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CROSSING DEEP RIVERS: JOSE MARIA ARGUEDAS AND THE RENAMING OF PERU

Margaret V. Ekstrom

From the earliest days of the Discovery, the Spaniards had problems with naming in the New World. They had difficulties with the pronunciation and spelling of the Indian names for people and places, and they had to accept the native terminology for objects which had no name in Spanish because they did not exist in Spain. Such early chroniclers of the Conquest as Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Bartolomé de las Casas wrote with amazement in Spanish of the things they found in the Americas, interspersing variations of the native words along the way. Many such words even found their way into English eventually, such as tomato, chocolate, ocelot and coyote. Nevertheless, Spanish soon established itself as the dominant language of political, economic and social control in Latin America.

The first Peruvian mestizo author, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, attempted to balance the situation somewhat by writing in Spanish a history of his Inca ancestors, using native terminology for many of their ancient customs. The Peruvian Indians attempted several rebellions against Spanish domination in the name of Tupac Amarú, one of their cultural heroes. Nevertheless it is obvious that even after Latin America gained its independence from Spain and although millions of people in the region today still speak the native languages, Spanish maintained its cultural and linguistic dominance.

Some authors known as *indigenistas* attempted to preserve in their works some elements of native language and culture. They succeeded to varying degrees. Some were content with more of a social than a literary emphasis. And yet some of the most famous writers of modern Hispanic America who have gained international literary acclaim (Miguel Angel Asturias, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez) include frequent references to native culture in their works.

The Mexican author Rosario Castellanos succeeded at the very beginning of her novel *Balún Canán* in describing the American Indian's sense of loss: "...And then, angry, they dispossessed us, they snatched away from us what we had treasured: the word, which is the ark of memory. Since those days they burn and are consumed with the wood in the bonfire. The smoke rises in the wind and dissolves. The faceless ash remains." Her ancestral characters speak in whispers, requesting their descendants to consider the history of their forebears: "Think about us, do not erase us from your memory, do not forget us" (Castellanos 8-9).

The Peruvian author José María Arguedas also wished to include native American culture in his works. Born in 1911 in the Andean town of Andahuaylas, Arguedas was raised bilingually and biculturally. Neglected by his stepmother while his father, an itinerant lawyer, was traveling, Arguedas spent most of his childhood among the Peruvian Indians, speaking their Quechua language and learning their songs, customs, legends and beliefs. These experiences left a lasting impression upon him.

Arguedas eventually went to the capital city of Lima and studied at the University of San Marcos. He began his professional career in anthropology, sociology and ethnography, writing extensively on the Peruvian Indians, before he turned to the writing of fiction. He was determined to reflect in his work his country's dual heritage of Spanish and Inca origins. Although he did some writing in Quechua, he knew that he could spread his message to a wider audience only by writing in Spanish. He gradually succeeded in developing a written style of the Spanish language which was modified somewhat to include the vocabulary, intonations and speech patterns of Quechua. Although a grammatically correct Spanish, it included syntactical variations such as postponing the verb and omitting conjunctions, which reflected Indian usage (Rowe xvii).

In his novel *Los ríos profundos/Deep Rivers* (1958), Arguedas achieved what is generally recognized as his greatest literary and critical success in his ingenious use of a modified Spanish language. He included a glossary and numerous footnotes to aid the reader (Gold 59–60). “Unusual effects are created by the short, sometimes abrupt, phraseology as brief sentences are interspersed with longer ones which contain several thoughts. The thoughts themselves, though coming in rapid succession, fall into logical patterns. The mode of expression is thus uncomplicated without being in any way an exaggerated sort of pidgin Spanish... Arguedas has succeeded in creating an idiom which intimately expresses Indian attitudes and beliefs and at the same time preserves necessary universality by being understandable to all readers of Spanish.” (Aldrich 64–65)

Both character and place names in the work *Deep Rivers* may be analyzed to show Arguedas’ unique linguistic literary technique and to reflect the interest in naming which he shared with the Peruvian Indians. In addition, the main character of the novel, Ernesto, is a fourteen-year-old boy who has had the experience of living in both cultures. His love for the nature of his homeland is both a product and a reflection of the Indian heritage. The many autobiographical aspects of the first-person narration add an aura of authenticity, since the people and places described reflect reality. Nevertheless, there is also a mystical tone resulting from references to Indian religious and cultural practices. The relationships between the two cultures are carefully delineated in the use of language and speech patterns.

