

What were the main causes of the Túpaq Amaru rebellion in Peru?

(Danny Concha)

In early November 1780, the capture and execution of a district governor in a region south of Cusco sparked what would become the largest uprising in colonial Spanish-American history; the Tupac Amaru rebellion. The main causes behind this so-called Great Rebellion range from wider socioeconomic considerations to a set of personal circumstances and from native messianic ideology to class-specific contributions. This combination of factors enabled José Gabriel Condorcanqui Noguera to momentarily unite the varying interests and aspirations within the communities of the Canas y Canchis and Quispicanchis, thus enabling a fragile yet formidable coalition between indigenous, creole and ecclesiastical sectors. It is from this momentary collaboration that the Tupac Amaru rebellion could emerge.

Contextually, the dramatic socioeconomic and administrative changes brought about by the Bourbon reforms proved a decisive cause of the rebellion. This is due to the fact that the reforms, imposed on Andean life by Carlos III in a bid to tighten control and extract greater revenues from the Spanish colonies, created both widespread and collective resentment towards colonial rule. Whilst O'Phelan Godoy's figures of violent protest in Peru (escalating dramatically from twenty in the 1760s to seventy in the 1770s)¹ suggest growing levels of social unrest caused by Bourbon reforms, it is the multi-sectoral nature of this impact that really counted in creating the necessary cohesion for the rebellion to succeed.

This can be illustrated on both economic and socio-political spheres. Indeed, Stavig explores the multi-sectoral nature of economic grievances by citing the effects of the increase in *alcabala* (royal tax) and the legalisation of the *reparto de mercancías* (forced sale of goods) in the insurgency regions². Whilst it was the indigenous population who bore the brunt of these burdens (triple increase in *alcabala* in 1776 and taxation of the previously exempt coca leaf in 1777), creole governors (*caciques*) also suffered, as they faced increasing pressures to meet the growing demands placed on their *indio* communities, whilst being subject to fiscal demands themselves. With regards to the Church, Cahill notes that 'the more tribute that was extracted from the peasantry, the less there was for the *curas*'³.

Bureaucratic and administrative grievances were equally wide reaching. Walker's claim that Bourbon reform brought about the 'erosion of creoles' power, the decrease in Indians' autonomy, and the weakened position of the Church'⁴ can be illustrated by the disputes over chieftainship legitimacy. Whilst *caciques* faced the constant threat of being replaced by *intrusos* (Bourbon-favoured, Peninsular-born Spanish bureaucrats), their indigenous communities risked losing autonomy and protection, as these *intruso* governors had limited interest in the values, interests or wellbeing of the community. Similarly, local Churches faced increasing assaults on their autonomy, as Bourbon royalists regarded their independence and wealth with suspicion, thus

¹Scarlett O'Phelan Godoy. *Rebellions and Revolts in Eighteenth Century Peru and Upper Peru*. Cologne: Böhlau (1985) pp.224

²Ward Stavig. *The World of Túpac Amaru: Conflict, Community and Identity in Colonial Peru*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1999), pp.211

³David Cahill. "Curas and Social Conflict in the Doctrinas of Cuzco, 1780-1814", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1984), pp.249

⁴ Charles Walker. *The Tupac Amaru Rebellion*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, (2014) pp.26

seeking to reduce their influence accordingly by placing them ever more firmly under the control of the Crown⁵.

Whilst the multi-sectoral nature of these grievances played a vital role in priming the region for rebellion, the movement required an exceptional leader to unite the various interests at stake. For this reason, Walker argues that José Gabriel was only able to carry out the rebellion due to his ability to 'move along, gain acceptance from and recruit different social groups'⁶, as his inherited intermediary position as *cacique* granted him the privilege of moving freely (and necessarily) between the different social groups. Whilst his fluency in Quechua and proclaimed Inca lineage earned him the respect of his indigenous community, his *mestizo* ethnicity, level of education and business interactions with creole traders enabled him to form close *criollo* and *mestizo* networks. In addition, his Jesuit upbringing and reputation as a devout Catholic aligned him with influential figures in the Church, including the priest of Antonio López de Sosa.

