

Constraints of Empire: Indigenous Women and Agency in 16th Century Potosí

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Introduction

Over thirteen-thousand feet above sea-level sits Potosí, an Andean wonder that was once the richest city on earth. Today, in the twenty-first century, even just a quick visit to Potosí will spark immense curiosity. Watching over the cobblestone streets lies a mountain with a rusty hue. This mountain, with its rich silver veins, was the sole money-maker for the Spanish Empire for centuries. Its somber shadow of a dried-up mine looms over the city. The streets ooze culture, nursing traditions that have endured centuries of hegemonic oppression. Lining the streets are indigenous¹ women young

and old, selling produce, herbs, coca leaves, and clothing. Every day, these women sit in the shadows of an empty shell of a mountain that holds a rich history of cruelty and despair but also perseverance and innovation.

This scene is eerily similar to that of the mid-1500s when the Spanish first identified Potosí as profitable. Walking through the streets of Potosí in the 1550s was a wonder for any visitor. The streets buzzed with activity, vibrating with languages and cultures — painting a surreal scene to the European eye. Lands unknown to the east less than a century ago now hosted a bustling city that quite literally funded the empire.² No longer could exist the notion of a barren continent to the west. Curiosity sparked from the rumors of Potosí's early extravagance. By 1600, the

¹ I will refer to the people native to the Andes as either “indigenous” or “Andean,” the documents from the sixteenth century analyzed in this paper used the term “Indias” or “Indios”

² Eighty percent of Spain's wealth at the time came from silver, see Dennis O. Flynn and Giráldez, “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’: The Origin of World Trade in 1571,” *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (1995): 202-22.

& goods

trade

number of inhabitants reached 100,000 people.³ This city, from its start, was built by indigenous women using the few resources they had to create something bigger, an emerging unique economy. The city was said to “enrich all of Europe, Asia, and Africa,” a bold claim that was repeated in many firsthand accounts.⁴ The sixteenth century brought tremendous wealth to the Spanish Empire, all from the discovery of silver mines in Latin America. All those who encountered Potosí in its peak wrote about it with pure astonishment. Government officials, Spanish chroniclers, travelers, and friars alike conveyed their bewilderment of the vibrant indigenous markets and the availability of goods. To an outsider, extensive markets were a true wonder in an environment such as Potosí.

Indigenous women often dominated these markets, displaying goods imported from various distances. Potosí’s isolation and altitude left indigenous women with little to work with in terms of natural resources to provide sustenance and ways to earn money to survive. Working for currency was unknown to those who lived before the conquest. However, this idea was quickly implemented in Spanish colonies.

It appears as if indigenous women adapted quickly to a mercantilist economy and Spanish society, but under the surface is a more complex reality.⁵ These women faced colonial constraints daily. The start of a colonial mercantile economy “certainly imposed severe pressures on Andean peoples.”⁶ Stereotypes, market regulations

³ Kris Lane, *Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2019), 1.

⁴ Fray Martín De Murúa, “‘Of the Rich and Famous Mountain of Potosí and of Its Grandezas’ and ‘Of the Imperial Villa of Santiago de Potosí,’” in *Historia General Del Perú*, 1613.

⁵ Mercantilism, in Spanish terms, relied almost entirely on finite resources such as silver and gold.

Spain practiced a closed form of mercantilism and restricted trade with the colonies. Their firm dependence on mercantile policies ultimately led to the downfall of the empire, among other reasons.

⁶ Steve Stern, “The Variety and Ambiguity of Native Andean Intervention in European Colonial Markets,” in *Ethnicity, Markets, and Migration in the Andes: At the Crossroads of History and Anthropology*, ed.

designed to discourage ambitious market ventures, and tribute requirements all created large obstacles to indigenous success. Yet, the responsibility of maintaining the city fell into their laps as some women sold goods to survive while later, women came to Potosí to get rich. For either reason, they created extensive and flourishing marketplaces selling a multitude of both basic and luxury goods. The vendors sold chicha,⁷ cloth, coca leaves, fresh fish, fresh meats, assorted fruits and vegetables, and even bartered silver ores. Potosí is more than 240 miles to the sea and sits high in the Andes — far removed from any large city. If the women themselves trekked to the ocean to obtain fish, it would certainly spoil by the time they reached Potosí. To accomplish such a feat, indigenous women constructed hybrid strategies – a combination of Spanish economic practices and Andean trade

methods — to thrive against Spanish constraints.

Potosí was the richest city in the world at one point and hosted much controversy and wonder. In current scholarship, Potosí seems to be a contested and chaotic place, one which simultaneously saw great agency and ingenuity on behalf of the indigenous population. This intriguingly contradictory city begs for more scholarship and studying the liminal transition from Inca rule to early colonialism offers a unique timeframe in which scholars can analyze how Potosí became the city so feverishly described in firsthand accounts.

