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Corriendo Tabla: Indigeneity and the History of Surfing in Peru

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Corriendo tabla, which translates to “running board,” is a pastime that symbolizes the national identity of the Latin American country of Peru. While many Spanish-speaking countries use the term *surfear*, derived from the English infinitive “to surf,” this verbiage alludes to the Western introduction of the sport; therefore, by rejecting Westernized diction, Indigenous Peruvians reclaim their role in the inception of surfing. Though modern surfing is a popular, successful, and widely practiced pastime in Peru, it is critical to explore the contradicting histories of surfing in Peru and the implications that these discourses have on Indigenous representation in Peruvian society.

While the history of modern surfing is widely attributed to native Hawaiian culture, many Peruvians believe that the sport evolved from ancient wave-riding practices that took place in their country over five thousand years ago. Due to the geography and climate of Peru as a desert, ancient coastal civilizations struggled to cultivate a sustainable food source as the lack of precipitation made it difficult to live solely off of the land. For this reason, many Indigenous Peruvians looked to the ocean to meet the nutritional needs of entire nations. One such society, the Yungas, were reportedly the first to create reed boats that would be used to overcome the powerful ocean waves in order to catch fish. As the concept of wave-riding became widespread throughout Peru, competitions ensued to test the abilities of local fishermen, and thus the sport of wave-riding was born and spread throughout Polynesia by Peruvian voyagers. In 1947, Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl demonstrated the practicality of this theory when he successfully traveled from Peru to the Polynesian islands in his raft named *Kon Tiki*. Heyerdahl’s 101-day journey showed that Polynesia was populated from east to west by pre-Incan sailors, which provides scientific evidence that wave-riding originated in and was disseminated from Peru. In addition, archaeological evidence of surfing including art, jewelry,

and ceramic sculptures of reed boats and wave-riders that date back to 800-600 B.C.E. have been found in the ancient Peruvian coastal ruins of the Chan-Chan, Mochica, and Chimu people.

In a 2009 interview with Scott Mijares, world-famous Peruvian surfer Felipe Pomar—the first person to win the International Surfing Federation World Surfing Championship in 1965—describes how horse-riding Spanish conquistadors saw native Peruvian fisherman riding reed boats in the 1500s and subsequently coined the boats *caballitos de totoras*, which translates to “little reed ponies.” Pomar also depicts how fishermen used different sized *caballitos* depending on surf conditions, with longer boats and bamboo paddles helpful to navigate smaller waves while larger waves were overcome with hand-paddling in shorter boats. During his interview, Pomar emphasizes that Peruvians’ “whole life, their religion, their livelihood, their recreation, their art, everything revolved around the ocean and the waves.” The Peruvian wave-riding theory gained popularity when Pomar published these facts in an article in California’s *Surfer* magazine in 1988, but it is widely contested by many Western scholars.

The Western discourse on the history of surfing traces its roots back to the Hawaiian Islands, and many individuals believe that surfing was brought to Peru in the mid-twentieth century to be practiced solely by socio-economic elites. Carlos Enrique Dogny, a native Peruvian whose father immigrated to the country from France, was taught to surf by the famous Hawaiian surfer Duke Kahanamoku while he was vacationing in Waikiki. In 1938, Dogny returned to Peru to surf the local waves, and he eventually formed the Waikiki Club of Peru in 1942 which brought together some of the best surfers and seemingly sparked a new wave of surfing competition in the country.

While Dogny may have had a prominent role in re-popularizing or ‘bringing back’ modern surfing in Peru, it is critical not to erase the complex and valid history of wave-riding that many Indigenous Peruvians describe. Attributing the origin of surfing in Peru to Dogny, a privileged member of the Peruvian elite born of a white, French army general and a Peruvian sugarcane heiress, fails to recognize the cultural and ritualistic practices that surfing represents in Indigenous societies. Dogny’s Waikiki Club of Peru also has a complicated history with representation, for many of its members were white, male elites. In addition, members of Dogny’s surf club frequently renamed local Peruvian beaches to match popular Hawaiian or Californian locations, which demonstrates a form of modern colonialism as the original, historical, and native names and the cultural representations behind them are replaced—and seemingly erased—in modern dialogue by foreigners. Furthermore, failure to accept the Indigenous history and practice of wave-riding in Peru continues to invalidate the innovation, ideas, and beliefs of these communities, which is what the members of Peru’s *indigenismo* movement are trying to overcome.

The *indigenismo* movement is a collection of social, political, and artistic acts demonstrated by citizens throughout South America with the intent of shifting societal views away from Spanish colonialism and back towards national heritage. In Peru, this movement is a powerful platform for Indigenous groups to reclaim their histories and to overcome social and economic exploitation. Though the *indigenismo* movement encompasses political protests and the push for Indigenous representation in Peru’s government, its main medium is literature, which provides a powerful tool for Indigenous groups to tell their stories using their own voices and languages. From novelas like Álvaro Linares’s *El Señor de las Olas* (The Lord of the Waves) to Mirko Lauer’s set of poems entitled *Sobrevivir* (To Survive), Peruvian literature also

frequently employs surfing as a prominent theme. Authors of the *indigenismo* movement are writing about surfing not only to connect with their readers, seeing as surfing is a popular pastime in Peru, but also to create space for dialogue on the cultural, ritualistic, and personal aspects of the sport in order to rethink the modern and historical implications of surfing as a primarily white, elite tourist pastime.

Like many areas around the world, Peru has seen an increase in tourism and white settlement, especially along the coastline. Besides the effects of tourism and colonialism on Peru's economy, politics, and social hierarchy, there has also been a prominent shift in the demographics of surfing in Peru. Due to the cost of surf gear, the lack of transportation, and the overpopulation of the breaks, modern surfing in Peru lacks an Indigenous presence. This underrepresentation seems to further shift the discourse on the history of surfing in Peru to a Western, white-male-dominated origin as that is the primary demographic currently populating Peru's waves via tourism. On the contrary, many people believe that the *indigenismo* movement does not attempt to discredit the Western 'Dogny theory' of surfing in Peru; rather, it works to connect the urban surfer to the Indigenous coastal fisherman through an intimate affinity for the ocean. This not only redeems past differences between the subjects, but also connects the modern sport of surfing to its Indigenous wave-riding roots. By empowering local communities and creating space for Indigenous people to reclaim their histories, the *indigenismo* movement does not work to erase nor discredit the Western view on the history of modern surfing, but allows for a compromise as both discourses are validated and interwoven to create a rich and complex history of surfing in Peru.

Although the *indigenismo* movement has begun to address the adversity that Indigenous communities face in modern society, it is by no means a comprehensive solution to the

problematic exploitation of Indigenous people in Peru nor in the world as a whole. However, opening up a dialogue surrounding inequality in Peru—especially in the context of a popular national pastime such as *corriendo tabla*—forces individuals, both native and non-native, to rethink their long-held beliefs and to re-evaluate their role in disseminating incomplete information or overstepping boundaries in foreign nations (including foreign ocean spaces). This dialogue also demonstrates the unique power of surfing as a connection between pleasure and protest, because the surfer locates himself or herself on the breaking point of a wave when it explodes, which physically and metaphorically breaks down binaries while also maintaining fluidity and motion. For many Peruvians, *corriendo tabla* signifies more than the simple pleasure of “running on boards”; rather, it represents the ingenuity and resourcefulness of their ancestors who used this practice to sustain a population for generations. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that histories are like the ocean—they are dynamic, vast, and powerful—and failure to accept the beliefs of all societies leads to problematic underrepresentation and exploitation, even in seemingly innocent pastimes such as surfing.

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