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978-0-521-04049-5 - Native Lords of Quito in the Age of the Incas: The Political Economy of North Andean Chiefdoms

Frank Salomon

Excerpt

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Introduction

Quito, Ecuador's metropolis on the Andean heights, has in earlier incarnations been a Spanish colonial city, an Inca provincial capital, and a crossroads of pre-Incaic aboriginal peoples. Most of the remains which Quito's past has left to us—documents, handiworks, folkloric memories—are palimpsest-like artifacts on which various peoples and ages have left their messages superimposed. Any scholar, whether anthropologist, archaeologist, or historian, must begin his work with the discovery of their stratigraphy, separating out superimposed texts. Only then is there a hope of reconstructing past civilizations and the forces that shaped their succession.

But if the record is a palimpsest, it is not one of those on which a miscellany of unrelated texts has been written. Rather, each successive text is, in a sense, a commentary on the preceding ones; and all share a common theme, the relation between the author's culture and its natural and human environment. Each of the authors has been influenced by the very text which his own writing obscures.

The present work deals with two of these authors substantively, the pre-Incaic aboriginal societies and the Inca empire, and a third heuristically, the Spanish regime through whose records we have some verbal evidence about the first two. Its central goal is to reconstruct the political and economic institutions of the oldest and most obscured stratum, aboriginal Quito.

To Quiteños it will look obvious why the strands of testimony are worth disentangling. The prehispanic origins of their city have proved an almost completely intractable problem, heavily freighted with patriotic emotion and encumbered by old, unforgiving polemics. But its interest has not faded. As an idiographic problem—an attempt at knowledge of a unique reality—it is fascinating. The present work is intended, among other things, as a vindication of idiographic inquiry, and as a contribution to the Quiteños' enterprise in historical self-knowledge.

But it also addresses some more general themes: First, aboriginal Quito

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appears a promising case for the study of chiefdoms. Like Polynesia and Central America, the northern Andes offer ethnohistorical evidence of how stratified and centralized but stateless societies functioned. Archaeologists, who cannot count on recovering the same functional aspects covered in the document record, regard such cases as windows on the emergence of complex society. Like the Polynesian and Central American cases also, Quito-area evidence clarifies likenesses and differences between chiefdom and state by allowing us to observe the two kinds of unit in conflict and (later) in interlocking organization. But unlike the other two, the Quito case presents us with the panorama of an invading state that is non-European. The Inca conquest of aboriginal Quito allows one to consider such phenomena as colonialism, political frontiers, etc., in a more thoroughly comparative light than most others do.

Second, the case bears on larger issues in New World prehistory. Ecuador is one of the areas which Willey (1971:254-359) classified in an "Intermediate Area" connecting the Andean and Mesoamerican culture areas but belonging to neither. Is this area "intermediate" only in geography? The evidence from Quito suggests that it is also "intermediate" in a cultural and organizational sense. Aboriginal institutions in Quito resemble both Aztec and Inca polities, combining traits usually thought of as distinctive to one or the other. It is an old and traditionally evaded question whether South American and Mesoamerican empire-building traditions have a common prehistory. If we can get a clear view of polities that seem ontogenetically prior to either, located halfway between them, we have at a minimum an interesting problem in distinguishing between common origin, independent invention, and contact effects.

Third, the case is methodologically interesting. The attempt to reconstruct a social order from testimony obscured by not one but two layers of alien discourse demands some special effort in the way of source criticism and interpretation. That it can be done to any useful degree is a hopeful sign for ethnohistory, since a large number of other nonliterate societies appear in the document record only through similarly multilayered, many-voiced, culturally distorting testimonies.

On the practice of ethnohistory

Any rendering of the past is, among other things, an exploration of the potentials of the author's own culture: specifically, of its ability to give its own bearers an intelligible place in the flux of events, and an intelligible relationship to other times and peoples whose foreignness would, if uninterpreted, fill the world of thought with chaos and anomaly. Cultures differ profoundly in their ways of doing this. Some have interpreted change and difference in a way irreducibly different from what we call

