

Sodomy, Sin, and String Writing: The Moral Origins of Andean *Khipu*

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Abstract. According to the anonymous seventeenth-century author of the Quito Manuscript, ancient Andeans once possessed a writing system (*qillqa*) that they replaced with knotted strings (*khipu*) as part of the religious and sexual reform of their nation. The manuscript's redactor, Fernando de Montesinos, added to the text his own speculations about Andean writing, which he linked to the Tree of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. For both of these authors, ideas about indigenous "writing" were not neutral, but were intertwined with arguments about the moral and cultural merits of Andean civilization. This essay explores how each author's claims about writing and knotted strings—*qillqa* and *khipu*—were intrinsic to their political and theological aims, fitting into a larger discourse about the justification of colonial rule.

A body of Andean legends recorded in the seventeenth century makes startling claims about the existence of writing in ancient Peru. According to the account, the earliest Peruvians possessed a system of writing on "qillqa," defined in the text as "parchments and certain tree leaves on which they used to write" (Montesinos 2007 [1644]: 130; for the meaning of "qillqa" see Rappaport and Cummins 1998). The account tells us that by the time of Prince Sinchi Cozque, the *amautas*, or learned men, were well versed in reading and writing: "The amautas say that the events of those times were known by the traditions of the most ancient ones . . . that when this prince reigned there were letters, and men learned in them, whom they call amautas, and these [men] taught reading and writing" (Montesinos 2007 [1644]: 111).

Later in the same passage, a further detail about this ancient writing is presented: "What I have been able to find out is that they wrote on the

leaves of bananas; they dried them and later wrote on them, from whence Juan Coctovicto, in his *Itinerary through Jerusalem and Syria*, came to say that the ancient ones wrote on these leaves” (Montesinos 2007 [1644]: 111; the reference is to Cootwijk 1619).

Yet the Peruvians did not maintain their writing, according to the text. Many centuries later, during the reign of Topa Cauri—known as Pachacuti the Seventh—letters were outlawed by the king under the pain of death. Topa Cauri’s kingdom had been decimated by disease and warfare. To improve the state of his kingdom, the emperor instituted a moral reform, insisting that his subjects give up both idolatry and homosexual sodomy, “to which as wanton beasts they had given themselves” [“que como vestias desenfrenadas se hauían dado”] (Montesinos 2007 [1644]: 130). When his subjects violently resisted Topa Cauri’s reforms, the emperor consulted the god Illatiçi Huiracocha—the True God of the Old Testament, according to the text—whose ministers informed him that writing with characters was the cause of these vices. Therefore, the king commanded that writing no longer be used in Peru. As the text states:

With this, Topa Cauri ordered as a law, under the penalty of death, that no one use qillqa . . . nor could anyone use any type of letters. They followed this oracular command with such care that, after this loss, the Peruvians never used letters. And because in later times a wise amauta invented some characters, they burned him alive. And thus, from this time onwards, they used strings and khipus . . . and boys were taught the method of counting by khipus, adding different colors, which served as letters, with which their tiny republic was ennobled. (Montesinos 2007 [1644]: 130)

This narrative about the Andean past constitutes Book II of a larger work, *The Historical Memoirs of Peru*, compiled by a Spanish priest, Fernando de Montesinos, in 1644. In *The Historical Memoirs*, a work of five volumes, the second volume is devoted to presenting a unique version of indigenous history and mythology. Montesinos’s source for this second book was a manuscript that he bought at an auction in Lima; although the manuscript was anonymous, Montesinos tells us that the author was a long-time resident of Quito. Profound stylistic and ideological differences exist between Book II and the rest of Montesinos’s writings. The earliest redaction of Book II, which I have called the Quito Manuscript, contains numerous grammatical errors in Spanish not made by Montesinos in his other writings, but typical of native Andean speakers. Based on the linguistic evidence, it appears that the author of the Quito Manuscript was an indigenous or mestizo individual from the Quito area (Hyland 2007:

57–68). Montesinos copied most of Book II directly from the Quito Manuscript, to which he had earlier added marginal notations; these marginal notations were then written into the body of the text in the 1644 redaction, the earliest extant version of Book II. Thus, in the 1644 manuscript, we have two levels of colonial conjecture about writing and khipus—that of the original indigenous or mestizo author, and that of the gloss added by the Spanish priest, Montesinos.

