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### Oral History Project

In 1968, in Peru, military general Juan Velasco Alvarado issued a coup d'état against the previous president Fernando Belaúnde. His government lasted twelve years (1968-1980), and then a coup d'état was raised against him by his Prime Minister, Francisco Morales Bermúdez. Although sources claim that Velasco's government was left-leaning and focused on supporting Indigenous communities in Peru, my grandfather's migration story highlights the reality of people's economic situation in the provinces where Indigenous people are more present.

My grandfather, Renato Cuba Pantigoso, was born and raised in Cusco, but had to migrate to Huancayo (another Peruvian province) when he was seventeen years old to seek better economic opportunities and a chance to support his family. Huancayo, located in the province of Junín, was closer to Perú's capital, Lima.

When I asked him about the political scenario at the time he migrated in 1970, and how he experienced it, he explained:

Estábamos en ese tiempo en un gobierno militar, en una dictadura. Bajo una revolución del gobierno militar instaurado en ese periodo. Esto generaba en su contexto pocas oportunidades laborales porque no había un desarrollo industrial en la economía del país. Entonces, yo al terminar mi secundaria, y viendo que mis posibilidades económicas en mi tierra, en el Cusco, no podían ser cubiertas, desde el punto de vista económico, por mis padres, decidí tener que debía salir para buscar

nuevos horizontes y nuevos futuros que puedan enmarcar el desarrollo de mi vida laboral, profesional.

*(We were at that time in a military government, in a dictatorship. Under a revolution by the military government established in that period. This generated, in its context, few labour opportunities because there wasn't an industrial development in the country's economy. So, I, after finishing my secondary school and seeing that my economic possibilities in my home, in Cusco, could not be fulfilled, from an economic standpoint, by my parents, I decided I had to leave to search for new horizons and new futures that could support the development of my working, professional life).*

Because of this economic insecurity, my grandfather found himself with no choice but to migrate to another province in hopes for upward mobility, and to be able to provide income for himself and his family.

These structural economic problems were not new. They did not only arrive with Velasco's government, but are issues that preceded the year 1970, when my grandfather migrated, and indeed they continue today. We talked about his childhood, and he told me that his father was a merchant without secure pay. With the little money he earned, he had to provide for eleven children. So, at the age of six, my grandfather started working by visiting nearby towns (between half an hour and two hours from the city, by bus) to sell some merchandise in hopes that it would bring some extra income to the family. But, as he reflected later, this is not a responsibility that should be put upon a child:

Los niños a esa edad, su mente está en la fantasía, en el juego, y yo ya tenía que asumir responsabilidad, porque viajaba con el pasaje de ida pero no tenía el pasaje de vuelta. Y eso me generaba cierto temor que si no podía conseguir producto de la

comercialización de lo que llevaba, eventualmente pudiera no tener el pasaje de vuelta y eso me aterraba y me daba miedo, y así discurría, pero siempre con una fortaleza en la fe y conversando con Dios.

*(Children at that age, their minds are in fantasy, in play, but I already had to assume responsibility, because I travelled with a one-way ticket but no money to get back. And this gave me certain fear that if I couldn't get money from the products I had, eventually I could not have a ticket back and that terrified me and I was afraid, and so it went, but always with the strength of faith and talking to God).*

When we were discussing topics for the interview, my grandfather mentioned that once when he asked his grandson (my nine-year-old cousin) what his job was, he replied his job was to play. My grandfather agreed because, as he told me, no one should take away a child's right to live their childhood and to play, because it is an age that never returns. But in my grandfather's case, this right was taken away forcefully because of his economic situation, and he instead learned to feel uncertainty and fear at an incredibly young age.

When my grandfather graduated, he already understood he could not attend university, even a public one, because that generated further expenses like bus tickets, clothes, and books, which his family could not help paying for. He wanted to find a job that would allow him to support his parents and eventually give him enough stability to study. Because of this, and since he already had a sister living in Huancayo, he began his journey:

En una camioneta de unos señores que eran comerciantes y que llevaban productos en la camioneta, y yo conversé y aceptaron en llevarme gratuitamente a cambio de que les cuidara la mercadería que ellos tenían en el carro.

*(In the truck of some men who were merchants and who took their products in the truck, I talked to them and they agreed to take me for free in exchange for watching the merchandise in the truck).*

It was a five-day journey, which gave my grandfather enough time to think of future projects, but also to reflect on the precarity of his situation, starting from zero in a different province. Eventually, he found a job in Huancayo, in a financial company, and made his way up the ladder from then. “Mi meta en esa empresa es siempre ser el mejor,” he said, “cualquiera sea la labor que me dieran, tenía que ser el mejor” (*My goal in that company was to always be the best, no matter what duties they gave me, I had to be the best*). Within six months, he was promoted to sign cheques, and his pay was doubled. Later, he was chosen as a representative of the workers in the Board of Directors at only 18 years old, a decision-making position. With hard work, two years later he started studying business management at university at night. We talked about his life motto, “Da más de lo que piden” (*Give more than what they ask of you*), and what that meant in his journey of upward mobility and dedication to building his professional self:

Si a mí me pedían algo que no sabía, yo nunca decía no. Yo le decía a mis jefes, ‘si tú me enseñas, yo hago.’

