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Religion

Inca religion was extraordinarily complex and constituted a fundamental part of Inca life. It emphasized formality and ritual; most activities were focused on agricultural practices, deity worship, or curing disease. For this reason the Incas had a very large group of priests who directed the formal religious practices of the state, and other individuals who could be consulted to help in matters of a more personal nature. Although religious and governmental bureaucracies were separate, it would be a mistake to say there was a separation of church and state. Few governmental actions were conducted without consulting the gods. In fact, the more important the activity, the more important the religious rituals that were necessary for the success of the venture. In addition, the religious bureaucracy depended on the state's conquests to provide food and supplies needed to conduct its affairs.

The conquering Spaniards regarded any religion except Christianity as evil and any other religious beliefs as devil worship. Thus they made an exceptionally determined effort to stamp out native religion. Nonetheless the Spaniards' interest in eliminating the native religion also led them to write a good deal about its practices and thereby pass on knowledge about it to future generations.

MYTHOLOGY

Myths are stories or legends concerning people and events in the past, especially ones that attempt to explain why the world or a people came to be. Myths of many societies are purely fanciful and have no basis in

fact, such as those of the Greeks. Others may have some basis in fact, yet through countless years of telling and retelling have become more story than fact. Inca mythology contains examples of both. Also, myths concerning the origins of the world have been used by political leaders in many societies to justify the world order as they see it, especially in cases where there are marked inequalities between people. The Inca leadership certainly used their mythology for such purposes.

According to Rowe (1946: 315), all the Inca myths recorded by the Spaniards either explained where the Incas came from (origin myths) or described historical events. Whether other kinds of myths were held by the Incas is unknown.

The origin myth of the Incas justified their elevated social standing over other people. The founding father and first king of the Incas was Manco Capac, according to Guaman Poma. He came out of the earth from a cave at a place called Pacariqtambo, accompanied by three brothers and four sisters. Over a period of several years they traveled to Cuzco with a group of other people who were loyal to them, who also came from caves at Pacariqtambo (see Introduction). One brother became feared by the others for his exceptional strength and was sent back to Pacariqtambo, where he was sealed up in the original caves. Another brother stayed at the mountain of Huanacauri, where he originated the male puberty rites. He then turned to stone and subsequently became an important cult figure of the Incas. The two other brothers and the four sisters continued to Cuzco. Upon reaching the Cuzco valley the Incas drove a golden staff into the ground, which was the sign that this would be the place of their permanent settlement. A third brother turned himself into a stone field guardian. Under the direction of the remaining brother, Manco Capac, the Incas drove out the native occupants and founded the capital of Cuzco (Guaman Poma 1980: 80-87).

In another variation of this myth, Garcilaso (1966: 52-53) has Manco Capac and his sister (who was also his wife) travel to Pacariqtambo from Lake Titicaca, and then to Cuzco. After founding Cuzco, Manco traveled across the empire, organizing the ethnic groups and bringing them civilization.

The differences between these two versions are important, for they affect the social relations of the people who live with the Incas in the Cuzco valley. In Guaman Poma's version, Manco Capac and his sister originate in Pacariqtambo and are accompanied from there by others; these others become the Incas-by-privilege. Because they accompanied the original ruler to Cuzco, they too are given the status of "Inca." In Garcilaso's version, only Manco Capac and his sister come from Lake Titicaca; therefore the Incas-by-privilege were originally not "Inca." They were given the title later. The differences between the two versions thus reflect a difference in whether the Incas-by-privilege were Incas from

ancient times or only became Incas when the royal couple arrived in the Cuzco valley.

An interesting perspective is provided by Brian Bauer (1992: 30). He notes that Garcilaso was the great-grandson of Huayna Capac and hence a royal Inca. From Garcilaso's perspective, then, the Incas-by-privilege owed their Inca status to his ancestors' having bestowed it on them. Guaman Poma, however, was from Huánuco and was therefore non-Inca. He saw the differences between the Incas-by-blood and Incas-by-privilege as one of degree.