Using detailed descriptions of the markets, it is evident that women, almost entirely in control of the markets, carried Potosí's *riqueza* on their backs and therefore facilitated the process of enriching the city and the empire. To do so, they maintained

Brooke Larson, Olivia Harris, and Enrique Tandeter (Duke University Press, 1995), 89.

⁷ Chicha is beer made with fermented corn flour, popular in the pre-Columbian Andes, extremely important during colonial era.

relationships with their ethnic groups and utilized multifaceted techniques to resist giving in to colonial forces when faced with circumstances out of their control.⁸ Andean control of trade routes allowed women to import goods and gain immense profit. Drawing on Inca systems of providing goods for masses of people, the women established various methods of obtaining goods and sold them in a Spanish-based economy. These hybrid marketplaces mixed with Andean and Spanish economic practices carried Potosí in its “flourishing” years.

Section Outline

In an ethnohistory based paper, historical context is vital to understand the background of the analyzed groups. Therefore, the first section, “This Land is My Land,” provides a brief summary of the

events leading up to the timeframe of this paper. It begins with the first prolonged contact between the old world and the new world and ends with the first thirty years after the discovery of Potosí. The second section, “Markets in the Eyes of the Outsider,” paints a vivid picture of the open-air markets using first-hand accounts written by Spanish visitors to Potosí in the first fifty years of its existence. Chroniclers such as Pedro Cieza de León, Friar Martín de Murúa, Alonso Ramos Gavilán, Friar Diego de Ocaña, and Luis Capoche appear throughout this section to narrate sixteenth century Potosí from a Spanish perspective. These chroniclers also appear in the next section, “Cultural Stereotypes: Evil, Vice, and Sins,” which addresses the cultural stereotypes placed on indigenous women by the Spanish. It follows examples of stereotypical beliefs of indigenous peoples

⁸ Brook Larson, “Andean Communities, Political Cultures, and Markets: The Changing Contours of a Field,” in *Ethnicity, Markets, and Migration in the*

Andes: At the Crossroads of History and Anthropology, ed. Brooke Larson, Olivia Harris, and Enrique Tandeter (Duke University Press, 1995), 21.

in the 16th century, specifically of indigenous women, and the subsequent impact of their prejudice on marketplace activity. Much contemporary scholarship on Potosí tends to glorify the agency of indigenous women in Potosí. While it is certainly impressive what the women did in a rather chaotic transition from Incan society to Spanish colonialism, this paper aims to also emphasize the constraints they faced every day and to demystify the common dream-like descriptions of women in Potosí. The next section, “Markets Under Threat: Regulations and Control” draws upon chronicle narration but also secondary scholarship. This section is a case study of a specific regulation and indigenous market response. Finally, the last body section, “Tribute Required – Land Issues” is a brief look into the expansive tribute system and the part it played in indigenous colonial life. The middle three sections serve as analysis of the constraints behind indigenous agency

in modern scholarship. Potosí is a contested city, both in primary and secondary sources. Even in the present day, we see indigenous cultural preservation in modern day Peru and Bolivia. Therefore, to understand the present and its enduring traditions that have roots in pre-Inca times, we must first peer into the clash between indigenous and European cultures and how it allowed unique agency and societal negotiation.

This Land is My Land

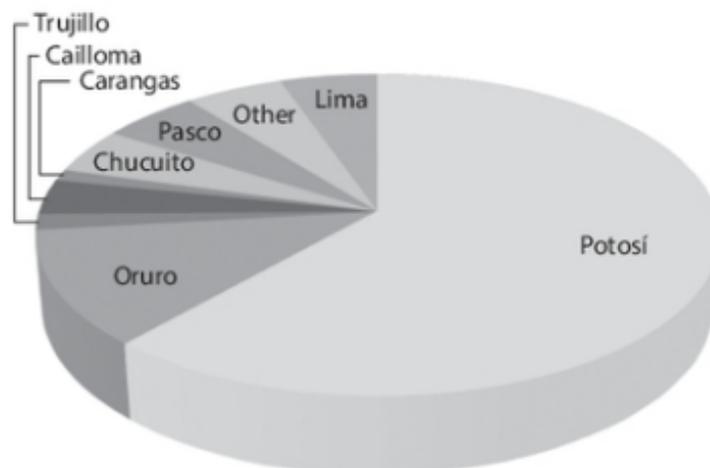
After Christopher Columbus’ 1492 voyage to the Americas, a wave of explorers, sponsored by Spain, rushed across the Atlantic in search of great wealth and status. Less than fifty years after Columbus, Francisco Pizarro, cousin of the infamous Hernán Cortés, explored the Pacific shores of South America. Once he learned of the Inca Empire and in 1531, he and his men dared to conquer this vast power. Despite having the advantage of thousands of men

compared to Pizarro's few hundred, the Incas were crushed due to Spanish technology, old world diseases, and a weakened empire from an ongoing civil war. By 1537, Pizarro gained control of Cuzco, the Inca capital and in turn, control of Peru. The years of the conquest marked the first contact between Spain and Inca forces and the beginning of transculturation along with cultural friction.