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“history,” by conceiving them *sub specie aeternitatis*, as manifestations of fixed structural relationships which exist, not in prior time as opposed to the present, but beyond time itself and behind all experienced realities. Others have seen past events as outward signs of inherent directionality built into the nature of time, whether cyclical, eschatological, or teleological in an indefinitely progressive sense; consciousness of this directionality is then itself the means of decoding testimony about events. Variation exists even within recent Western historiography. Some students have adhered to a positivist vision in which time is felt to be to some extent transparent, so that the remains of other times and peoples are capable of telling their own story in a way which breaks through and overcomes the limitations of the historian’s own experience. Others, including the present writer, despair of apprehending the past “as it really happened” in a final sense, and yet see in the study of the past an essentially reflexive value. Although one can only see the past and the foreign in the mirror of one’s own culture, a person who turns that mirror in new directions will see more than just his own reflection; he will see other people using other mirrors. By observing their actions he may be able to create within the limitations of his own culture an awareness, both of how people “make history” through other systems of thought, and of the possibility that the inner content of their action is ultimately beyond our reach. How great a degree of validity one attaches to these visions depends on how confident one is of knowing the shape and properties of the instruments through which one looks. The value of such study is reflexive in the sense that it encourages us to create special instruments anew and examine our old ones.

The ethnohistorian dwells at one of the uncomfortable but exhilarating points where all these problems must be kept in constant view. His special instruments for perceiving the foreign past are insights and categories derived from the fieldwork of ethnologists, and whatever confidence may be reposed in them derives from the fact that they were created in a dialogue with the living. Although the conceptual problems of working with live informants are similar to those of interrogating testimony from the past, the element of accident and loss is less destructive, the variety of voices that can be heard is greater, and therefore the pretension to a holistic picture of a society less unrealistic. The field ethnologist has more opportunities than the historians to seek out situations that will reveal to him where his perception has been influenced by unrecognized cultural premises. For these reasons such ethnological categories as “chiefdom,” “redistribution,” or *llajta* (Andean settlement) are used instead of terms borrowed from the ethnologically untested terminology of traditional historiography.

Nonetheless it is necessary to deal consciously with the question of how we propose to reconstruct past institutions ethnologically while working

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from testimonies whose own terminology and tacit assumptions we may not share or even fully grasp.

There is a difference in basic assumptions between the spirit in which the palimpsest-like written record is used here, and the way it has been used by the recompilers who create synthetic narrative histories based on chronicles. A colonial chronicle is a document of at least three strata: the Spanish author has construed in light of his own culture the data offered by Inca informants, or those who knew them, concerning not only Inca but also aboriginal peoples. The modern recompilers have tacitly, perhaps unconsciously, assumed that the best hope for understanding aboriginal cultures is to seize upon the historical kinship which we and the chroniclers share as members of a west European tradition. Our informants may not be Andean themselves, but at least they are people we can hope to understand when they speak of Andean things. There exists an excellent critical literature for this purpose, and there can be no doubt that such study has been fruitful as regards the understanding of colonial origins. But however skillfully one negotiates the cultural bridge between us and the sixteenth-century Castilians, the question remains, How strong is the bridge between their mental image and the Andean world it tried to apprehend?

Each chronicle must be studied individually in this respect. But certain tenets of the European thought of the period were so universal and deeply rooted as to form latent axioms which cannot help but have influenced their renderings of Andean reality. Since their time our cultural agenda has changed a great deal, and whole new subcultures, among them anthropology, have made new demands on the past. It has become necessary to take into account the likelihood that these latent assumptions color the data in a way which, from our point of view, obscures precisely the points we most urgently want to explore. Quite apart from the sheer scarcity of chronicle evidence about Quito, certain considerations of this kind lead modern ethnohistorians to turn aside from, or at least to supplement, classical sources in Andean historiography.

First, the chronicle record is strongly colored by the assumption that change is best understood as the product of clashes between elite groups through military means. The notion that changes in livelihood or in cultural rules about the uses of goods may be causative forces is usually absent.

Second, the notion of society implicit in most chronicles is that of separate strata in a constant relationship to each other, with the active principle of mobilization and change embodied in a privileged minority, and the principle of repetitive, cyclical action in the vassal majority; there is little suggestion of any internal dynamic or tension leading to change, so that any deviation from an idealized estate-like model is seen as social pathology rather than history.

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Third, the idea of history as the teleologically driven working out of the salvation of the world through universal Christianity, in which Spain was to play a militant role, not only interferes with efforts to understand Andean religious and social thought as an intelligent approach to the environment, but more fundamentally inhibits the perception that the Andean past was something wholly unfamiliar. Many writers were driven by a need to find ways of subsuming it in a familiar scheme of unified salvation history, lest the existence of an inexplicable form of humanity call in question their entire world view.

