Spanish Supremacy: Wheaten Bread and Panaderías in Colonial Potosí

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Since 1493, when the Spanish first attempted to bring wheat to the New World with Columbus's second voyage, it was clear that it would be a struggle. Each of their numerous attempts to grow wheat locally in the humid and hot conditions of the Caribbean was a miserable failure. The grain was of poor and uneven quality or simply did not germinate. El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, a writer and historian from the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru, recalled that "the anxiety of the Spaniards to have the things of their own country transplanted to the Indies was so strong that no danger or trouble seemed great enough to prevent them from trying to realize their desires" (Figueroa 2010, 305). The importance of this grain was such that even though it had already failed multiple times, Columbus and his successors continued their endeavours until they discovered that wheat grew well on the same land as maize. From that point on, wheat and wheaten bread thrived in the Andes Mountains.

Though El Inca Garcilaso could recall a time without wheaten bread, Africans, mestizos, and indigenous peoples soon joined Spaniards in consuming it. At the same time, urban Indians and Africans advanced into the production and sale of bread, in both forced and voluntary labour. Thus, bread "created an important colonial enterprise and transformed the Andean marketplace" (Mangan 2005, 96). Although wheaten bread thrived and became a dietary staple in the colonial viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain, its production, unlike other enterprises, remained dominated by Spaniards. This trend can be examined more closely by looking at the thriving marketplaces of Potosí, a colonial mining town in the heart of the Andes range. Unlike the non-Spanish dominated *pulperías* (small grocery stores) and *chicherías* (taverns that sold *chicha*, a maize beer) of colonial Potosí, the majority of large and small-scale *panaderías* (bakeries) were owned and run by Spaniards. By looking closely at the religious, social, and traditional attributes of the diverse society that existed there, it is possible to understand why this was one of the only industries into which non-Spanish peoples could not break.

The Greek myth of the goddess Demeter, who taught men to gather, use, store, and sow wild wheat, introduced a cultural breakthrough for mankind. Men turned away from their lives as hunters and gatherers to embrace civilization only after Demeter shared her knowledge of cultivation and initiated the agrarian cycle (Baudy 1995). Early modern Europeans were acquainted with ancient perspectives on the natural world but also drew on Christian ideology when considering the importance of bread. "The 'Lord's Prayer' refers to (our daily) bread as the necessary nourishment of the body, and indeed according to the gospel of John, Jesus declared himself to be bread: 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever.' (John 6:51)" (Figueroa 2010, 303). This strong Catholic affiliation to bread makes it easy to understand why the Spanish felt such desire and urgency to acquire a secure crop and in turn to produce wheaten bread in the New World. Without the bread, Spaniards could not properly perform Mass, and therefore could not properly worship their god. The conquest of the

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New World was not solely motivated by profits, but by religion.

When Cristoforo Colombo went to the Spanish monarchs Fernando and Isabella, religion was his driving motivation. He was successful in his proposals because the monarchs had just successfully completed *La Reconquista* in 1492. The Spanish reclaimed Spain in the name of Christianity and banished all Islamic peoples from the country. After hundreds of years of religious turmoil, the monarchs were eager to express their gratitude to God and saw Colombo's proposal as a striking opportunity to do so. This gratitude was demonstrated in efforts to strengthen Christianity within the country as well as to evangelize the New World.

Upon arrival in the New World, Colombo wrote in a letter that the indigenous people "*allende d'esto se fazan cristianos, y se inclinen al amor é servicio d e Sus Altezas y de toda lanación castellana* – might become Christians and be inclined to the love and service of their highnesses and of the whole Castilian nation" (Jane 1988, 9). This positive recognition of a possible Christian civilization and of a Spanish Imperial state was the beginning of centuries of Spanish rule in Latin America. In this context, bread was not only a substance for nourishment, but also a defining symbol of Christianity and therefore a defining feature of Spanish identity and power.