While scholars such as Mariano Rivero and Juan Tschudi (1851) and Elisa Morales Flores (2002) have claimed, based on this text, that an ancient form of hieroglyphics once existed in the Andes, it should be noted that discussions of “indigenous writing” in the seventeenth century were politically and ideologically charged. Ideas about native writing and language were not neutral, but were intertwined with arguments about the moral and cultural merits of Andean civilization (on language and power in colonial Peru, see for example, MacCormack 2007: 170–201; Durston 2007: 105–36; Salomon 2004: 109–27; Urton 2003: 1–36; and Hyland 2003). For both Montesinos and his anonymous source, the possible existence of writing in ancient Peru was part of a larger system of meanings by which each made sense of the Andean reality. This essay will explore how concepts of writing and knotted strings—qillqa and khipu—were intrinsic to the differing ideological goals of each of these colonial thinkers.

Sodomy and Superiority

Throughout the Quito Manuscript, the anonymous author praises the cultural superiority of the early Andean kings, as well as of the Inca emperors who reestablished the moral virtues of first Peruvian rulers. The early Peruvian kings, the text states, were “wise” and “prudent,” governing in accordance with natural law and worshiping the true God. After many centuries, the people fell away from these lofty ideals and began to practice idolatry and homosexuality. Eventually, as male homosexuality came to dominate court life, the royal women staged a coup, installing the first Inca king, who outlawed homosexuality on the pain of death. The narrative lauds the Incas for restoring natural law and the exalted morality of ancient times.¹

In the account of the spread of sodomy and idolatry in the Andes, the author of the Quito Manuscript appears to have been influenced by a well-known biblical passage in St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans (Romans 1:19–27). In these verses, Paul explains how all humankind initially possessed knowledge of the Creator, the God of the Old Testament. However, if nations fall away from this understanding of the Creator, and begin to worship animals and other created things, they are punished for their idola-

try by being turned to the practice of homosexuality. This biblical motif of moral decay, in which pagans degenerate from their initial faith in the Creator into idolatry and homosexuality, is clearly echoed in the Quito Manuscript. The manuscript reaffirms the initial goodness of the early Andean kings while glorifying the Incas as the paragons of moral virtue, the restorers of the “natural law” against sodomy. The shift from writing to knotted strings occurs only within this context of the moral restoration of the Andean nation.

It is not surprising that the anonymous author, who repeatedly praised the high cultural level of the ancient Andeans, claimed that they once possessed writing. Influential sixteenth-century writers, such as the Jesuit José de Acosta (1987 [1590]), considered writing to represent one of the most important markers of cultural excellence. Acosta ranked non-Christian societies according to the type of writing system used: for example, he considered the Chinese to have possessed a greater civilization than the ancient Mexicans because he believed Chinese characters constituted a more complete writing system than Aztec hieroglyphics. The Incas, who he thought lacked any writing system, were therefore inferior to the Mexicans in Acosta’s typology of non-Christian religions (Alcina Franch 1987: 23–39; Hyland 2003: 122–49). The high moral value placed on alphabetic writing by sixteenth-century Europeans such as Acosta explains why a defender of the native peoples, such as the anonymous author of the Quito Manuscript, would have imagined an indigenous past in which writing was commonplace. The author of the Quito Manuscript emphasized that the replacement of writing with knotted strings occurred only out of a concern with eliminating the vices of sodomy and idolatry, goals seen as highly laudable within the Christian discourse of colonial Peru. Moreover, the *kipus* themselves, as the text makes clear, served to “ennoble” the kingdom, and were a more than sufficient replacement for the *qillqa*.²

Banana Leaves and Unholy Script

The history of Andean writing and *kipus* presented in the Quito Manuscript forms part of the author’s larger discourse about the high cultural level of Andean civilization. The text’s redactor, Montesinos, however, viewed the Incas and all Indians with unrelenting hostility, condemning their intelligence, morality, and religion. Nowhere within the hundreds of pages of the rest of the *Historical Memoirs* does Montesinos ever praise the Incas or other Indians. Rather, he wrote that the Andean peoples committed the most heinous crimes against nature, including “idolatry, sodomy, speaking with the Devil, incest with their mothers and their daughters, tyranny, child-

murder, and drunken orgies that deprive them of the little sense they have” (Montesinos 1644: Book III, ch. 28). He included the Quito Manuscript in his book because the unusual number of Inca rulers in the text confirmed his interpretation of Old Testament prophecy; that is, he thought that the prophet Daniel’s vision of an evil beast with eleven horns—a blasphemous monster that had to be destroyed—represented the Inca empire with its line of eleven kings. Thus, the Jewish prophet had predicted the just defeat of the Incas by the forces of the Spanish king, whom Montesinos praised as “God’s policeman.”