As Spain began to organize their acquired territory, an Inca prospector in 1545 stumbled upon silver at a distant mountain called Potosí. It did not take long for the Spanish to catch word of it and in less than two years, Potosí, once part of the uninhabited *puna*, was named the "Villa Imperial" of Spain. Potosí was so rich in silver that its main mountain was known as "Cerro Rico," or "Rich Mountain," by the Spaniards. The discovery of silver in Peru affirmed the belief that the Americas were full of gold and silver and drove Spain to

tighten the grip on their overseas territories. Spanish mercantilism, their economic system of the time, was fueled by precious metals and the discovery of silver cemented Spain's dominance in an emerging global economy. Along with Potosí, Spain established many cities, often next to mines, filling them with Europeans and their families in search of wealth.

The first decades after the discovery of Potosí in 1545 were immensely successful in terms of silver extraction and city building. The main focus of early Spanish colonialism was to spread Christianity and to continue the allocation of resources into imperial funds. Silver in the Americas, concentrated in Potosí, was so widespread it launched a global economy as many countries accepting it as valid currency. Over 150,000 tons of silver were shipped from Potosí alone by the eighteenth



Potosí's share of Greater Peru's silver production, ca. 1545–1810 (based on tax records).

century.⁹ The first decade after 1545 saw both peninsular Spaniards and indigenous entrepreneurs venture to Potosí voluntarily to witness the city made of silver and make profits for themselves. This established a population in the city and sparked an individual economy with imports and exports of its own, supplying the miners and other residents. However, the mid-1560s saw a great decline in silver exports as the surface veins of silver were depleted and the

initial boom of the city faded. The Crown received twenty-five percent of all wealth gained in the colonies and sixty percent of Spanish income came from the exploitation of the American colonies.¹⁰ Therefore, this decline was detrimental in the eyes of the King.

Potosí's share of Greater Peru's silver production, c. 1545-1810.¹¹

Enter don Francisco de Toledo, appointed Viceroy of Peru by King Philip II

⁹ Lane, *Potosí*, 8.

¹⁰ Lane, *Potosí*, 9.

¹¹ Graph from Lane, *Potosí*, 8.

to “revive” Potosí, consolidate power, and ultimately create the framework for colonial Peru. Viceroy Toledo had such an impact on the colonies that his reforms served as a model for many other rulers throughout history and created an era called the “Toledan Reforms.”¹² During his tenure, the Viceroy took a census of the entire colony of Peru, heard testimonies of cruelties in the Inca Empire to justify the conquest, and reorganized the local governments. However, he is infamous for his system of *reducción* and obligatory labor. *Reducción* is the term for the reordering or consolidation of indigenous groups into Spanish-designed cities to facilitate Christianization, labor, and grouping together people “as humans should live.”¹³ Toledo also initiated the reinstatement of the Mit’a — the Inca system of contributory labor — as a revived

form of coerced labor mandated by Spain to serve the Empire. The new Mit’a supplied labor for silver mining made possible by able-bodied men. Much scholarship exists on the horrors of the Mit’a — death, disease, and dangerous conditions were rampant in the mines.¹⁴ Both *reducción* and the Mit’a had tremendous impacts on indigenous populations and contributed to the formation of Spanish colonial cities. Toledo’s centralization and overhaul of systems in the Viceroyalty of Peru strengthened Spain’s wealth and power and brought Spanish America into a second economic boom, seen most clearly in Potosí.

Spain was the first empire to rule from such distance and therefore had to pioneer ways to govern across the ocean. Information could take up to one hundred days to be relayed from the peninsula to the

¹² Jeremy Ravi Mumford, *Vertical Empire: The General Resettlement of Indians in the Colonial Andes* (Duke University Press, 2012), 1-6.

¹³ Luis Capoche, “Relación General Del Asiento y Villa Imperial de Potosí,” trans. Kris Lane, vol. 122.

Biblioteca de Autores Españoles (Madrid: Atlas, 1585), 18.

¹⁴ Refer to Kris Lane’s *Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World* for an excellent monograph on not only the Mit’a but a vivid description of Potosí as a city throughout time.

