

# **Motherhood Versus Metropolis: Maternity Practices in Native Cultures of the Chronicles of Peru**

*Diana Eguía Armenteros, PhD*

Universidad Católica Santa Teresa de Jesús de Ávila, Spain

---

## **Abstract**

Motherhood and colonization, why should we put these two notions together, and what do we know about the changes in childbearing patterns during the colonization of the America's as a signal of a broader cultural change? Even when all human life on this planet is born from a woman, we know more about the air we breathe, and the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood as Adrienne Rich famously said (1976: 11). The production of life remains a marginal issue in the study of modernity and its consequences. The colonization of America marked a significant shift in how Western minds understood themselves and was pivotal in the overall concept of motherhood and by combining both these cultural phenomena we can illuminate many aspects of society, then and now.

---

**Keywords:** Motherhood, colonization, Peru, chronicles, Latinamerica, native cultures.

## **Introduction**

When we look back at motherhood in the Early Modern Colonial Chronicles, different concepts of gender, body, community, work, and caring for one another emerge. This exercise is part of the ecofeminist theory, and also serves to understand the beginning of the current ecological, political, borders, and social crises. For example, we're now, facing what feminist theory called 'care crises,' (Robinson: 2011) e.g., common people did not get enough resources to help during the coronavirus pandemic. Nowadays, we see doctors and nurses in every country working in some precarious conditions. I'm going to point out when the devaluation of the caretaker as a figure whose work is undervalued and invisible began. My central thesis here is that colonization shifted the indigenous maternal pattern from an empowered member of society into a submissive, passive one. Therefore, we've traveled through colonization's first testimonies, stopping in the Andean region for its importance as the main source of gold for the

Spanish Crown (Gruzinski: 2002). Among many testimonies that narrate changes between the native and Western way of life, two of them are especially significant for their quality: those written by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (12 April 1539 – 23 April 1616) and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (ca. 1535– after 1616). Both are considered to be the most popular authors of their time, and their chronicles are complex texts that narrate the end of a world and its entire complex society. I want to share with you here few pieces of their writings, and drawings.

First, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, an American prince, published his *Comentarios “Reales de los Incas”* in Lisbon, in 1609. He is well-known as the first “mestizo” writer; however, his work has been cataloged as Eurocentric. His last name, Garcilaso de la Vega, is that of a significant literary Spanish family. His mother was an Incan princess, so he lived a life of recognition in both cultures. *Comentarios* gives us an extraordinary corpus of information about childbearing patterns, which is not common in any other Spanish literature.

If Inca Garcilaso is associated with the European point of view over America, on the contrary, we find Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, who devoted his life to fighting against the Spaniards and injustice. His chronicle, “*Nueva coronica y buen gobierno*”, is considered to be a significant contribution to our understanding of Peruvian history, and the pre-Columbian past which he describes in detail, and the colonial society which he harshly analyzes. “The First New Chronicle and Good Government”, by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, his handmade manuscript was found in Denmark in 1909, but it was finished in 1605 (Pease: 1980, IX). The obsession of Guamán Poma's Chronicle is the decline of the population caused by viruses, forced work, the exploitation of nature, and the persecution of the native way of life. Therefore, the maternal body is one of his main concerns. To him, the profanation of the native female role denied the legitimacy of the Spanish Empire over the Andean territory. In addition to his writing, his manuscript is full of his own drawings and paintings. Which has been considered the most crucial visual testimony of the conquest (Silverblatt, 1987: XXIV).

Now, let's take a look at how each author portrays indigenous mothers. Starting with Garcilaso, it is surprising that even though he dedicates many pages to their maternal practices, he always argued against them marking them as simply savages. His writings are full of “matriphobia” (hate towards mother figures). For example: “Los hijos criavan estrañamente, assí los Incas como la gente común, ricos y pobres, sin distinción alguna, con el menor regalo que les podían dar” (Book IV, chapter XII). In his work, scenes of the “unnatural mother” are repeated to justify the need for the imposition of Spanish culture over those unfit mothers.

However, he was still able to realize the autonomy and self-empowerment of these women (Ruth: 1991). In the next paragraph, he described how women diagnose and heal their children of different diseases with their "secretos naturales"/natural secrets. They also gave birth and took control of their pregnancy, and managed their own lactation. These mothers had enough access to medicine for diagnosing and curing infants of any disease. They did it through techniques that sound as novel today as the preservation of the umbilical cord and other "secrets", as the author called them:

Cuando al nacer de los niños les cortavan el ombligo, dexavan la tripilla larga como un dedo, la cual, después que se le caía, guardavan con grandissimo cuidado y se la davan a chupar al niño en cualquiera indisposición que le sentían. Y para certificarse de la indisposición, le miraban la pala de la lengua, y, si la veían desblanquecida, dezían que estava enfermo y entonces le davan la tripilla para que la chupasse (...) Los secretos naturales destas cosas ni me las dixerón ni yo las pregunté, más de que las ví hazer. (Book 1, Chapter XXIV).