Fourth, chroniclers were disposed to admire and even morally justify modes of government they saw as similar to European ideals of kingship and empire. Even as they deplored Inca paganism, they often upheld Inca claims to a *mission civilizatrice*. As a result most chroniclers take little interest in non-Inca local lords. Disdain for these nobles, apparently seen as comparable to Spanish warlords whose *luchas de bandas y linajes* ('factional and dynastic struggles') threatened the nascent nation state, is often particularly strong in those authors who had served as crown officials.

If there were no sources but the chronicles, there would be little hope of circumventing these assumptions and their consequences. Fortunately there are other sources, namely, the vast body of administrative and judicial documentation on native communities which accrued in the course of routine government work from the earliest days of European rule. These documents were researched and compiled for practical administrative purposes and required types of knowledge much more congenial to the anthropological agenda. Whatever ideology their writers may have held, they were constrained by the functional necessity of treating native communities as systemic wholes in whose survival the Crown had a vested interest, and therefore they had no choice but to understand the local lords as parts of a more general social and economic order.

Unlike chroniclers of apical institutions, fieldworker-bureaucrats sought detailed depictions of whole communities, down to the last orphan child or resident alien. They considered productive capacity and mechanisms of exchange as integral parts of political order. They were capable of taking stock of differences between culturally ideal and de facto political behavior without indignation. They considered the differences between local and imperial levels of government without presupposing them to be a moral issue, or considering local levels less worthy of study. Perhaps the most decisive advantage of such sources is the practice of presenting raw data in the organizing categories supplied by Andean witnesses themselves. Although these researchers worked from motives far different from those of ethnographers, the compiling of opposed testimony in adversary proceedings and the evaluation of results according to their usefulness in the laboratory of practical politics sub-

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jected this research to validity tests at least as rigorous as any used by narrative chroniclers.

It is possible, as John V. Murra first demonstrated, to undertake true ethnographies of the Andean past by using such sources. The first part of this study (Chapters 1-5) is an attempt at a specialized ethnography, concentrating on the political economy of the northern chiefdoms—that is, the relations between the mechanisms of exchange locally prevalent and the power structure of villages and regions. It begins with a sketch of the problem in its historical and geographical context (Chapter 1), continues by tracking down in detail the collectivities and productive systems involved (Chapter 2), locates their respective products as parts of a regional economic web (Chapter 3), focuses on the institutional links which channeled them (Chapter 4), and finally studies the aboriginal political order as a system of privilege based on advantages in manipulating these links (Chapter 5). Some of the detailed material in Chapters 1 and 2 will be of interest primarily to Ecuadorianists. It is presented in a fashion designed to allow skimming.

Our incomplete knowledge of chiefdoms is not a result only of the paucity of well-studied cases. It also derives from the fact that we, as products of highly state-centered societies, have trouble in conceiving how the play of small units, none of which has decisive dominion over the rest, can result in an integrated system of political economy on a more than local scale. In some measure early colonial observers suffered the same handicap. When trying to describe chiefdoms, sixteenth-century writers usually called them *behetrias*, a medieval jural term meaning a community entitled to choose its own ruler because it has no legitimate overlord. In the era of the Hapsburgs it carried connotations of chaos and misrule. But the supposition that rule by chiefs entails political chaos does little to explain the situation we actually find recorded, and it was utterly alien to the minds of people who testified about chiefdoms from firsthand knowledge. Nor is there any warrant for supposing the political life of chiefdoms to be more “simple” than that of states. The process of maneuvering and adjusting in a human environment over which no single chief had full dominion must have been highly complicated, and unless we assume that on the whole chiefs were willing to hazard danger and economic disruption to an infinite degree, we must admit the likelihood that some more or less stable order resulted. This is not to deny that the system was conflict-ridden, or that chiefs fought wars. It does deny that we are entitled to confuse historical chiefdoms with that purely speculative hypothesis, the war of each against all.