Regardless, the clear implication of the origin myth is that the descendants of Manco Capac and the rulers of the Incas were the only noble Incas, and that others were subservient to them. The myth also justifies the Inca royal tradition of the king marrying his full sister (because Manco Capac did). In addition, it explains the existence of some of the shrines near Cuzco (where the two brothers were turned to stone) and the importance of the male puberty rites, because they were given to the Incas by one of the original brothers before he turned to stone (Rowe 1946: 318).

Another important myth describes how the earth began. The Incas believed in *Viracocha*, who was both the god who created the world and also a man who traveled the earth doing great deeds. Viracocha created the world and the sky with all its stars, and he brought the sun and moon out of an island in Lake Titicaca to light it. He then went to Tiahuanaco and formed people and animals out of clay. He painted each tribe's clothing differently. He gave them distinctive cultures and sent them into the earth, to emerge from it in their homelands. He then traveled throughout the world to see if everyone was behaving properly. Upon reaching Ecuador, he said farewell and walked out across the Pacific Ocean. Rowe (1946: 318) mentions how Garcilaso's version of the Inca origin myth seems to combine the myth of Viracocha and that of Manco Capac.

The myth of Viracocha explains in simple terms how the earth, stars, and people were all created by a divine being. In this respect it is similar to the version of God's creation of the world in the Bible. Rowe (1946: 316) suggests that the Incas used parts of the origin myths of other people—both of their own area and others, especially the Lake Titicaca region—to come up with one that explained the world as they had redesigned it.

GODS

The Incas had many *deities*, or gods, each with a particular area of influence and power. The most powerful was Viracocha, the Creator. This deity was neither male nor female. The Spaniards saw several stat-

ues of this being in various temples. One such statue, of solid gold, was in Cuzco; it stood about 4 feet high. The figure's right arm was raised and its fist was clenched, except for the thumb and forefinger (Rowe 1946: 293). Viracocha gave the other gods their authority. For this reason Viracocha was seen as a more distant power in the world, and the other gods had more immediate influence and control over the actions of humans. Thus individuals were more preoccupied with rituals for the other gods.

The three principal gods under Viracocha were *Inti*, the Sun; *Illapa*, the Thunder or Weather god; and *Mama-Quilla*, the Moon. *Inti*, the most powerful, was the god of agriculture. This god was represented as a golden disk with rays and a human face in the center. *Illapa*, the next most powerful, was associated with rain. He was usually depicted as a man in the sky wearing radiant clothing, holding a war club in one hand and a sling in the other. *Mama-Quilla* was a woman and the wife of the Sun. The Moon did not appear to have any particular functions, but the lunar cycle was the basis for the Inca nighttime calendar.

The gods of the sky, *Inti* and *Illapa*, were important to the Incas, no doubt because the sky was the source of both sun and rain for sustaining the crops. However, of equal importance were the god of the earth, *Pacha-Mama*, and the god of the sea, *Mama-Cocha*, both of which were regarded as female. *Pacha-Mama* was important to the Incas as agriculturalists, whereas *Mama-Cocha* was important to fishing groups residing near the ocean. *Mama-Cocha* was also the ultimate source of all water, including rivers, streams, and irrigation water. Hence she was important even to the Incas in Cuzco. Below these deities were various gods associated with stars or constellations that served different functions. For example, some stars watched over flocks of camelids, others over wild animals, and still others over plants and seeds (Rowe 1946: 295).

All major deities of the Incas constituted an official cult. Although the cult religious structures were called Sun Temples by the Spaniards (suggesting that they were used exclusively by the priests of *Inti*), they also housed the other deities and the priests who served them. Only the most important deities, such as Viracocha, *Inti*, and *Illapa*, were represented by images. *Mama-Quilla*, *Pacha-Mama*, and *Mama-Cocha* apparently had no images, and neither did the lesser deities.