The protagonist Ernesto/Ernest is diligently trying to find his cultural and personal place in the world. The title *Deep Rivers* refers both to his love for the waterways and other natural beauties of Peru and to the profound ethnic currents which flow in the boy and the land (Arguedas 181, 244). Ernesto has led a rather vagabond existence, at times traveling with his itinerant-lawyer father. Sometimes he was placed in the custody of neglectful relatives who generally left him in the care of Indian servants, among whom he learned a love for their culture. The reader gains this information through occasional flashbacks scattered throughout the novel. There are also included numerous *huaynos* (indigenous Peruvian songs) in both the original Quechua and Spanish translations, to reflect Ernesto’s moods and longings and to reinforce the bicultural nature of the work.

The novel opens with Ernesto in the ancient Inca capital city of Cuzco, the “ombiligo del mundo” or center of the world (Chang-Rodríguez 38). The boy is traveling with his anonymous, blue-eyed father in the hopes of obtaining some money from a cantankerous uncle known only as “El Viejo,” the old man. The enterprise meets with failure, as might have been expected. Father and son then journey to the town of Abancay, where Ernesto is enrolled in a *colegio*, in this case a boarding school for boys run by a group of priests. The rest of the novel transpires here. Ernesto is discouraged about being virtually abandoned by his father, but he tries to adjust at the school while dreaming of an eventual reunion with his father and an escape to his idealized Indian homeland.

During the opening scenes in Cuzco in Chapter I of the novel, Ernesto is delighted by his father’s explanations of some of the historical sites of the ancient city, as they were viewing it then in the first half of the twentieth century. The reader quickly becomes aware of Ernesto’s love for names, the sounds of words and the natural descriptions of his surroundings. They discuss the María Angola, the great bell of the cathedral, and contrast it with the Inca Roca, the precise Inca stonework of many of the ancient buildings. The father refers to some of the Indian gods (Amaru/the snake and the ancient lineage of Cápac, the royal family of the sun). He explains the Quechua custom of naming the crevices in the rock (*quijllu/rajadura*) to emphasize that it is a living part of nature (Arguedas 11, 15, 25). Ernesto recalls a song about the “yawar rumi” or *pedra de sangre* (stone of blood) which stresses that all parts of nature are alive like the “yawar mayu” or river of blood which flows and pulsates like blood, a turbulent river shining in the sunlight. His father states that the stones of Inca Roca will remain until the last judgment, that they will stand guard by “Sacsay huaman” or “águila repleta” – the great eagle of the fortress. Throughout the novel, Ernesto returns to this theme of naming the vital parts of nature in accordance with indigenous customs.

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He tries to analyze the name of the town where he is now living, Abancay, as having derived from *amank'ay*, a yellow wild-flower, or from *awankay*, the high, balanced, observant flight of the great birds (Arguedas 36). He studies the names of the rivers in the vicinity:

Apurímac — dios que habla, significa el nombre de este río

Apurímac — the name of this river means “god which speaks” (Arguedas 26).

Pachachaca — puente sobre el mundo, significa este nombre

Pachachaca — this name means “bridge over the world” (Arguedas 49, 68).

For Ernesto, the greatest adventure would be to travel along a river and to get to know it very well.

With some of the boys at the school, he discusses the meaning of *werak'ocha* (Viracocha) the great light or sun god of the Incas, who is contrasted with the *apu*, the regional gods of the native villages, such as K'arwarasu, symbolized by the sparrowhawk (Arguedas 34, 87). Ernesto explains that the Indians gave names to all aspects of nature: birds, trees, rivers, stones, insects, earthquakes. The names of Peruvian towns flow lovingly from Ernesto's lips and from Arguedas' pen: Patibamba, Ayacucho, Huancavelica, Paraisancos, Chalhuanco, Utari, Huanapata, Pampas, Huaytará, Coracora, Puquio, Andahuaylas, Yauyos, Cangallo (Arguedas 104, 179).

Although his schoolmates may not share his enthusiasm for place names, they are extremely interested in nicknames for one another. Ernesto is perhaps too studious for most of the boys, but he does make some friends — and all share in the games of name play. Some of the best examples are:

Peluca — le llamaban Peluca porque su padre ere barbero

Peluca — they called him Peluca (wig) because his father was a barber (Arguedas 61).