Montesinos’s added commentary about Andean writing can be identified by the citation of one of his favorite works, the *Itinerary through Jerusalem and Syria* by Juan Cotovicto (Cootwijk 1619). Montesinos referred to this work repeatedly in the other books of the *Historical Memoirs*, where it served as the basis for his knowledge of the Holy Lands. He wrote that he was able to find out that the ancient Peruvians wrote on dried banana leaves, “from whence . . . Cotovicto . . . came to say that the ancient ones wrote on these leaves.” What Cotovicto actually wrote was that the ancient Syrians used banana leaves. Montesinos’s application of this statement to the ancient Peruvians reflected his belief that there was regular commerce between Peru and the Middle East in biblical times because Peru was the biblical Ophir. Cotovicto followed the classical author Pliny (AD 23–79) in associating “leaf-writing” with the most primitive forms of script (Pliny 1968: 141, 411).³ Montesinos, however, would read much harsher meanings into the use of leaves for writing.

For Montesinos, the question of qillqa writing on banana leaves was part of his imperialist fantasies about Peru as Ophir, the land of gold in the Old Testament. In his unpublished writings, Montesinos argued that Peru was inhabited by immigrants from Tyre, a coastal city near Jerusalem. According to scripture, he explained, the people of Tyre formed the population of Ophir, the source of King Solomon’s gold, now known—he continued—to have been Peru. A central aspect of his thought was that the Old Testament prophecies about Tyre and Ophir actually referred to Peru. The books of Amos and Isaiah describe how the Jewish kings would lose their trade with Ophir because of their faithlessness to Jewish law. Montesinos argued that these biblical prophecies revealed that Israel had enjoyed trade with Ophir (that is, Peru) as a gift from God and a sign of divine favor. However, once the ancient Jews strayed from their faith, Ophir was removed from Israel’s orbit as a divine punishment for the Jews’ alleged perfidiousness. The prophet Isaiah wrote that for seventy years Tyre (Peru for Montesinos) would languish “like a poor forgotten harlot,” at which point “the Lord will again return to Tyre . . . [and] the profits of her trad-

ing will be dedicated to the Lord.” Montesinos reiterated that this passage foretold how the kings of Israel lost the trade with Ophir/Peru because of their refusal to follow God’s commandments. The seventy years during which Ophir was forgotten, he wrote, corresponded metaphorically to the time from when the kings of Jerusalem lost Ophir until the Spaniards rediscovered this land. Spain’s discovery and conquest of Peru, he continued, marked the time of the Lord’s return to Tyre and, therefore, as foretold in holy scripture, the Spanish conquest was inevitable and just. In his unpublished chapters, Montesinos emphasized that the wealth of the Americas was used by Spain to defend Christendom throughout the world just as Isaiah had predicted.

Not only did Spain benefit from Ophir’s—that is, Peru’s—wealth, but with Spain’s conquest of Ophir, the divine authority of the ancient kings of Israel became vested in the kings of Spain. With the transfer of control over Ophir from Jerusalem to Madrid, Montesinos continued, the divine kingship that had once been part of the kingdom of Israel was now given, through God’s will, to the Spanish rulers. Therefore, he concluded, the kings of Spain also merit the title of the kings of Jerusalem, making them the greatest rulers on earth. And why was Spain chosen by God for the honor of inheriting the titles of Jerusalem above all other kingdoms in Europe? Because God was so pleased with the Spanish Crown for establishing the Spanish Inquisition, which allowed Spain to maintain the purest faith in Christendom. Thus, we see that this small detail that Montesinos added about the native Peruvian writing—that it was done on banana leaves in conjunction with the ancient writing of Syria—was part of a complex imperialist ideology in which the equation of Peru with Ophir justified the conquest of the Incas.