Such an ethnography of the past, however, does not address the more strictly historical calling of ethnohistory. It concentrates on function, not on change, and would be open to all the criticisms leveled at “ethno-

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graphic present” treatments if it failed to give some account of the fact that the chiefdoms as we know them were not only in a state of change, but in the crux of a great historical upheaval: the irruption of central Andean Inca civilization into the northern Andes. History provides any number of instances of chiefdoms which fell into the crucible of a great centralizing power, but few more intriguing than this. Chapters 6 and 7 address the question of how chiefdoms were made over into elements of a state which, like all states, despised the *behetría* type of rule, but which differed from states nearer our own experience in at least two important respects: first, its rulers were intimately familiar with Andean chiefdoms, so that their mode of operation shows a subtle understanding of chiefdom politics; second, their vision of their own role, and of the transformation they proposed to effect, belonged to an intellectual order very different from that of any European empire. The sources for Inca rule are richer than those on local lords, and as a result it is possible not only to reconstruct some of the specific operations by which the Incas transformed the chiefdoms, but even to gain some clues from their behavior about the meaning of this process as seen under the assumptions of Inca thought.

Structuralist students of Tawantinsuyu such as Wachtel and Zuidema have made advances toward elucidating the logical and ideational framework in which the invaders from Cuzco organized experience. These authors, by teasing out the principles latent in Inca testimony and artifacts, have shown that the Incaic perception of diachrony was far more alien to our mentality than, for example, the teleological world view of militant Spanish Catholicism. In fact it had little in common with what we call history. Action over time was not conceived as changing the world, but as representing on the canvas of time the same supra-temporal structures that were also represented in space through the sacred geography of holy places, in plastic material through the use of imagery, and in social interaction through ritual.

For these reasons it is not possible to read Inca accounts of the past as if they were chronicles or histories. They are parts of a different enterprise altogether. Yet it is not necessary either to conclude from this fact that Western paradigms are of no use in studying the Inca past, or, on the other side, to slough off the fascinating problem of the inner content of Inca history by assuming it to be merely an ideological veneer hiding more fundamental “-etic” considerations. We know that Andean modes of thought, although a world apart from our sciences, provided an utterly practical and highly refined apparatus for solving ecological and adaptive problems. And similarly we must conclude, because the record of Inca domination is conclusive, that they also provided in ways we have yet to understand an equally practical guide to the tough realities of statecraft. Perhaps the most striking single fact about the sequence of events that

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constituted the making of northernmost Tawantinsuyu is the fact that, when one brings together testimony from numerous native witnesses, diverse in their ethnicity and their attitudes to the Inca state, what emerges is not a record of rough-and-tumble opportunist forays but a pattern of regular sequences so sharply defined that one cannot help suspecting a will on the Incas' part to design history itself in the image of a structural ideal. Perhaps some day we will be able to see how human conflict—the hard facts of scarcity and war—were conceived not as disruptions of a patterned time-space, but as yet another medium in which, as in art, architecture, and ritual, the fundamental pattern of the Inca universe might be made manifest through human action.

In the context of the modest findings reported here, such a hope is utopian. But there would be little point in following a craft as arduous as ethnohistory if one did not have high hopes for it in the long run. When speculating on the maximum ambitions of Andean ethnohistory, we might well ask whether it is not within our power to take up, from our side, the project which Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala first proposed from the Andean side. It is fitting that we should become students of a master from among the defeated, because the victims of conquest, unlike the victors, do not have the option of denying the reality of the deep cultural differences between the two sides. As victors, some of us have evaded the problem of foreignness by subsuming foreign peoples under familiar categories (“peasant,” “primitive,” etc.) and trying to derive the subjective qualities of their historic action on the cheap by making deductions from these imposed terminologies. Such an evasion is not possible for the defeated, on whom the culture of the victors has been forced. They experience it as an efficacious reality; they cannot deny its difference, because they suffer the consequences of the difference.

One element of an ideal ethnohistory, then, is literally “ethno-history” in a sense analogous to ethnobotany or ethnoscience; that is, an attempt to render a foreign group’s perception of the meaning of historical change by studying the latent or overt principles of thought through which it ordered action. But it is equally important to remember that Guaman Poma did not presume in some way to jump outside his own culture and portray the two cultural worlds as if from a European viewpoint. His insistence on his identity as a man of the Andes, rooted in the legitimacy of a local chiefdom, has its intellectual counterpart in the fact that he tries to apprehend and appropriate foreign reality by applying to it characteristically Andean modes of analysis. His historiography is an operation within his own culture, an attempt to expand its capabilities by apprehending what lay outside it. Similarly the ethnohistoric ideal would be a historiography with an inside and an outside. It would contain a rendering of behavior in terms of explanatory concepts indispensable to our own system of thought (such as

