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AESTHETICS AND ASCETICISM IN INCA RELIGION

Constance Classen

Abstract: Among the Incas, sensory experience served as both a marker of status and a conduit to the supernatural. Ritual was preceded by a deprivation of sensation, especially taste, and followed by the consumption of highly flavoured food. Special sensory powers were ascribed to diviners and ceremonial virgins, with odours being especially associated with the latter role. Both intensive discipline and exquisite sensation were valued and formed part of the training and perquisites of the élite.

Résumé: Chez les Incas les expériences sensorielles ont servi et comme indicateur de status et comme moyen d'accéder au surnaturel. Les rites étaient précédés par une privation sensorielle – en particulier celle du goût – pour ensuite être suivie par la consommation de plats fortement assaisonnés. Des pouvoirs sensoriels étaient attribués aux divins et aux vierges cérémonieuses. Celles-ci étaient associées avec les odeurs. La discipline et le pouvoir sensoriel aigu étaient recherchés et faisaient partie de l'apprentissage et des bénéfices de l'élite.

Aesthetics and asceticism were important means by which the Incas distinguished themselves as civilized in contrast to non-Incas whom they deemed “savages.” According to the Incas, “savages” were characterized both by their lack of sensory refinement, i.e. they didn't wear clothes, and by their lack of sensory control, i.e. they didn't regulate their sexuality through marriage (Garcilaso de la Vega 1945 1:40). The Incas, on the other hand, prided themselves on their ability to both cultivate the senses and control them.

When the Spanish arrived in the Inca Empire, they too were often perceived as “savages” by the Incas, due to their violent behaviour and sensory excesses (i.e. Garcilaso de la Vega 1945 1:86). The Spanish, however, considered *themselves* to be civilized and the *Incas* savages, a conception which they were particularly anxious to uphold in order to justify their conquest of the empire.¹ Nonetheless, despite centuries of being associated with

savagery by the Spanish, present-day Andeans continue to regard themselves as “civilized” in contrast to the Indians of the lowlands (Bastien 1978:97).

Inca ideals of aesthetics and asceticism are best manifested in Inca religious practices and institutions. A short period of sensory deprivation, which in its most basic form consisted of abstaining from salt and pepper, was an essential prelude to all major Inca rituals. The rituals themselves were marked by their sensory richness, as manifested through pageantry, music, dance, the burning of incense and sacrifices, and feasting.

It is noteworthy that fasting for the Incas consisted not of abstaining from food but of abstaining from flavour. The deprivation of flavour before rituals was contrasted with the abundance of flavour present in the feasting which followed rituals. As in Inca mythology salt and pepper (*cache* and *uchu*) were the names given to two of the founders of the Inca dynasty, this pre-ritual fasting followed by post-ritual feasting was perhaps a symbolic reenactment of an original mythological transition from the pre-Inca world to the age of the Incas.

Inca priests were commonly required by their office to engage in long periods of fasting and abstention from sexual relations. In the case of a person in training for a religious office the ascetic requirements could be quite severe. According to one report:

A person about to assume one of the [priestly] offices has to fast for a month, or, in some places a year, eating neither salt nor pepper nor sleeping with his wife, nor washing nor combing his hair. In some localities they are forbidden to touch the body with their hands. (Arriaga 1968:37)

This asceticism can be seen as a form of ritual exchange: one deprived oneself of certain things in order to receive other desired things — divine powers or a good harvest, for instance.

Significantly, the deprivation was principally one of sensory pleasure, with the senses particularly affected being those apparently considered the most productive of sensory pleasure — touch and taste. The deprivation of sensory pleasure practised before assuming a religious office or before undergoing a rite of passage would leave the body receptive to the sensory expressions of ritual and of the sacred.² It may also have served to protect those persons whose bodily boundaries would be abnormally weak due to their liminal position from being “disintegrated” by dangerously strong and intrusive physical sensations.³

There were some among the Incas for whom asceticism was a life-long practice. The *acllas* or chosen women, notably, remained virgins all their lives.⁴ These women were selected at an early age as the most beautiful in the entire Inca empire. After a period of training some were taken or distri-

buted as wives by the Inca, and the rest were cloistered in special houses next to temples of the sun in order to serve the Inca deities. These *acllas* were told that if they lost their virginity their bodies would rot and, in fact, were punished by death if they had sexual relations. (Murúa 1946:387; Garcilaso de la Vega 1945 1:184-192).

Sex and marriage were understood to a certain extent by the Incas as the conquest and civilization of “savage” female bodies.⁵ The Quechua word *purum* could mean an unconquered enemy, uncultivated land or a virgin woman. Sex and marriage, however, while on the one hand considered fundamental to civilization, on the other hand were seen as a corruption of an original pure state. Virginity in both women and men, therefore, although not generally prized by the Incas, could serve to represent purity and wholeness within a sacred context, as in the case of the *acllas*.

According to one colonial chronicler, the *acllas* abstained from food as well as from sex, surviving on odours alone.