This social mobility enabled him to participate in and appeal to the distinct aspirations within his local community. Whilst O'Phelan asserts that the rebellion was founded firmly on 'una especie de acuerdo tácito entre las comunidades, sus caciques y el clero'⁷, it was José Gabriel who formulated this 'acuerdo' through his carefully constructed abolitionist policies and deliberate targeting and execution of a common enemy in the *corregidor* Antonio de Arriaga. His initial delay in committing to the abolition of the *mita* (forced labour system) reflects his ability to balance the various interests of the sectors. Abolish the *mita* too soon, and he risked alienating creoles whose businesses who relied on the policy⁸. Thus, José Gabriel's privileged social circumstances enabled him to strategically retain allies from each sector in the initial stages, with each providing an all-important contribution.

The contribution of the indigenous population was the most significant, due to their availability, receptiveness and inherent belief systems. In terms of availability, the indigenous demographic of Canas y Canchis and Quispicanchis stood at 90 and 83 percent respectively⁹ and supplied 85 percent of the rebel force¹⁰. Yet more crucially, this indigenous mass was relatively autonomous and largely answered to their *cacique* rather than Peninsular Spanish rule. Walker explains that this was due to the lack of state presence in rural regions south of Cusco, which relied heavily on local authorities to maintain order¹¹. As a local authority himself, José Gabriel was thus left to mobilise a mass-movement of loyal subjects with relatively little State intervention.

Yet, what ultimately counted was how receptive the indigenous masses were to José Gabriel's call. Serulnikov explains their 'astonishing alacrity' with reference to a rising sense of neo-Inca nationalism. He argues that it was a 'deeply rooted awareness of cultural pride and social prestige...that lay behind the political radicalisation of large sectors of native society'¹². This claim is validated by the wave of renewed interest in Inca heritage and culture during the later stages of the eighteenth century, with increasing visibility in literature (re-emergence of Garcilaso de la Vega's *Commentarios Reales*), art (increasing Inca portraiture) and identity, as reflected in the frequency of genealogical disputes surrounding Inca heritage (including José Gabriel himself). Whilst this raised profile of neo-Inca culture no doubt empowered the indigenous population by awakening a greater sense of social worth and expectations, it is the more deep-rooted aspects of Inca spirituality and prophecy that determined the fervent support that the rebellion received.

⁵ *ibid*, pp.84

⁶ *ibid*, pp.20

⁷ O'Phelan Godoy, *La gran rebelión en los Andes: De Tupac Amaru a Túpac Catari*. Cusco: Centro Bartolomé de las Casas (1995) pp.193

⁸ *ibid*, pp. 194

⁹ Flores Galindo, Alberto. *Buscando Un Inca*, Lima: Editorial Horizonte (1988) pp. 134

¹⁰ Stavig, pp.226

¹¹ Walker, pp.16

¹² *ibid*, pp.41

This deeper, messianic element to the Tupac Amaru's rebellion was the most fundamental cause of mass indigenous insurgency, according to Flores Galindo. He argues that by building on neo-Inca religious symbolism and prophecies regarding the return of an Inca king, José Gabriel was able to project a distinctly Andean utopian ideal, and consequently draw support from the fervent *indio* masses. Citing revivalist predictions in 1777 followed by apocalyptic regional weather in 1779-80, Flores Galindo asserts that by the time José Gabriel emerged onto the revolutionary scene, under the title Tupac Amaru (evoking the last Inca king, executed in 1572), 'los campesinos entendieron que eran convocados para un pachacuti; demasiados signos lo venían anunciando'¹³. This cataclysmic notion of *pachacuti* (an Andean millenarian idea of radical upheaval¹⁴) imbued the rebellion with heightened spiritual meaning as a charismatic leader became a 'prophet of a new era'¹⁵, and his actions (such as Arriaga's execution or the burning of colonial *obrajes*) became radical symbols of transformation and change in the eyes of indigenous believers. This proved crucial in terms of recruitment as many indigenous believed José Gabriel could resurrect them in battle and more importantly felt a spiritual obligation to join the cause.