Garcilaso also described how midwives (called "oclo") were considered sacred. Mothers could live an independent life from their husbands for the first two or two and a half years after giving birth, avoiding a new pregnancy. Women of *Comentarios reales* had access to medical knowledge and practiced herbology, soothing techniques, and lactation expertise. They ultimately challenged Early Modern concepts of technology, reason, and truth.

Una Palla de la sangre real conocí que por necesidad dió a criar una hija suya. La ama devió de hazer traición o se empreñó, que la niña se encanijó y se puso como ética, que no tenía sino los huessos y el pellejo. La madre, viendo a su hija ayusca (al cabo de ocho meses que se había enxugado la leche), la bolvió a llamar a los pechos con cercenadas y emplastos de yervas que se puso a las espaldas, y bolvió a criar su hija y la convalesció y libró de muerte. No quiso dársela a otra ama, porque dixo que la leche de la madre era la que le aprovechaba. (Book IV, chapter XII).

Contrary to the empowered mother of the Inca, Felipe Guamán Poma gave us a portrait of the woman's body as the central resource of exploitation from the Americas. In his view, it was not the gold that the Spaniards were exploiting but the women's bodies. *Coronica* placed in the Andes after the Spanish crown took control over the territory. Spaniards sexually abused and enslaved women into domestic tasks such as cooking, preparing fabrics, kneading, and distilling. The indigenous world ended native rights, native traditional women's roles, and its cosmovision of gender parallelism.

In the following drawing, Guamán Poma portrays an Andean woman carrying her son on her back while working on textiles for a friar. This man is attacking her by pulling her hair. The friar is, presumably, the child's

biological father since Guamán Poma dedicated many pages to denounce rapes committed by clerks. The image illustrates the colonial civilizations' transformation from their maternal practices to one forceful incarnation. If we look a little more carefully, we see that the infant's expression doesn't relate to or doesn't seem to fit with what is happening in the rest of the scene. The child, the dependent being, has been set aside in pursuit of the physical exploitation of his mother's body and the making of textile goods as an exchange value. This child is the "mestizo", son of a native woman, and a white Spaniard. The baby is growing up separated from his ancestors tradition. Before the conquest, kids were taken care of by their free mothers with the help of the community, at least up until two or two years and a half. She, the mother, like the majority of native women, is now living in the new Spanish metropolis. The author characterized her as a victim of labor and sexual exploitation: crying, working, and raising a child.



*Corónica. Padres/ 646 [646]*

Domestic work in the colonial Andes was at that time mostly carried out by the indigenous women who were forced to migrate by the masses to the cities to be part of the new domestic trade. Meanwhile, the men, who did not go to the mines remained in rural areas, dividing the native community into two geographically and separate halves. "Indian men and women lived

in two separate worlds that, while interconnected with each other in many areas, were nevertheless remarkably isolated. Social networks were overwhelmingly forged along sex lines". (Burkett, 1978:120). That is Guaman Poma's central pain: it was impossible for traditional native communities to survive in terms of human reproduction since young women and men were separated during infancy.

In these chronicles, we have many other examples of how colonization transformed seemingly well-balanced maternal practices into domestic service. Here, I've just offered a few of them, but both chronicles are full of many more examples. Surprisingly, scholars have rarely noticed the main role mothers occupied in these author's testimonies. Luckily we have Professor Irene Silverblatt's work, a monograph about native Andean communities, Incas before colonization. In *Moon, Sun, Witches* (1987) Silverblatt describes a society ruled by what she called "gender parallelism," which was opposed to the European gender binarism. In brief, Silverblatt's investigations talked about a gender division, but not about binary thinking. "Ayllu" is the native name for the community. In the land of the different "ayllus", work was organized and divided based on age and gender. Andean norms defined certain tasks as appropriate for men and others for women. Nevertheless, the division of labor was never so strict as to prohibit one sex from doing the other's task, if the need ever arose. Andean gender ideologies recognized that women's work and men's work complemented each other. Their interplay was essential for Andean life to continue (1987:9). However, Western binarism, implies the predominance of one sex over the other, as it happens in other pairs like nature/culture or body/mind. If we take a look at non-western societies, like the Andean one, we do not find binarism thinking in a Western way. Inca Garcilaso's mothers perform the reproductive work necessary for the sustainability of life while also producing and reproducing medical and scientific knowledge. They were entitled to exercise care independently. The knowledge that came from mothers was not considered superstitious in the pre-colonial Andean world.