HUACAS AND SPIRITS

In addition to the deities just discussed, the Incas had a host of other beliefs in the supernatural. A pervasive part of Inca religious life involved the belief that many places and objects were imbued with supernatural powers. These supernatural features were called *huacas*. It is unclear whether the objects and places were



Inca king speaking to huacas, located in a circle. The huacas include ancestor mummies, mountains, rocks, and springs.

spirits themselves or simply the locations where spirits resided. Most huacas were local features of a settlement, significant to its residents only. Apparently the most common were springs and rocks. The Incas also had amulets that they believed held supernatural powers and that functioned like portable huacas (Rowe 1946: 297).

Particular reverence was also given to the bodies of the dead, who were regarded as huacas. The Inca kings' bodies were mummified after death and placed in temples, to be brought out during festivals and worshipped. Moreover, the dead Inca kings were considered to be active participants in the activities of their panacas, so their mummies were provided food and drink.

An unusual element of Inca religion was the *ceque system* (Zuidema 1964, 1990). This was a series of straight lines that radiated out from the

Coricancha in Cuzco, extending to the horizon and possibly beyond. Along the ceques were a series of 385 huacas, of which 328 served as a ceremonial calendar, according to Zuidema (see Chapter 4, Science and the Calendar). The ceque system served two purposes: to organize the geographic space around Cuzco, and to order the huacas according to the days of the year. For each huaca there was a special day when rituals were observed, and different social groups in Cuzco were responsible for the rituals of each huaca. The royal panacas were responsible for some of the huacas, and the non-royal ayllus and Incas-by-privilege were responsible for others. The system reinforced social distinctions between these groups.

The Incas believed in both evil and good powers that could be manipulated for the good or detriment of humans. Evil spirits were dreaded by the Incas. Unlike the deities and huacas discussed above, who were generally considered helpful to humans unless proper rituals were not observed, spirits were always considered to be evil and intent on harming humans.

The Incas' beliefs in an afterlife were akin to beliefs in a heaven and hell. Good people went to live with the Sun, where life was the same as on earth but there was always plenty of food and drink. Bad people went to live beneath the earth, where they were perpetually cold and had only stones to eat. The Inca nobility went to heaven regardless of character (Rowe 1946: 298). The Incas believed that the soul of a dead person protected its descendants from evil and liked its body to be brought out during festivals to be given food and chicha.

RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

Priests and priestesses associated with the official shrines and deities were fulltime specialists, supported by the tribute paid by conquered people. The fact that a third of the tribute went to the support of formal Inca religion indicates how many people were involved. There was a hierarchy of priests roughly paralleling the administrative hierarchy of the state. The priests were graded according to the rank of the shrine in which they worked. The highest-ranking priests were those who worked for the Sun. At the very top was a high priest, who was a close relative of the king and therefore related to the Sun. There was also a hierarchy of the individuals at each shrine: the attendants were subservient to the priests in charge of ceremonies.

All the major deities of the Incas were worshipped in the same temples, each with its own shrine. The shrines of the major deities—the Sun, Viracocha, the Thunder, and so on—had attendants; the more important the shrine, the more attendants were present. Different attendants had

different functions: for example, some were in charge of divination, others of sacrifices, still others of day-to-day activities. The temples of the official Inca cult had their own group of consecrated women, the *mamaconas*, who were selected from the Chosen Women. These women did the same tasks as other Chosen Women, making chicha and textiles for the temples, but could not marry or be given as wives to officials. A woman of highest nobility was in charge of them. It is apparent that the *mamacona* for a temple served all the different deities at that temple; they were not exclusively for the use of the Sun.

In addition to the shrines of the Inca cult, there were many local shrines usually associated with particular huacas (discussed earlier). These might or might not have a temple or even a building, but most usually had some kind of attendant. Rowe (1946: 299) says that this attendant was typically an elderly man who could not help with other tasks. The shrines were not supported by the Inca agricultural tax but, rather, by the individuals for whom the place was sacred.