Americas and vice versa. This was an ineffective and rather chaotic way to govern and had to be remedied. The Spaniards in the colonies were vastly outnumbered by their indigenous counterparts and in order to establish dominance, peninsular officials had to centralize control. They did so with the establishment of smaller offices individual to each city. The Council of Indies, viceroyalties, *audiencias*, *provincias*, *corregidores*, and *cabildos* were all varying degrees of official governmental control on behalf of the King. The transition from the conquest to colonialism was chaotic at best as various cultures, languages, traditions, religions, and societies clashed in every interaction. Further, ethnic groups took advantage of this confusion following the conquest.¹⁵

In the chaos of establishing colonies throughout America, determining the best

way to govern them, dealing with politics in Europe, and organizing the indigenous peoples, Spain had a lot on their plate. Yet, through Toledo's assertion, the silver mining prevailed through the Mit'a and *reducción*. The indigenous peoples enduring this forced migration had no idea what would ensue in the next decade. The creation of the world's richest silver city was ahead of them, insured by their labor, their knowledge, and their agency. If they could have predicted the success of Potosí as they trekked through hundreds of kilometers of rough terrain to fulfill their Mit'a duties, they would correctly assume that it would be built upon their backs.¹⁶ Toledo ensured this. The Viceroy was willing to make Potosí function at its highest efficiency through any means necessary. Despite later criticism for his methods by the likes of chroniclers and friars, Viceroy Toledo's Mit'a reforms were

¹⁵ Larson, et al. *Ethnicity, Markets, and Migration in the Andes: At the Crossroads of History and Anthropology* (Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Lane, *Potosi*.

effective albeit destructive. Spain's "insatiable thirst for money" required the exploitation of indigenous peoples and natural resources.¹⁷ Toledo's *reducción* and Mit'a requirements pushed many families of *mitayos*¹⁸ into economic and social uncertainty. Despite this, it is simultaneously true that the Spanish Empire could not have achieved its success without women who confronted hundreds of constraints daily and continued to work with or alongside those which they could not control. What they could control, however, gave them the power to continue their market activity.

Markets in the Eyes of the Outsider

Those who visited Potosí and wrote about their experiences are known today as *chroniclers*. Most primary sources we have of early colonial Potosí are chronicles written by Spaniards. Unfortunately, there are virtually no surviving firsthand accounts of Potosí in its early years made by indigenous people. There are official documents such as wills and testimonies that contain bits of information but were ultimately written by Spaniard officials.¹⁹ While there is a wealth of information in these chronicles, it is important to analyze them carefully. These writers may have had ulterior motives or simply a flair for the dramatic. Perhaps they wanted to distract their audience from the cruelties of the cities. For the purpose of my argument, I see these chronicles as useful sources to piece together the foundational history of Potosí. They are not the definitive truth and should

¹⁷ De Murúa, "'Of the Rich,'" 2.

¹⁸ Mit'a workers, usually men 18-50 years old.

¹⁹ Many current Andean scholars use wills and testimonies to probe the lives of indigenous people in

early colonial Peru and find hidden pieces of daily urban life for indigenous women, often those who became rich in Potosí.

not be read as such. But many chroniclers wrote - perhaps more extensively than the markets - about the Mit'a and silver mining. Some even criticized the Crown. While motives varied, many writers simply captured what they saw Potosí to be from their perspective. Therefore, utilizing the main primary sources available, descriptions of markets from the chronicles become a way of exploring the past, albeit through Spanish eyes.

To nearly all chroniclers, the city was unlike any other. Pedro Cieza de León,²⁰ a Spanish soldier traveling through the early colonies claimed that Potosí's markets were so grand that no other market in the world could compare.²¹ Friar Martín de Murúa narrated a glimpse into how these markets were so successful. He described

how twice a week, indigenous women would make lavish meals - rivaling those served in Europe - and carry them up to the miners. They would not ask for money in return, but rather they asked for silver ores in exchange. With this, "they are provided with what is necessary all week."²² These pieces of silver allowed women to barter and obtain resources, solidify and maintain their distant connections, and provide Potosí with sustenance. From this, the streets of Potosí witnessed the exchange of twenty-five to thirty thousand pesos daily, proving the vitality of the marketplaces.²³ As the population increased, diverse market activity along with the rapid processing of silver pulled the Andean world into the global economy. Yet relying on finite resources (i.e., silver) could only take an empire so far.

²⁰ Pedro Cieza de León was a greatly trusted source of information on much of the Andes and South America. He documented many plants native to the area for the first time and his accumulation of knowledge contributed to environmental studies of the time, not only historical studies.

²¹ Pedro de Cieza de León, *Travels of Pedro de Cieza de León, A.D. 1532–50: Contained in the First Part*

of His Chronicle of Peru, trans. Clements R. Markham. Cambridge Library Collection - Hakluyt First Series. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter CX: 391.

²² De Murúa, "Of the Rich."

