Quechua Language Use in Modern Peru: An Investigation of Cultural Authenticity and Identity Construction

Tess Renker
What is Quechua?

- Indigenous language spoken mainly in Andean nations of South America
- Language of the Incas
- 8 million Quechua-speakers worldwide; 3.5 million speakers in Peru alone
- Primarily oral language
- Considered to be in decline – an endangered language
Racial and Cultural Discrimination

- Discrimination against Quechua-speakers has as much to do with culture as it does with race
- Quechua language almost impossible to disconnect from indigenous cultures
- Quechua associated with ignorance, poverty, and a “campesino” lifestyle
- Use of Quechua almost immediately excludes speakers from Peruvian society
“Performances” of Mestizo Identities

- Quechua-speakers often forced to “perform” a mestizo identity to avoid racial and cultural discrimination
- Adapt the clothing, lifestyle, and often language of the hegemonic Peruvian majority
- Forced to limit or cease use of Quechua to achieve socioeconomic mobility
- Many prefer not to speak Quechua with their children as a means of protecting them
Idealization of Quechua Language and Culture

- Quechua also linked with an idealized conception of Indigenous peoples
- Indexes “Machu Picchu,” “ancestors,” “forefathers,” “archeological remains,” etc.
- Linked to a certain nostalgia for simpler times and campesino lifestyles
- Oversimplification of contemporary indigenous cultures
- Designation of indigenous peoples as an “exotic other”
“Performance” of Oversimplified Indigenousness

- Indigenousness becomes commoditized
- Individuals “perform” Incan-indigenous stereotypes for economic advancement
- Traits that normally attract discrimination valued for their “exoticism”
- Quechua language use marks one as “authentically indigenous” or “authentically Incan”
Conclusion

- Quechua speakers are both victims of racial-cultural discrimination and the subjects of criticism related to the authenticity of their own indigenousness.
- Often must adopt or “perform” an alternate identity as a means of survival.