In addition to the religious specialists who officiated at the Inca cults and huacas, there were curers and sorcerers. *Curers* were individuals who claimed to have been contacted by spirits and told how to heal illnesses. *Sorcerers* were individuals who claimed to be able to speak with spirits and so were consulted when a person needed information, such as where a lost object could be found or what was happening far away. Sorcerers lived among the local people and were greatly feared (Rowe 1946: 302–303).

Particularly powerful sorcerers near Cuzco used small braziers of fire to speak with spirits. According to Rowe, they used ventriloquism to make it seem as if the fires were speaking to the person. These individuals were consulted only for the most serious matters and were paid well for their services.

RITUALS

To the Incas, the ritual, or practice of religious beliefs, was an essential aspect of life. One conducted rituals to ensure that one's life and well-being were not jeopardized, or to ward off evil spirits. If rituals were conducted properly, misfortunes could be avoided.

Almost all rituals were accompanied by some kind of sacrifice, most often guinea pigs or llamas but occasionally children. Most huacas were given llamas or guinea pigs. The main deities—Viracocha, the Creator; Inti, the Sun; and Illapa, the Thunder—always had distinctive colored llamas sacrificed to them: brown to Viracocha, white to Inti, and mixed color to Illapa. The animal was sacrificed by having its throat cut. Food, chicha, and coca were also given to huacas as sacrifices. The food and coca were usually burned, whereas

Sacrifices

the chicha was poured on the ground (Rowe 1946: 306–307). Cumbi cloth was also an important sacrificial item, especially to the Sun. Seashells, gold, silver, and corn flour were used as offerings as well.

The most important ceremonies, natural catastrophes, war, and the coronation of new kings involved sacrifices of humans—always children between the ages of 10 and 15. The children, always non-Incas, had to be physically perfect. The procedure involved a feast for the child so he or she would not go to Viracocha hungry. Following the feast the child would be strangled, its throat cut, or its heart cut out and offered to the deity still beating (Rowe 1946: 306). Sometimes children were sacrificed to mountain huacas by bringing them to the summit, getting them drunk, and then killing them (Reinhard 1992: 99–101).

The practice of child sacrifice might appear cruel to the reader, but one must remember that the sacrifice only occurred for the most important religious reasons. Humans were sacrificed for these events because they were considered the most worthy thing that could be offered to the gods. Children, rather than adults, were offered presumably because they were more pure in spirit than adults. Although it was no doubt a painful emotional experience for the families of the sacrificed children, to be selected was considered a great honor by both the child and his or her family.

Numerous public ceremonies were associated with the calendars and with special events. Some ceremonies were held on a daily basis, such as the sacrifice of wood, food, and cloth to Inti. More elaborate ceremonies—including making sacrifices, dancing, feasting, and perhaps recounting important historical events—were held during times of crisis, at the coronation or death of a king, and during the various months of the calendar.

The three most important ceremonial months were *Capac Raymi* (December), *Aymoray* (May), and *Inti Raymi* (June). Bernabé Cobo (1990) offers detailed descriptions of these and other ceremonies. *Capac Raymi* celebrated the beginning of the rainy season and included the summer solstice, marking the longest day of the year. The most important rituals conducted were the male puberty rites (described in Chapter 3, *Private Life and Culture*). Ceremonies to other deities, especially Inti, were also conducted during this month. To emphasize the importance of the rituals, all non-Inca residents of Cuzco had to leave the center of town for the three weeks of the rites. They stayed in special areas near the main roads leading to their place of origin. When they returned at the end of the ceremony, they were fed lumps of corn flour mixed with the blood of sacrificed llamas. The lumps were said to be gifts from Inti to them, but ones that would inform the deity if the person spoke badly of it or the king. Several days of dancing and drinking chicha followed the return of the provincial residents of Cuzco, and the month closed with a

special sacrifice on the last day. To celebrate the end of the puberty rites, and therefore the entrance into manhood of a new group of boys, food tribute from the provinces was delivered to Cuzco at this time (Rowe 1946: 309).

