of creating and feeling and making other people feel what they could all call their own.

References Cited

De la Cadena, Marisol. 2000. *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991*. Durham: Duke University Press.

——. 2001. "Mestizos-indígenas, Imágenes de autenticidad y des-indianización en la ciudad del Cuzco". In *Identidades Representadas, Performance, Experiencia y Memoria en los Andes,* edited by Gisela Cánepa-Koch, pp.179-212. Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica.

García, Jose Uriel. *El Nuevo Indio*. Cusco: Editorial Rosas.

Itier, César. 1995. *El teatro quechua en el Cuzco. Tomo I. Dramas y comedias de Nemesio Zúñiga Cazorla*. Lima: Centro Bartolomé de Las Casas-Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos.

——. 2000. *El Teatro Quechua en el Cuzco. Tomo II. Indigenismo, Lengua y Literatura en el Perú Moderno*. Lima: Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos-Centro Bartolomé de las Casas.

López, Rick. 2004. "Intellectuals, the Popular Classes, and the State: Integrating the Mexican Cultural Nation, 1916-1940". Paper presented in the panel "Comparing Indigenismo" in the XXV LASA Congress, October 7-9, Las Vegas.

——. Forthcoming. "Two Ways of Exalting Indianness in 1921: The Noche Mexicana and the Exposition of Popular Art". In *Forjando Patria: State, Society and the Formation of National Identity in Mexico, 1920-1940*. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis editors. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mallon, Florencia. 1995. *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mendoza, Zoila. 1996. "Defining Folklore: Mestizo and Indigenous Identities on the Move." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 17(2): 165-183.

——. 2000. *Shaping Society Through Dance:Mestizo Ritual Performance in the Peruvian Andes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

——. 2006. *Crear y Sentir Lo Nuestro: Folklore, Identidad Regional y Nacional en el Cuzco, Siglo Veinte*. Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

Rowe, William y Vivian Schelling. 1991. *Memory and Modernity:Popular Culture in Latin America*. New York: Verso.

Wade, Peter. 2000. *Music, Race and Nation, Musica Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.