Romero — pilgrim, for the boy who liked to play his guitar as if he were a wandering minstrel.

Palacios/Palacitos — Little Palaces for the poor little mestizo boy, raised among Indians, who kept dreaming that his relatively wealthy landowning father would someday visit him.

The somewhat older, wealthier boy Antero was sometimes called Candela or candle for his light-colored hair or more frequently:

Markask'a — le decían en quechua, el Marcado, a causa de sus lunares

Markask'a — they called him in Quechua, the Marked or Branded One, because of his moles (Arguedas 75).

Markask'a actually developed a friendship with the poetic Ernesto, who helped him write letters to his girlfriend, until they realized their differences about the value of indigenous culture. The schoolboys did come from several social groups, from criollo to mestizo, although most of them had some knowledge of popular Quechua expressions in everyday use. Some of the boys expressed a loyalty to their *ayllus* or local communities. All were familiar with the terms for different Indian groups:

the *pochos* or household servants

the *colonos* or landworkers

the *comuneros* or members of free Indian communities.

Attitudes toward the native culture varied widely, with the priests trying to keep it under control. One of the most sustained episodes in Chapter VI of the novel concerns the *zumbayllu* or *trompo* (Indian toy top) which captivates the boys during a game. The Indians attributed magical properties to the top, with its singing whistle. When one of the priests tries to bless the top, some of the boys fear that it will lose its magic. Arguedas thus emphasizes another example of linguistic and cultural contrast. He even spends considerable time at the beginning of Chapter VI analyzing the linguistic derivations of several related words and their onomatopoeic value in Quechua. This technique slows down the progress of the narrative somewhat, yet it also highlights the cultural comparisons so valued by Arguedas.

Women also play a significant role in the novel. Doña Felipa (Arguedas 98) is the bold leader of the *chicheras* or beer-makers who stage a rebellion when their supply of salt, a necessary ingredient for the Indian brew of *chicha*, is cut off. The soldiers who pursue her are nicknamed *huayruros* (Arguedas 148, 151) because their red and black uniforms make them resemble the native bean of similar colors. *La opa*, from the Quechua *upa* meaning fool (Corominas 424), is a poor, mentally handicapped woman who served as a kitchen worker at the school and who was abused by several of the boys until she found and began to wear Felipa's shawl, a symbol of power. We do not learn her name until the end of the novel, when she is seen dying during a typhus epidemic. She is wrapped in the shawl, being comforted by the sympathetic Ernesto, when it is revealed that she bears the proud and forceful name of Marcelina (Arguedas 219).

The last important character to appear in the novel is a wandering minstrel harpist who appears in one of the local bars or *chicherías* to sing a *huayno* in honor of the executed doña Felipa. He is called papacha Oblitas (Arguedas 177) or great and honorable father in honor of his talent for giving pleasure through his musical skills. Ernesto thinks he recognizes him, having seen and heard him play in other villages. He reveals the use of multiple names combining Hispanic and Indian heritage as in Jesús Warank'a Gabriel, used by one of the accompanying singers. Their music describes further aspects of the dual heritage.

Not long after this scene, the school and village are thrown into a panic by the threat of the typhus epidemic. Everyone escapes in different directions. Ernesto decides to follow the river, hoping to find his father or to live among the true, free Indians far out in the countryside.

Throughout the novel, Arguedas attempted to reveal the cultural effects of naming and renaming in Peru. The name of Peru itself was a product of confusion, having been derived from two words of Indian origin: *Berú* meaning land and *Pelú* meaning river (Chang-Rodríguez 53). Arguedas wished to clarify such combination forms of language and culture. His character and alter-ego Ernesto displayed a longing for greater contact with his father, which is one example of cultural ties. Another is his love for names and words, for the sounds which we use to identify things in the world. Arguedas' technique of the unique combinations of Spanish and Quechua further emphasized the duality of cultures which exists in so much of the Hispanic world. Since his death in 1969, Arguedas' work has begun to be recognized as one of the principal examples of bilingual naming techniques. No less a figure than Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia has stressed the vital importance of the naming of characters in literary works: "...if the man doesn't have the right name, no one is created, and there are so many novels in the world, including good ones, that roll into oblivion because the characters have the wrong names" (*El espectador* 1982). Arguedas had deliberately attempted to ensure that all the aspects of his work reflected only the right (most appropriately bicultural) names.

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