Maize, a starchy, corn-like grain, played an equally defining and religious role in the lives of the Maya, the Nahua, and the Inca. In the lives of these people, maize had an important place in the historical and religious traditions as shown through the presence of maize gods, maize rituals, maize iconography, and maize stories. "The Maya oral tradition … tells of gods experimenting with different materials to create human beings, until they finally created people out of maize dough, leaving no doubt about the central place of maize in Maya culture. Nahua babies were not given a name until they had eaten their first maize-based food, thereby receiving an individual and cultural identity" (Figueroa 2010, 308). The direct relationship between the Sun, the life-giving god, and maize was never overlooked by the Incas. In the most sacred building complex in Cuzco, known as the Coricancha, it was said that there was a field of gold maize and this maize as well as *chicha* were offered to the sun. Although Spanish and Indigenous cultures shared a common cultural attribute, grain, neither was willing to accept the traditions of the other, and differences emerged.

Francisco López de Gómara, a widely read Spanish chronicler, wrote in 1553 that "they did not have wheat in all the Indies, which are another world, a huge lack given what we are used to here" (Figueroa 2010, 301). Europeans observed that maize, potatoes, and manioc (or cassava, or yucca) filled the "food role that wheat and other cereals played in the Old World" (Figueroa 2010, 306). Maize, the most widespread of the three, reminded Europeans most strongly of familiar grain-producing grasses (Figueroa 2010, 306). De Gómara wrote in his history of the Indies:

> Maize is, to conclude, a very good thing, and the Indians will not leave it for wheat, from all I know. The reasons given are important, and they are: they are used to this bread, they feel well with it; maize serves them as bread and wine, maize multiplies more than wheat and grows with fewer problems than wheat, not only from water and sun but also from birds and beasts. Maize requires less work: one man alone sews and harvests more maize than one man and two beasts sew and harvest wheat [Figueroa 2010, 301].

Indigenous peoples were deeply rooted in their traditions as a means to survive in the harsh colonial world of Potosí, where Spanish colonialism contradicted, overlooked, and many times rejected their traditions.

At the mining metropolis of Potosí in the early seventeenth century, a noticeable shift from *chuño* (freeze-dried potatoes) and *chicha* to bread and wine occurred, and this shift came to connote social distinction

(Saignes 1999, 108). Due to an increasingly stratified society, each class developed a distinctive way of life, including a unique food culture. This food culture highlighted the preference for and symbolic value of wheaten bread over 'Indian breads.' It is quite evident that the racial and class structure of colonial society was reflected in a hierarchy of breads. At the top was wheaten bread, which had the prestige of the dominant class and religion. Maize bread, in accordance with regional preferences, came in second place and was adopted by a large number of the Spanish Americans, but it could not rise to the level of wheat (Figueroa 2010).

This hierarchy was, needless to say, dominated by the Spaniards. This domination was due to two simple factors: race and financial stability. Bread was a symbolic representation of Spain in the colonies, and therefore showed that the Indigenous were situated at the bottom. Although it was possible to change one's status and climb up the hierarchy, one could not achieve this without great perseverance and know-how. It was also more difficult for non-Spanish bakers to access the substantial amount of capital required to purchase bulk flour, so these bakers usually opened small-scale operations. Small-scale operations typically catered to a smaller area and earned a smaller profit (Mangan 2005, 99). The bread hierarchy that existed in Potosí can be summarized by saying that Spaniards owned large- and small-scale *panaderías* and mainly sold their products to a variety of people, while non-Spanish people owned small-scale *panaderías* and sold their products mainly to the indigenous population in their *ranchería* (community).

Although the non-Spanish inhabitants of colonial Potosí played a crucial role in the *panadería* industry, they rarely became owners of *panaderías*. Where an established religion described maize, not wheat, as the "holy" grain, where to run a bakery you needed Spanish blood and a large sum of money, and where weathered traditions led the way through new territory, it is no wonder that the adoption of wheat was resisted, and that the non-Spanish population came to such odds with the *panadería* industry. Whether it was because of religion or social standing or tradition, the majority of non-Spanish peoples served the paid help of their Spanish officials and owners. Inarguably, with or without the industrial domination of Spaniards, wheaten bread and *panaderías* became a thriving industry in the New World. The ability of the Spaniards to integrate wheaten bread into this and many other societies may be their greatest feat. Five hundred years after Columbus's first attempt to bring this grain to the New World, wheaten bread remains a staple of South American diets. It has transcended the boundaries of religion, class, and time. As long as there are lands to sow, rains to nurture, and hands to work, it will remain a thriving business for centuries.

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