*(If they asked me to do something I didn't know, I never said no. I told my bosses: 'If you teach me, I will do it').*

This mindset and change of attitude are what allowed my grandfather to thrive as a professional, and which later gave him the opportunity to build his own business. He needed to adopt this kind of attitude because otherwise he had no chances to develop his reputation. It was not due to any help from the government, as had been their supposed

goal. Instead, this government (and the ones before and after it) created such economic obstacles in his life, which he had to migrate to overcome. In his final reflections, he said:

Yo creo que esta experiencia de vida fue muy triste en la niñez, fue incierto en la adolescencia, fue ya en la vida real del trabajo laboral gratificante porque podía encontrar en los jefes un reconocimiento a mi esfuerzo y a mi labor.

*(I think that this life experience was very sad in my childhood, it was uncertain in adolescence, and it was only in real labour work that it became gratifying because I could find in my bosses an acknowledgement of my effort and work).*

My grandfather's story shows the life of a person who overcame hardship in a country whose government constantly ignores the struggles of the people living outside the capital. I admire him because of what he achieved to give my family stability and opportunities. Finally, he wanted to share one last message before finalizing the interview:

Finalmente invocar a los jóvenes: no pierdan su sueño, no pierdan la fe, y sepan que el esfuerzo al final tiene sus recompensas, y así es como uno tiene que trabajar. Y si no, Dios estará siempre dándonos el esfuerzo, la paciencia y la bendición que podamos lograr lo que nos hemos propuesto.

*(Finally, to the youth: Don't lose your dream, don't lose faith, and know that effort has its rewards in the end, and that is how one should work. And if not, God will always give us the effort, the patience, and the blessings for us to achieve what we have planned to do).*

### Critical Reflection

My grandfather's story is one of the very few where the person can achieve social mobility with their hardworking efforts, in a country that will not support them unless they reach this high status. A story like his, although inspiring, is very rare, as the increasing economic inequality in Peru cannot always be escaped with effort. Still, his story portrays the economic necessity in the ignored provinces of Peru and, as he also suggested, an experience proper of most Latin American countries. This is a "history from below" (Lynd), the story of a person with an experience of poverty and necessity in his early years, a person who had to grow up quicker than he would have liked. But it is also a story that many ignore, so I wish to highlight it with the privilege that his efforts gave me.

For context on Velasco's government, I used *Wikipedia*, not for accuracy, but because it was more likely to portray the established dominant narrative, or the version most people will learn about. While the site describes his "presidency" as introducing "left-leaning policies that addressed Indigenous Peruvians, such as nationalization or agrarian reform" (*Wikipedia*), my grandfather remembers it as a "dictatorship," with an underdeveloped industrial economy and few labour opportunities outside the major provinces of the country (Lima and its surrounding areas). The site also mentions that "the poor and most excluded were prioritized in this system" (*Wikipedia*), a narrative that does not align with my family's economic precarity. As a "history from below," my grandfather's experience shows the point of view of a person who did not have the class status needed for his story to be heard.

These inconsistencies are also proof of Scott Neigh's argument in his Introduction to *Resisting the State*, of how the dominant narratives of "conventional history" are often not representative of what really happened. As he explains, "conventional history makes

certain assumptions about how society works and what history should be, and the exclusion of people and stories and ideas flows from those assumptions” (Neigh 8). The history taught in schools tends to skim over the experiences of people living in the marginalized provinces of Peru when speaking about the military governments (and dictatorships) that took place. Although not exactly painting Velasco as a hero, they still ignore most of the consequences of his government and the failure of his plans.

Some of the impacts on oppressed groups that my grandfather experienced as a lower-class man of Indigenous descent, as highlighted in this interview, include “less access to adequate income and other key resources,” “reduced personal safety,” “less access to, choice about, and control over work,” and “lack of visibility of your reality in the dominant media” (Neigh 12). These are important experiences that should be brought to light by telling “oral history from below.” It should be “a history that reflects the reality of life for the poor and working people, [and] the ultimate subject of that history is likely to be not the individual, but the group” (Lynd 39). Most people living in provinces like Cusco, Puno, Loreto, and ultimately most apart from Lima, have similar experiences of being ignored by the government, living in economic scarcity, children working from the early age of six, and the list goes on.

The *Wikipedia* page did not mention the word “dictatorship,” but it was one of the first that came to mind for my grandfather when I asked him about the political context of the 1970s. This proves that, as Neigh suggests, “history told from the standpoint of workers will treat different stories as important than history that assumes the standpoint of owners” (12). While people living in marginalization and poverty in Peru will see this period as a dictatorship, conventional history and writers from the outside describe it as a “presidency” (*Wikipedia*), ignorant to the lived realities and the stories of the people from below.

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