However, whilst this spiritually empowered mass of *indios* regions provided the bulk of the insurgency, it was the participation of *criollo* and *mestizos* that contributed most in terms of leadership and expertise. Indeed, Campbell calculates that of the forty-two members in positions of authority during the initial insurgency, sixteen were *criollo* and seventeen *mestizos*¹⁶. This dependency on creoles included creole estate owners (*hacendados*), who offered great influence over their respective labour force and proved instrumental in spreading rebellion propaganda to the masses on behalf of José Gabriel. Likewise, literate creoles such as Felipe Bermúdez were able to offer their services as scribes and messengers, writing important letters both to and for their leader¹⁷. This opened up channels of communication and information which would have been impossible in an exclusively-indigenous and illiterate leadership; an advantage that was hugely important given José Gabriel's extensive correspondence with his inner circle and especially wife Micaela Bastidas.

Additionally, certain creole sympathisers were able to provide military expertise to an otherwise untrained rebel force. Campbell cites the case of Jose Antonio Figueroa to exemplify this, as he aided in the maintenance of arms and weaponry¹⁸, thus offering the necessary technological expertise to enable more sophisticated rebel combat where it was most needed. So crucial was this creole input that Cahill suggests an interpretation of the initial rebellion as a 'joint venture' between *indios* and *criollos*, or an 'Inca-Creole Junta'¹⁹, which whilst slightly hyperbolic sheds light on why José Gabriel was so keen to maintain a *indio-criollo* alliance and why royalist forces were so eager to break it up, through fear mongering and propaganda about a barbaric indigenous class war. The fact that both parties viewed creole participation as a vital cog in the Tupac Amaru machine suggests how vital this sector was.

Finally, the role of the ecclesiastical sector must be considered. Whilst less active or subversive than the indigenous masses and creole leaders, the Church contributed most in terms of ambivalence and inaction; as suggested by Walker in his claim that 'many priests were neither committed rebels nor effective counterinsurgents'²⁰. Crucially, the Church wielded the 'single most efficient weapon'²¹ against the rebellion in their ability to excommunicate José Gabriel and to condemn the rebellion from the pulpit. Yet Bishop Moscoso's week-long delay in exercising this ability proved costly to counterinsurgency forces, as the blow struck only after the rebellion had

¹³ Flores Galindo, pp.151

¹⁴ Walker, pp.57

¹⁵ Serulnikov, Sergio. *Revolution in the Andes: The Age of Túpac Amaru*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2013) pp. 8-9

¹⁶ Campbell, Leon G. "Social Structure of the Túpac Amaru Army in Cuzco, 1780-81", *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (1981) pp. 685

¹⁷ Walker, pp.63

¹⁸ Campbell, pp.689-90

¹⁹ Walker, pp.63

²⁰ *ibid*, pp.85

²¹ Walker, pp.69

mobilised and gained significant ground and support. Thus, the rebellion enjoyed a sense of Catholic legitimacy for just long enough to enable the mass to mobilise and begin the rebellion. In addition, ecclesiastical figures such as Antonio López de Sosa is noted to have supported the rebellion not only in aiding preparations for Arriaga's execution but also in refusing to spy on rebels.

All in all, the Tupac Amaru rebellion was caused by a combination of grievances, aspirations and a brief coming-together of indigenous, creole and ecclesiastical contributions. Whilst the indigenous element would come to define the rebellion, it relied on input beyond the *indio* sector in its initial emergence. Indeed, Stavig claims that 'for a brief moment in the late eighteenth century...diverse peoples came closer to functioning as one than they may ever have done before and certainly than they have done since'²². Whilst the extent of participation and the reasons behind it differed greatly, it was the combined efforts of various sectors of society that originally propelled the rebellion forwards, enabling it the momentum to achieve the scale of revolution that it did.

²² Stavig, pp.256

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