Chapter 5

The Politics of Folklore: 1900–1930

In Tarma, Adolfo Vienrich’s pioneering works on folklore established a tradition that later local intellectuals would try to follow. His perspective had been framed by discussions with comrades of the Literary Circle and Unión Nacional on how to create a “national spirit,” first through literature and then through the study of folklore. But the earlier associations of folklore with the past would shift ground in Andean provinces (López 2008). Contributing to this were changes taking place in province-state relations. As the public sphere contracted and political debate was smothered, the cultural field was reconstructed as more inclusive and became more politicized. Popular culture has been conceived as “a space or series of spaces where popular subjects, as distinct from members of ruling groups, are formed” (Rowe and Schelling 1991: 10). This means that alternative political identities, positions, and narratives are expressed and kept alive and are seen as becoming particularly important under authoritarian regimes and political repression. Popular culture therefore retains a potential to become transformative and transgressive, to spill over into the political field, as well as to comment and subvert what is happening in the realm of formal politics. But this does not mean its subversive potential is always realized. Famously, carnival’s overturning of authority has more often been seen as a permissible rupture, or an escape value for popular discontent, than a preparation for revolution. The focus of this chapter is on the political significance of popular culture in Tarma town in the early twentieth century illustrated by the performance of two emblematic events in the town’s cultural repertoire. I discuss how particular elements were singled out and represented by local intellectuals in their search for citizenship through a politics of locality as well as alternatives to elite rule.

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Radicals silenced in the political arena looked to the cultural field for inspiration and for pathways for regeneration. The first cultural event I discuss is a danza or dance drama, *el baile del Inca* (the dance of the Inca), which was performed by members of a trade guild on December 24 in the central square. As described by Vienrich, this danza inverted the historical record by celebrating the Inca and humbling the Spaniard. In the 1920s, performance of *el baile* was no longer given such prominence in the town as before, an indication of changes underway in urban society. During that decade *carnavales* (carnival) grew in popularity as a collective celebration, when for three days before Lent everybody could participate in mocking officialdom and taking over public space. The resurgence of *carnavales* prompted local intellectuals to reflect on the origins of its different elements. Clearly central in both events was the image of a world turned upside down, an inversion of established order. The case study of Tarma suggests that cultural performance was not always treated as a licensed release but at particular moments became threatening to the authorities and therefore repressed.

What we know about the performance of *el baile del Inca* comes from Vienrich’s description in his short book *Azucenas Quechuas*, published in 1905. But he was no innocent observer. His engagement with popular culture needs to be seen through the lens of his radical political project. When describing *el baile* in terms of indigenous resistance, he was probably reading more into the danza than either the guild members performing it or the onlookers watching it would have done. But his version of the danza remained accessible to a local, literate public; his works were reprinted and available in municipal libraries in the central Andean region. Later generations of local intellectuals would not only read his work, but they also often quoted it at length in their own renditions of Tarma’s folklore. In other words, over time, Vienrich’s representation of *el baile* became established as historical fact.

Several local intellectuals pondered the history of *carnavales*. By the 1920s, the event had become associated with particular forms of music, first the muliza (music of Argentinian origin) and then the huayno (music of indigenous origin), which unleashed rivalry between urban neighborhoods for the best new compositions. An early history of the muliza was written by the teacher and poet Gustavo Allende Llavería, who had been a student of Vienrich at the Colegio San Ramón. He set himself the task of explaining how a musical form that everybody knew had come from the Argentine Pampas was made “native” to Tarma and why it had been the popular classes, not the