²³ De León, *Travels*, 391.

As Spain used mercantilist ambitions to exploit indigenous Andeans and natural resources, indigenous women were forming their own distinct economy; one that proved profitable for Spain as well. Women were responsible for most of the food and commodities and in turn, were the largest group of consumers. They maintained relationships with their ethnic groups and utilized multifaceted techniques to resist giving in to colonial forces when faced with circumstances out of their control.²⁴ Against the harsh colonial rule, indigenous women created a city without fully assimilating into the new dominant societal expectations.²⁵ With these indigenous women, Spain had a thriving city, a center of their colonial empire that enriched not only themselves, but the world around them as well. Without these women to supply an economy or form the basic units of a city, the silver extraction

process would not have reached the extent it did. These women fueled the empire and created a type of social agency which defined them in the years to come, creating an institution that can still be seen today.

Cultural Stereotypes: Evil, Vice, and Sins

“I have never ceased to condemn throughout my life the cruelty with which they [Spanish] treat these miserable Indians, almost without thinking,” lamented Alonso Ramos Gavilán, a Spanish friar visiting Potosí in 1603.²⁶ Gavilán witnessed firsthand the harsh treatment of indigenous peoples in a city that rumored to be exuberant and immensely rich. While he was likely referring to the Mit’a, indigenous women also faced numerous constraints in their markets at the base of Cerro Rico.

Some witnesses condemned the treatment of

²⁴ Larson, “Andean Communities,” 21.

²⁵ Larson, “Andean Communities,” 18.

²⁶ Alonso Ramos Gavilán, “A Miracle in Potosí,” in *Historia del Santuario de Nuestra Señora de*

Copacabana (Lima, Peru: Jerónimo Contreras, 1603), 2.

the indigenous people, like Gavilán, while others, such as friar Diego de Ocaña, perpetuated stereotypes of indigenous peoples by describing them as demonic, animal-like, and “badly ill-featured...very ugly.”²⁷ These writings portrayed stereotypes of the time in much more explicit terms than official documents. In many of these chronicles, there was a clear gender bias in terms of describing indigenous peoples. Shown most clearly in Ocaña’s early writings, he revealed his apparent heartbreak over the way the indigenous men were treated in the mines. However, the friar, when detailing the women living in Potosí, never missed an opportunity to describe the women as scheming and hedonistic witches. “The more capital they have, the more vice they procure,” declared Ocaña, who stated that he, himself, never visited a single woman.²⁸

Vowing that what he writes is the truth and not hearsay, Ocaña disclosed an inherent bias against indigenous women.

Luis Capoche, a Spanish mine owner, wrote extensively of Potosí and its silver processes. In his writings, he also opted to illustrate indigenous people and how Spain handled the beginnings of American colonialism. As with nearly every Spaniard, Christianity was an integral part of not only their lives, but one of the biggest reasons for conquest and colonialism. To evangelize the indigenous population was an important goal for Spain and the subsequent empire. The strong Christian energy surrounding Spanish colonialism caused the *peninsulares*²⁹ to see the indigenous groups as people who needed to be saved from themselves, from their traditions, from their sins. Capoche did not conceal his strong Christian beliefs when describing

²⁷ Fray Diego de Ocaña, “Potosí: The Eighth Wonder of the World,” trans. Kris Lane, in *Viaje por el Nuevo Mundo de Guadalupe a Potosí, 1599- 1605*, eds. Blanca Lopez de Mariscal and Abraham Madroñal

(Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2010), 5.

²⁸ Ocaña, “Eighth Wonder”, 6.

²⁹ Those born in Spain but lived in the colonies.

indigenous peoples. According to Capoche, they lived "...barbarically with no more law than to be born and to die... those who are baptized have not a single Christian custom, nor sign of faith, nor virtue."³⁰ He writes that, in order to ease the evangelization of the groups, they must all live together like humans should. Capoche favored some groups over others, claiming some are more docile than others, some are enemies while others are not. However, their actions often received strong criticism, especially in traditional practices.

Groups in the Andes often consumed "chicha," a culturally significant drink with pre-Incan roots. a potent beer made from local maize ground down into flour, chicha was an integral part of Andean life and continued to be through the colonial era. To explore the social, cultural, and economic environment of colonial Potosí without mention of chicha would ignore a major

factor in the city's development. Every weekend, according to Ocaña, indigenous groups gathered around town, dancing through the night, and consuming an abundance of this fermented corn beer. He explains it vividly:

It [chicha] is so strong that it dizzies one and really makes one drunk, and from Saturday night until midday Monday they [indigenous groups] do not stop drinking...Indian men and women go dancing heavily all night, not stopping, nor does the dance end, until all the chicha is gone, along with all the money they have...at any hour of night one hears the drums of the Indian townships; and as they go whirling about dancing, all go drinking, both men and women, until the jugs of chicha run out; and both the men and women are left so drunk