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scarcity and decision making, social integration and conflict, complexity and simplicity, culture and nature, etc.), which would make foreign peoples' historic acts intelligible in a way that meets our standards for explaining action in general. Indeed we have no choice but to do so, consciously or unconsciously. But this explanation should not rest on arbitrary attributions of motives to the people studied; on the contrary, its value would lie in its being joined to an "inner history" showing that this intelligible action may be achieved through foreign systems of thought. The ultimate mission of the ethnohistorian is not just to turn anthropology to advantage in broadening the practice of Western historiography. It is to develop a more genuinely anthropological attitude toward history itself by showing how cultures possess inwardly different diachronic senses – different premises about the relation between human action and change – and that these condition the way each "makes history" in its own terms.

Scope of the study

Our point of departure has been the work of John V. Murra, and especially that phase of it which is synthesized in his essay "El control vertical de un máximo de pisos ecológicos en la economía de las sociedades andinas" ('Vertical Control of a Maximum of Ecological Floors in the Economy of Andean Societies' [1972] 1975). Since some of its terms and theoretical elements recur throughout the present work, it will be convenient to sketch them before undertaking the argument.

Murra has called attention to an inescapable functional imperative facing Andean societies, namely the need for access to the natural resources of multiple ecological zones located at widely varying altitudes. Some societies have drawn on levels all the way from the beaches of the Pacific to the barren pinnacles of the New World's highest mountain chain, and eastward into Amazonia. Others have exploited smaller segments of this "vertical" array. The multitiered landscape, and the many human groups inhabiting its different "pisos" or "stories," offered extraordinary cultural and natural riches, but also challenged the ingenuity and the might of every group which hoped to guarantee its material autonomy. The combination of cultural elements serving to deal with them is termed the "vertical control apparatus." Although this apparatus varied in its scale and political organization, study of ethnohistorical sources and the results of field studies during the 1960s afforded strong evidences of a characteristic constellation of vertical controls observable in very many central and south Andean societies, from small villages to the Inca empire itself. This constellation, nicknamed the "vertical archipelago," rests on the management of several more or less small enclaves located so as to control crucial resources at multiple

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vertical and ecological “stories,” sacrificing territorial contiguity to economic autarchy.

In particular, the “vertical archipelago” consisted of a relatively densely populated settlement, culturally more or less homogeneous and self-identified as a single collectivity, where both political authority and the production of the major foodstuffs centered, and multiple remote enclaves in such crucial “vertical outliers” as high salt pans, lumber-bearing forests in the *montaña* belt (sub-Andean tropical forest), coca fields along irrigable semi-arid valleys, and the fishing waters of the Humboldt current. The persons stationed in such outliers retained full rights in their home community. But their neighbors at the outliers ordinarily came from many “foreign” groups, including some of self-consciously different ethnicity. This pattern, although it existed in a characteristically Inca variant, is thought to originate in remote pre-Incaic times. The spatial limits of its distribution are by no means clear. The clarification of these limits, and of alternative solutions to the “vertical” problem, promises to help define intra-Andean cultural differences and the level of organization at which we can hope to find pan-Andean traits. It may also contribute to eventual explanation of the peculiar trajectory of Andean “horizon” cultures, with their explosive expansion and rapid fragmentation.

In regard to the case of the Quito region (see Figure 1), which differs from those studied by Murra in the 1960s both in its ecology and in its relatively tenuous connection to pre-Incaic “horizon” cultures, the following positions will be argued:

- First, that it is possible to detect, through the double curtain of Incaic and Spanish impositions, the outline of certain institutions foreign to both and aboriginal in origin.
- Second, that the chiefdoms (“*cacicazgos*,” “*curacazgos*”) to which these belonged were, although small in scale, highly centralized and stratified.
- Third, that their economies solved the “vertical” problem in a manner qualitatively different from that seen in “archipelago” formations by developing diversified exchange links over medium and long distances.
- Fourth, that the power of chiefs (“*curacas*,” “*caciques*”) rested in large measure on the ability to guarantee such links and to further them through the use of politically authorized exchange specialists.
- Fifth, that the Inca conquest brought with it the gradual dismantling of such systems and their replacement by ecologically equivalent “archipelagos.”

The sources

Attempts to define the polity of ancient Quito have not been lacking. But in general the inquiry has bogged down in interminable debates about a