Aymoray took place in the modern month of May, to celebrate the corn harvest. People brought the corn from the fields, dancing and singing songs that asked that the corn not run out before the next harvest. Still singing and dancing, the people joined together in the city, where a large number of llamas were sacrificed. The raw meat from the llamas was distributed to all Incas, young and old, who ate some of it with toasted corn. Thirty other llamas were sacrificed and the meat burned at all the huacas in Cuzco, the most important ones receiving more meat, the less important ones receiving less meat.

Later in the month, more offerings of llamas were made to Inti in thanks for the corn harvest. Then the people assembled in a sacred field near Cuzco, where the boys who had received their emblems of manhood in the previous initiation ceremonies brought small sacks of the field's harvest into the city. Then everyone returned and plowed the field as a symbol of the importance of the corn harvest. Rituals to the corn deity, *mamazara*, were also conducted in each family's home to ensure an adequate supply of this grain.

Inti Raymi, celebrated in June, was the most important festival for the Sun god, Inti. The entire festival was conducted on a hill near Cuzco called Manturcalla, and only Inca males of royal blood were allowed to attend. On the first day 100 brown llamas were sacrificed. On the following days more llamas were sacrificed, not only to Inti but also to Viracocha and Illapa. Many statues were carved of wood, dressed in fine cumbi cloth, and burned at the end of the festival. A special dance was performed four times a day, with much drinking of chicha. After the sacrifices were made on Manturcalla, half the participants went to nearby hills to make further sacrifices while the rest stayed and danced. Llama figurines of gold, silver, and seashells were buried on the three nearby hills. The climax of the festival involved the sacrifice of special young llamas to Viracocha, whose image had been brought to Manturcalla on litters carried by important individuals. After this, all the charcoal and burned bones from the sacrifices were collected and deposited in a place near the hill, and everyone returned to Cuzco to continue singing and dancing for the rest of the day.

Every other month had associated rituals as well, making a full calendar of ceremonial events (see Chapter 4, Science and the Calendar). In addition, there were public ceremonies for special events such as war or natural catastrophe. Although the event might vary, the ceremony was the same. As with the initiation rites, all non-noble residents were sent away from Cuzco and all residents avoided eating salt, chili peppers,

and chicha and refrained from sexual activity. The images of Viracocha, Inti, and Illapa were brought into the main square, along with the kings' mummies (which were also gods), and sacrifices—including children—were performed. Then boys under 20 years of age put on special costumes and walked around the square eight times, followed by a nobleman who scattered coca on the ground. The boys spent the night in the square praying to Viracocha and the Sun to end the particular problem that warranted the ceremony. In the morning, everyone broke their fast with a great feast and much chicha drinking, which lasted two days (Rowe 1946: 311).

Other Ceremonies

In addition to the ceremonies conducted according to the calendar and for the good of the empire, there were ceremonies for other purposes. These fall into three general categories: divination, curing, and sorcery. *Divination* is the attempt to foretell events in the future. This was widely practiced by the Incas, who rarely did anything without trying to divine the outcome. *Oracles* were supernatural figures that could answer questions about the future. They were the most powerful form of divination and were consulted only for important reasons, such as when to attack an enemy or if disease had struck a king. They might be human images or other figures. The Oracle of Pachacamac on the central coast south of Lima was described by Cobo as a wooden image carved into a "fierce and frightening figure." An important oracle near Cuzco was a post decorated with a golden band to which two golden breasts were attached. It was dressed in fine women's clothing, with a row of smaller figures on each side (Cobo 1990: 108).

An individual would approach the oracle and ask it a question. The oracle was said to answer in a voice that could be understood only by the priests or attendants of the oracle. There were four main oracles: the one near Cuzco, two on the coast near modern-day Lima, and one in the central highlands. At least one of these, the Oracle of Pachacamac south of Lima, predated the Incas, having been founded during the Middle Horizon.