³⁰ Capoche, "Relación General," 33.

that they fall on the ground like pigs.³¹

With Ocaña's description, one can make sense of Capoché's call for action against these "excessive binges" that persist every weekend:

Until they remedy this great evil [excessive drinking], the preaching of the gospel will yield little fruit among them [Andeans]...what most deprives them of this benefit are their perpetual drinking binges, so much so that these poor folks spend everything they make on this vice, and commit many sins, with which Our Lord is most offended...and as these parties last day and night, or better said, all their lives...in this there are great evils.³²

Indigenous drinking, from the outsider's perspective, led to great sin. Claims of

incest, fornication, and promiscuity were rampant through this time, with most Spaniards placing blame on chicha, public drunkenness, and the general nature of indigenous people. These "sins" were viewed as obstacles to evangelization and perceived as an affront to Spain's support and protection. Chicha was supposedly inhibiting the efficiency of the workers, and the "sins" the groups committed were far too large to ignore. As addressed in part three of this paper, the local government went to great lengths to restrict the sale and consumption of chicha, with indigenous behavior being only one reason for the restrictions. The two most important things to Spain and the empire — silver and Christianity — were threatened by the consumption of chicha.

Both Ocaña and Capoché relayed their perceptions of indigenous drinking with a confidence that exuded credibility to

³¹ Ocaña, "Eighth Wonder," 13.

³² Capoché, "Relación General," 51.

their audiences. They both had tremendous influence on Spanish thought and law through their chronicles of Potosí. The importance of the chronicles lies in their impact. The majority of Potosí's writers and visitors were friars or associated with the church. Clergymen were held in high regard to the Spanish people, but especially to the King. Their words held weight and were read by the world. It may seem like these visitors had no impact on what actually happened in the *Villa Imperial*, but the main law-making bodies of the empire — the King and the Council of the Indies — read these pieces and made legislative, economic, and political decisions based on them. Their writings spread not only throughout the Americas but to Spain, informing the King and reaching common people as well. While Potosí had its own local government, the main head of the empire was ultimately the King. When Philip II heard from those who

experienced Potosí and depicted indigenous people from personal experience, it certainly impacted his and the Council of Indies' decisions. Women faced prejudice every day, and when the dominant societal force maintained these beliefs, bias echoed throughout every law, regulation, and interaction and made prejudice institutional.

Brooke Larson claims that ethnicity certainly had a factor in Spanish regulations, which therefore limited economic opportunities for indigenous women. She argues that “European inventions were designed to circumscribe the economic, social, and political freedom of indigenous peoples.”³³ Despite these limitations, female vendors of all ethnicities shaped the markets of Potosí without fully assimilating.³⁴ The local and peninsular governments tried to control and form the ever-growing city, but it proved to be difficult. Especially so in the first decades when the city's population had

³³ Larson, “Andean Communities,” 35.

³⁴ Larson, “Andean Communities,” 32.

an indigenous majority. Confronted by negative stereotypes, indigenous women skillfully pushed back. Hybrid strategies incorporating Andean economic ideas infused with European systems allowed Andeans to adjust to forces and demands they could not control and focus on what they could control.³⁵ The disorganization following the conquest created a city in transition — one that allowed indigenous women to take advantage of the chaos and negotiate their way through the creation of the city. The cooperation amongst indigenous women and their connections was so strong that it countered Spanish dominance. Being viewed as hedonistic witches certainly created obstacles on many levels. Yet through historical and present-day evidence, it is evident that indigenous women did not submit, but rather used their

surroundings and connections to survive and thrive in this demanding society.

Markets Under Threat: Regulations & Control

Indigenous women initiated a large market economy, one that provided all necessary goods to its people. One witness concluded that “this villa does not produce any local product other than silver, but even so it does not lack a single thing necessary to human life.”³⁶ This praised achievement did not come easily. Spain and the local council aimed to control not only market products and prices, but the participants as well. Various market restrictions reflected ethnic anxieties³⁷ in the colonial period. To counter indigenous businesses and to encourage Spanish-owned stores, Spain marked Spanish-owned stores as “legitimate,” while indigenous vendors

³⁵ Larson, “Andean Communities,” 21.

³⁶ De Murúa, “Of the Rich”.