Whereas, colonization authorities founded Modern institutions like Universities and 'Protomedicato' (medical school); however, women were not allowed to access them for reasons of gender, race, and economic status. Colonial society did not consider mothers as a relevant social component and saw motherhood as an act of empty social value. Moreover, indigenous women had no access to knowledge and no access to the land for material resources under colonization. Guamán Poma told us about women inheriting land from other women without the interference of their fathers, husband, brother or landlord: *Teniendo de derecho de sangre y linaje y ley, no se le puede quitar por Dios y de su justicia, aunque sea mujer como tenga derecho. Bven gobierno, 454 [456].*

Spaniards misunderstood the occupation of women over their own resources, roles and obligations as a proof of submission to their husband. They were unable to perceive that these women's work involved caring for and transmitting their own heritage. "Women's work in the ayllu -from weaving, cooking, and sowing to child care-was never considered a private service for husbands" (Silverblatt,1987:9). This mentality denotes that the androcentric sphere of work was already completely perpetuated by the conquerors.

In Garcilaso's chronicle, we read about sacred caretakers, venerated women whose recognition was not to be with their husband, but to their commitment to the health and well-being of their people. These women's social significance was built upon their work, not over their role as men's wives. Quite a world away from the European model of the good wife, the submissive role is here substituted by the empowerment of its functions as caretakers and their attachment to a more extended community of care, ruled by themselves. They shaped a self-supportive community of cooperation and autonomy.

(...) no dexavan de salir a visitar las parientas más cercanas en sus enfermedades y partos, y cuando tresquilavan y ponían el nombre a sus primogénitos. Estas eran tenidas en grandíssima veneración por su castidad y limpieza, y por excelencia y deidad las llamavan Ocllo (...) Yo alcancé a conocer una déstas (...) Teníanla en la veneración que hemos dicho, porque dondequiera le davan el primer lugar, y soy testigo que mi madre lo hazía assí con ella, tanto por ser tía como por su edad y honestidad. (Book VII. Chapter. VII).

Meanwhile, Colonial authorities settled the first Protomedicato in Lima, 1570; many "women's manuals" were published in the Metropoli Spain: such as Juan Luis Vives' *De Institutione foeminae christianae* (1524) and *De officio mariti* (1528) or Fray Luis de León's *La perfecta casada* (1584). Concerning a Christian woman as a wife, mother, and recipient of the lineage's honor, multiple treatises described how the mother should act, feel, conceive her body, and how to physically care for her child. The new legislation imposed by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) helped to limit women's access to knowledge, their movement, and agency (Ortega López, 1977: 250-268). Many ideas around fertility and maternity are products of these times and still exist in today's societies. Meanwhile, in the Andes, the notion of the community remained after colonization as long as it could.

## Conclusion

Thanks to these two author's Chronicles, native Andean mothers are described as empowered, self-managed, respected, and valued members of their community, mothers who could make decisions about how to raise their children and what was in their best interest. Apart from that, they also narrated how those mothers were transformed into poor and marginalized domestic workers by Spaniards.

The modern project institutes the idea of "nature" as a hierarchy that allows white men to dominate the world, using the world's resources, non-whites, women, and animals. That is the true colonization. Colonization is not just about the imposition of some territories over others. It is the imposition of some bodies over others. Colonial and modern societies started to see motherhood as passive, irrelevant, invisible, and undervalued work. Mothers, as the primary source of care, were the first ones to educate the young under these white patriarchal patterns.

## References:

1. Burkett, Elinor. "Las mujeres indígenas y la sociedad blanca: el caso del Perú del siglo XVI", in A. Lavrin, *Las mujeres latinoamericanas*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985: 121-152.
2. Garcilaso de la Vega, Inca, el. *Comentarios reales y otros textos*. González Vigil, R. (ed.). Barcelona: Penguin Clásicos, 2016.
3. Guamán Poma, Felipe, de. *Primera nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. Pease, Franklin (ed.) Lima: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980.
4. Gruzinski, Serge. *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
5. León, Luis. de. *La perfecta casada*. (ed. San José Lera, J.). Madrid: Espasa Colección Austral, 1992.
6. Perry, Ruth. "Colonizing the Breast", in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Special Issue, Part 1: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe, Oct., (1991): 204-234.
7. Robinson, Fiona. "Care ethics and the Transnationalization of Care", in *Feminist Ethics and Social Policy. Toward a new Global Political Economy of Care*, eds. Rianne Mahon, R., and Robinson, F., Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.
8. Silverblatt, Irene. *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender ideologies and class in Inca and Colonial Peru*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.
9. Ortega López, M., Segura, C., Folguera, P. *Historia de las mujeres en España*, Madrid: Síntesis, 1997.
10. Vives, Juan Luis. *La formación de la mujer cristiana (1523)*. Madrid: Signo, 1936