Furthermore, Montesinos held a very mystical view of bananas themselves. In his unpublished writing, he claimed that after many years of searching, he discovered that the banana was the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, which was located in the Peruvian jungle (Montesinos 1644: Book I, ch. 31, 32). The first Inquisition trial ever held, he wrote, was in Peru and concluded with God’s punishment of Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden bananas. (He apparently was unaware that the banana was not native to South America.) Thus, for him the banana was the ultimate symbol of human sinfulness, the cause of humanity’s fall from grace. As he wrote in Book I of the *Historical Memoirs*, the three-armed cross (“cruzifici efigniem atrinque”) seen in the banana when it is cut “represents to us the guilt of Adam, the greatest evil” (Montesinos 1786: Book I, ch. 31). Writing on banana leaves, therefore, was an unholy script, harken-

ing to the sin of Adam, a fittingly immoral medium for the words of a nation that Montesinos considered unnatural and idolatrous.

The Disappearing Khipu

As Margaret Bender has noted in this issue, “Beliefs about writing systems in the Americas are powerfully connected to social ideologies” (this volume, 179). For both Montesinos and the anonymous author, their “graphic ideologies”—that is, their moral characterizations of European and Andean graphic systems within the context of colonial language ideologies—spring from the broader context of Spanish colonialism in Peru. Initially, the Spanish conquerers of the Andes readily accepted the validity and utility of khipu records. However, as Carmen Beatriz Loza (2001) has argued, by 1583 the use of khipu was under attack by the Lima episcopal council because of the khipus’ suspected ties to Andean paganism. From the late 1580s onwards, she asserts, colonial khipukamayus were forced to labor semiclandestinely for fear of being discovered in a practice that colonial authorities linked to idolatry. At the same time, a flourishing scribal culture in the highlands allowed Spanish authorities to insist upon written records in place of knotted strings. Khipu use appears to have disappeared from the public view throughout the later colonial period. It has only been in more recent times, with the uncovering of seventeenth-century documents that mention khipus (Salomon 2004: 118–20), the discovery of patrimonial khipus preserved in highland villages (Salomon 2004), and the study of modern herders’ khipus (Mackey 2002: 323) that the persistence of khipus has been recognized. While khipus continued to be used locally in the Andes throughout the seventeenth century and into the twentieth (*ibid.*), their use was officially denigrated and apparently went underground.

Conclusion

Just as evidence of khipu usage eventually disappeared from the consciousness of Hispanic society in the Andes, so too were the khipu marginalized or absent in the discussions of Andean writing examined here. It is surely a sign of the hegemony of alphabetic writing that the anonymous author defended indigenous cord texts by first inventing a mythical leaf-writing and then stating that the khipu were as good as this imaginary ancient script. Montesinos avoided discussing the khipu at all, focusing instead on the alleged symbolic evils of banana leaves. To Montesinos, Andean qillqa writing stood as a sign of human sinfulness, as well as of the ancient ties

between biblical history and the New World, a relationship that ultimately justified the Spanish destruction of Tawantinsuyu. Both Montesinos and his anonymous source grappled with trying to understand the relationship between knotted strings and alphabetic writing; the solutions each proposed reflected their larger concerns with imperialism and indigenous civilization.

Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

- 1 On colonial attitudes toward indigenous homosexuality, see Horswell 2006.
- 2 According to Montesinos, the author of the Quito Manuscript had devoted an entire chapter to khipus used for conveying ancient historical traditions. In the unpublished Book I of the 1644 redaction, Montesinos, while discussing the chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega's theories about the name "Peru," alludes to the anonymous author's chapter on indigenous history and khipus:

Y porque desto [the antiquity of the name "Pirua"] no tubo noticia Garcilaso diçe el autor del manuscrito en el discurso 2, cap. 1, tratando de los amautas e istoriadores indios y de la diferençia de los quipos de que usaban para tradiçion de los suçesos y hechos de los reis Peruanos, instrumentos de que usaron en lugar de las letras que perdieron; que saue se an inbiado a esse año muchos de aquellos quipos para que los uiese Garcilaso. Destos quipos ai de gran número en el Piru y en la çiudad de Quito. (Montesinos 1644, Seville ms.: Book I, chap. 4).

- 3 Pliny stated that before paper had been invented, "people used to write on palm-leaves and then on the bark of certain trees" (Pliny 1968: Book 13: 139–41).

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