³⁷ This refers to Spain’s propensity to organize people based on race and ethnicity. They were notorious for grouping people down to “one drop of blood,” which if contained even one drop of indigenous or African

blood, they would be considered one or part of a mixed group such as Mulatto or Mestizo. This was clear in the 1650s-1800s during colonial maturity but was born when the Spanish landed in America. The anxieties were there, just not institutionalized yet.

underwent significant inspections and faced regulations due to their illicit nature. Regulations of markets, goods, and spaces of trade were one way in which the Spanish controlled the “illegally operated” markets. Very few complied with the Council’s and Crown’s rules, as it limited their income opportunities. The vast force of store owners and their ambitions (which included Spaniards as well), made it difficult for Spain to maintain a grip on the growing economy. The Town Council felt they had a duty to protect Potosí’s people from fraud and up-charging committed by non-Spaniards. Their job was to oversee not just the mines and silver production, but the legal sale of goods. Therefore, these goals were reflected in regulations of goods.

In a similar vein, the council also devoted a substantial portion of their efforts to discussing and enacting regulations of

store-like indoor establishments that typically served wine or chicha. These places were called *pulperías*, the owners known as *pulperos* or *pulperas*. The town council attempted to control the number and location of these stores and the owners in order to limit places of alcohol sales and discourage illegal trade, a direct response due to the aforementioned stereotypes of drunken behavior. If Spanish *pulperos/as* accepted stolen goods or silver as payment they would receive a fine, compelling Spanish-owned *pulperías* to engage in a legal economy.³⁸ The council hoped this would aid in not only reducing illicit trade but restricting indigenous consumption of alcohol. The Spanish also aimed to control the pricing of goods, again in the name of protecting their residents from unreasonable prices. Urban vendors, in an effort to avoid regulations, bought goods from outside city

³⁸ Jane E. Mangan, *Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosí* (Duke University Press, 2005), 57.

limits at a low price and resold them at a higher price in Potosí. Controlling this obtention of goods harbored great frustration for the council. Jane Mangan explains that indigenous women were frequently the culprits of this issue, due to their apparent endless search for personal profit.

Stereotypes had a significant role in specific regulations and is evident in another of Spain's efforts to reduce indigenous alcohol intake. As early as the 1560s, the Crown attempted to restrict the import of corn flour to reduce consumption of chicha.³⁹ Spain and the town council did this for two reasons: first, to reduce the “drunkenness of the Indians,” which threatened the evangelization process and silver mining. Second, to control the urban colonial economy whose success — through legal and illicit means — created competition with the peninsular economy.⁴⁰

Still, the production of chicha, being culturally significant to the Andes and popularly consumed, was unlikely to be hindered.

Ultimately, the restriction on corn flour did not have a negative impact on the chicha market. Indigenous chicha makers simply switched their recipe to the next accessible ingredient — wheat flour. Finding that wheat flour worked just as fine as the maize, the makers adjusted. However, bread was a staple in Spanish diet. It was instantly threatened when most of the wheat flour was siphoned into chicha production. This was no simple shortage of wheat flour, shortage of bread. According to Ocaña, 600,000 “loads” of corn flour were bought a year in advance to make chicha.⁴¹ Because every load makes sixteen large jugs of this corn beer, over nine million jugs of chicha were made and consumed annually.⁴²

³⁹ Mangan, *Trading Roles*, 76.

⁴⁰ Mangan, *Trading Roles*, 50.

⁴¹ We must be careful with this information, as these accounts could be exaggerated. However, similar

numbers appear in other primary accounts to support this claim. Therefore, it is used in this paper, but encouraged to not be taken at face value.

⁴² De Ocaña, “Eighth Wonder,” 14.

Consequentially, the town council reversed the maize flour restriction – a win for the indigenous vendors. Again, this proves the subtle yet coordinated negotiations between colonialism and agency. By switching an ingredient in a culturally significant drink, agency was reinforced in a practice that Spain was so desperately against.

As for the *pulperías*, the council's restriction on licensing aimed to allow only twenty-four Spanish owned stores. But when one visitor counted, the number was nearly one hundred stores — proving these regulations were simply no match for vendors, but specifically indigenous vendors who faced the most constraints. The consistent challenging of Spanish regulations — whether chicha limitations or *pulperia* restrictions — gave rise to subtle negotiation and push-back, most notably through economical methods. Naturally, these regulations were strongly opposed, as

they restricted enterprise.⁴³ Indigenous vendors didn't precisely resist European economics but adapted to a situation they could not control and took advantage of what they could. Some scholars argue that there was significant resistance, others argue that it was mere survival that brought about a push-back. This research implies a combination of both. Hybridity is key. The women chose what worked for them and what didn't. Some regulations were effective. In most of Potosí, however, they failed due to subtle resistance in hybrid forms of survival. Spain wanted goods to sustain the city, and Andean markets supplied just that. Yet, as Mangan so eloquently puts it, the “economy that developed [in Potosí] moved beyond Spanish parameters and used its own agency to determine the value, mode, and location of economic transactions.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Mangan, *Trading Roles*, 50.