[The *acllas*] have no need of food, they live only on the odour of a certain wild fruit, and when they are travelling away from their house, they take some of this fruit with them in order to sustain themselves with its odour. If they were ever to smell a bad odour, it was considered certain that they would die without remedy. (Murúa 1946:262-263)

This myth was undoubtedly intended to emphasize the spirituality and exquisite sensitivity of the *acllas*. The “bad odours” which would be fatal to the *acllas*, may well have included the odours of sexual intercourse which many South American native peoples consider dangerous to one’s health (i.e. Crocker 1985:159-160).⁶

Those Incas who engaged in the most extreme ascetic practices were the diviners who lived alone in the wilderness, wore no clothes, slept on the ground and ate roots (Murúa 1946:156). These diviners manifested many of the characteristics which the Incas associated with savagery — they didn’t wear clothes, they didn’t live in towns and they didn’t practise agriculture — however, their purpose in this was not to participate in the chaos and sensuality of the earth but to detach themselves from it so as to be more attentive to the manifestations of the sacred.

The blunting of the senses of touch and taste practised by the diviners may have been intended to increase the sensitivity of sight and hearing, the primary media of divine revelation in Inca religion. The diviners who lived in the wilderness are said to have gained their knowledge by staring at the luminaries. Other diviners, who were in charge of the temples, went so far as to blind themselves in order to privilege their sense of hearing and attend

to the oral communications of the sacred statues in the temples (Murúa 1946:156, 257).

Such ascetic diviners were, like the cloistered *acllas*, outside the normal social order—the diviners did not conquer in the traditional male way and the *acllas* were not conquered in the traditional female way. Significantly, the odour the *acllas* were said to live on came from a *wild* fruit, associating the *acllas* with the unconquered earth and putting them again on a similar plane to the diviners who lived off the uncultivated products of the earth. Although the diviners and the *acllas* were outside the normal social order, however, by serving the Incas as conduits of sacred power, they helped to uphold the social order.

A significant difference between the *acllas* and the diviners is that the former were not only religious ascetics, but also guardians of Inca aesthetic values. The *acllas* were chosen for their exceptional beauty; they wove the finest cloth in the empire, prepared the finest food and drink, and had the finest singing voices. Most of the productions of the *acllas* were destined exclusively for the deities and the Inca ruling class. Only the Inca élite, for example, was permitted to wear the soft clothing which the *acllas* wove; their subjects were obliged to wear coarse clothes (Pizarro 1921:222-223).⁷ Class distinctions within the Inca empire were thus established in part by aesthetic distinctions.

The aesthetic superiority with which the Incas invested themselves was matched by an ascetic superiority. The Inca male puberty rite was preceded by a rigorous training period during which Inca boys were required to fast, sleep on the ground, go barefoot, practise fighting techniques and manifest a general insensibility to pain. The Inca heir was expected to excel in these practices of austerity, as in all else, for the Incas held that a leader should be superior in all ways to his followers (Garcilaso de la Vega 1945 2:59).

Inca culture would seem on one level a combination of Rome and Sparta, of hedonistic excess, as marked by the orgies of revelry which followed rituals, and ascetic self-denial, as marked by the extreme self control which Incas were trained to possess.⁸ Both these aesthetic and ascetic extremes, however, formed part of a religious system which considered sensory elaboration and control central to civilization and a fundamental means of establishing communion with the divine, and which required that a balance always be maintained between opposites for society and the cosmos to remain stable.

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Notes

1. The Spanish executed the Inca ruler Atahualpa, for instance, on the basis of his alleged "barbarism." Atahualpa was charged by the Spanish with having committed, among other things, human sacrifice, polygamy and idolatry (Garcilaso de la Vega 1944:96-97).
2. In this regard it is interesting to note that the Desana Indians of the Colombian Amazon abstain from condiments and sex for several days before ritually ingesting hallucinogens in order to have bright and pleasant visions (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:11).
3. Among the Bororo of Central Brazil new parents (a very liminal position in Bororo culture) may not engage in sex, eat strong-tasting foods or scratch themselves, because all of these actions would have a debilitating or aging effect on them (Crocker 1985:56-59).
4. The *yanacona*, male servants of the Incas, who remained celibate during their youth, possibly formed to a certain extent the male counterpart of the *acllas*.
5. The role of women in the Inca is discussed by Irene Silverblatt in *Moon, Sun and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru*.
6. For a comparison of highland and lowland South American sensory models see Classen (1990).
7. Of all the senses, touch was the one considered most able to traverse categories by the Incas, and therefore the one which had to be most rigorously controlled. Everything which the Inca touched, in particular his garments, for instance, was kept in chests and burned each year so that no one else could touch them and thereby transgress the barriers which separated the Inca from his subjects (Pizarro 1921:225).
8. Failure to manifest complete self control when so required had dire consequences. In the initial encounter of the Inca with the Spanish, for example, those Inca warriors who displayed fear of the horses of the Spanish were executed by the Inca.

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