For less serious divinations, the priests sacrificed a llama, took out a lung, and blew into a vein. The markings on the vein as it was distended indicated to the priest if the outcome would be positive or negative. The same ceremony could be conducted with guinea pigs, although these were used for less important divinations. Even simpler forms involved counting whether a group of pebbles had an even or odd number; chewing coca, spitting the juice on the hand, and seeing how it ran down the fingers; observing the movement of spiders or snakes; and burning llama fat or coca leaves and inspecting the way the fire burned (Rowe 1946: 303–304). It is obvious that the priests in charge of interpreting these

signs had a great deal of influence in deciding what the outcome should be.

Sorcerers also could be consulted to foretell the future by speaking to evil spirits. Often they did this by drinking themselves into a stupor, which allowed them to see and speak to the spirits. This kind of divination was used by individuals for personal reasons. Sorcery was performed for the purpose of bringing misfortune or even death on another person. This was often done in a manner akin to modern voodoo, by making a figure of the person and piercing it with sharp objects or burning it. Another means was to obtain some part of the victim—such as hair, nails, skin, or teeth—and injure or harm it as a means of passing on that treatment to the victim. Sorcery was forbidden. Not only would a sorcerer be put to death if discovered, but his entire family as well.

Unusual events could be interpreted as omens of good or evil, usually the latter. Eclipses and shooting stars were considered particularly bad luck. Rainbows, the hooting of an owl, or the howling of a dog were also signs of bad things to come. Dreams were important portents of good or evil, although the individual who had the dream interpreted its significance; there were no special interpreters of dreams.

Curing was another ceremony conducted by individuals. The Incas did not believe in natural causes of illness; all disease was thought to be caused by supernatural elements. Thus to get rid of a disease, one had to appease the spirit that was causing the illness. This usually involved some form of sacrifice to the offended spirit or huaca. Curers specialized in this activity, having been called to the occupation by spirits. The spirit gave the curer the power and knowledge of healing.

Curing involved a variety of other activities besides sacrifices. Many different plants were considered to have healing powers. In fact, some of these herbs, have been tested for modern uses, and research is presently being conducted to determine whether any have commercial value.

The rituals involved with curing depended on what the cause of the disease was thought to be. If the illness was thought to be due to a failure to provide proper rituals for a huaca, then such was prescribed along with blowing the powder of corn and seashells toward the huaca. If the disease was thought to be caused by a foreign object in the person's body, the curer might simply massage the patient and suck on parts of the body where the pain was occurring. Usually the curer would produce an object that he claimed was the cause of the disease, such as a sharp object or some plant or animal material (Rowe 1946: 313). If the disease was identified as sorcery-induced, then a sorcerer was needed to cure the patient. This might or might not be the same person, as there was no clear division between curing and sorcery.

Both Cobo and Guaman Poma mention very elaborate cures that were attempted for particularly grave illnesses. A small room was cleaned out

completely; next the walls and floor were scrubbed with black corn powder, which was then burned in it; then the procedure was repeated with white corn powder. After the room was thus purified, the patient was brought in and laid on his or her back in the middle of the room. He or she was then put to sleep or into a trance, possibly through hypnotism. The curer pretended to cut the patient open and produced exotic objects, such as toads and snakes, which were burned as the causes of the illness.

An interesting Inca medical practice, which was known to earlier Andean societies as well, is *trepanation*, or cutting open the skull to expose the brain. This was no doubt done to let evil spirits out, but it had the added factor of danger that comes with working on the nerve center of the body. It is a credit to the Inca curers that many of these operations were successful, because many excavated skulls show evidence of having healed prior to death. In other examples there are multiple holes, indicating that the operation was performed more than once. It seems likely that the patient was in a drunken or drug-induced stupor, because the operation would have been very painful.

In contrast to the priests and priestesses in service to the official Inca religious shrines, both curers and sorcerors were parttime practitioners, doing the supernatural work in addition to their other jobs such as farming or making pottery.