⁴⁴ Mangan, *Trading Roles*, 57.

Tribute Required: Land Issues

Spanish Colonial history is notoriously complicated. The system of tribute in the Andes is no exception.⁴⁵ Every city had different laws, requirements, and exceptions despite Toledo's tireless efforts to centralize. Tributary systems were formed early in the colonial process and were reasoned by the Crown as a way to serve the empire. Spain believed that the Andeans owed the Empire in exchange for access to global markets, protection, and the "saving of their souls" through Christianity. Tributes in early Peru consisted of foodstuffs, clothing, and animals. Later, Andeans were required to pay in silver monies. Focusing on the initial period, this meant that tributes often paid the salaries of *encomenderos* in

the form of products and supplied Spaniards with necessary goods.

Due to death in the mines, diseases, and migration, the mandatory tributes buried the residents. Spain's oversight in regularly reviewing the census put indigenous groups in a dire situation; tribute amounts remained the same despite the lesser amount of people – the entire Viceroyalty of Peru started with a population of nine million indigenous peoples and in only forty years, that number sank to one million.⁴⁶ Therefore, the remaining residents had to make up for the shortfalls. Not only did women have to provide for themselves and their families, but they also had to carry the burden of tribute for people who no longer existed. Ethnic groups were required to give their surplus harvests to the Crown, rather than

⁴⁵ This section provides a brief introduction into the effects tributes had on indigenous vendors and the markets in the 16th and 17th century colonial cities. Information on specifically Potosí is not entirely available excluding a few numeric records. To understand the complexity of tributary requirements in the colonial Andes, see Jeremy Mumford's

"Vertical Empire: The General Resettlement of Indians in the Colonial Andes" Mumford details the *reducciones* to explain how they affected tributes.
⁴⁶ John J. TePaske, Kendall W. Brown, and Herbert S. Klein, *The Royal Treasuries of the Spanish Empire in America*, vol. 2 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982).

saving it either to sell to indigenous market women or to save for years with bad harvests. This meant they had to surrender substantial amounts of their products, often from their ethnic groups' land, which in turn deprived them of their own sustenance. This created a chain reaction — ethnic lands were unpredictable due to the harsh climate and harvest could not be relied upon with a declining population; there were less people to maintain the lands.

It must be noted as well that giving tribute was not an alien concept to Andeans. Those who were part of the Incan Empire were accustomed to giving tribute through labor. So, when the Spanish colonial system demanded tribute in other forms such as silver and goods such as produce, coca, and animals, it stripped them of their livelihoods. One Spanish observer stated that, “Indians would rather work fifteen days as a community on other fields than give up for

tribute a few potatoes grown by the family for its own use.”⁴⁷ During the resettlement of the indigenous peoples, these lands that produced most of the tributary products and sustained the lives of Andeans were forcibly vacated and sold to Spaniards, leaving rural farmers with land that was simply not meant for harvest.

When discussing the colonial economy of Potosí, an entirely new and nuanced economy is defined that considered varying degrees of participation and influence. The indigenous peoples, when faced with oppressive economic practices, applied the practices they were used to such as working together to ensure the survival of their kin groups. They also employed new techniques either reminiscent of European tactics or an entirely new strategy. In response to the burdens of tribute, ethnic landowners would create additional farms or set aside land made exclusively for tributes,

⁴⁷ Stern, “Variety and Ambiguity,” 81.

so as not to deplete their supply — a direct response to constraints.⁴⁸ The heavy weight of tributes led to the creation of intricate trade routes and strong cooperation between indigenous kin groups. The preservation of their own methods with adaptations to make the economy benefit them suggests the flexibility of those faced with the birth of Spanish colonialism.

Conclusion: 500 Years of Counter

Hegemony

Potosí, once the richest city on earth, holds a deep, complex history of colonial oppression. Yet a compelling case of counter-hegemony emerges through research into the intricacies of responses to these constraints. Explorations of the transition into the colonial era uncover how indigenous women defined what it meant to live in a “colonial society” while maintaining control and identity. This paper detailed the constraints faced by indigenous

women vendors in an effort to provide context for the current rosy picture of indigenous ingenuity drawn by contemporary scholars of Andean history. However, even amidst Spanish restraints, we do see resilience and innovation as the conquered group negotiated their way through a new society. While colonial forces pushed against indigenous women from every angle, the markets gave them a way to create distance from the imposing society. They constructed hybrid strategies – a combination of Spanish economic practices and Andean trade methods – to thrive against Spanish constraints. Potosí’s colonial society was defined, in large part, by indigenous market women. Their work endured. The impact of their strategies is still abundantly visible in modern day Potosí – proof of the influence indigenous women had on Andean society.

⁴⁸ Stern, “Variety and Ambiguity,” 81-82.

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