

Viva Los Incas: Myths of Survival and Heritage in Incan Religion

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Religion has taken on many forms throughout history, each revealing much about those who believed in them. In the Incan empire, religion was embraced as an explanation for natural phenomena and the formation of society. Religion served an important purpose as it developed into a complex set of myths that governed the empire. Their polytheistic religion had several deities who controlled how the world functioned, with most important of these gods controlling the sun. Looking at the mythology that developed in the Incan empire reveals unrelenting dedication to surviving as individuals and as a united society. Incan mythology seems to enshrine, above all else, a belief in preservation; the mythology suggests a belief in preserving the societal hierarchy, livelihood, and the lineage of the Inca leader.

Standing as the cornerstone of Incan religion was Inti, the sun god. As the expression of the sun and light, Inti was responsible for the success of the harvest season. The sun gave life to maize, potatoes, and quinoa, which in turn ensured a steady food supply. While he did not create the Incas, he ensured their livelihood. To thank Inti, temples of the sun were built, prayers spoke, and tribute paid through the sacrifice of crops, llamas, and, in extreme cases, young children.¹ Inti was also the subject of the most important of the many Incan festivals, Inti Raymi. Despite centuries of Spanish influence, the festival is still celebrated in modern day Peru, as a reminder of their Incan heritage. To add to the significance of the sun god, Inti also fathered Manco Capac, the founder of the Incan state. Though Inti was the most important of Incan deities, several others joined to make up the pantheon.

Viracocha was the creator deity. To a predominantly Christian society Viracocha's secondary importance may seem strange, but this particular dynamic of this Incan religion helps to clarify what priorities existed within society. Viracocha had little to do with the Earth after creating it, while Inti was responsible for the prosperity of the Incan state. Inti was more important because of his role in the day-to-day lives of ordinary Incans, and while Viracocha was not the most important god, he still had a huge presence in Incan mythology. Today, Viracocha is generally considered to be the second-most important of the deities.

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¹ Paul R. Steele, *Handbook of Incan Mythology*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 248.

Viracochas method of creating the world reflects traditional Incan values; in particular the process of creating humans in the Incan origin myth helps to reinforce a belief in the power of lineage. To begin with, Viracocha created a race of giants, but replaced them with men of stone, before finally creating humans as they are today. This myth suggests that ancestors are somehow superior to their living descendants.

The third of the Incan's most worshipped gods was Illapa, who controlled lightning and rain from his place in the stars by "giving off flashes of lightning when he whirled his sling," pulling "water from the celestial river that was perceived as the Milky Way."² Like Inti, Illapa was essential to growing crops since he controlled rainfall, but quite uniquely, he was thought to give credibility to priests. Potential religious leaders would expose themselves to storms in hopes of becoming enlightened, a result of being struck by lightning. He is considered the third most important deity, and helps to form the trio of the most worshipped gods.

Inti, Viracocha, and Illapa were the most important gods of the Incan empire, but even so, many lesser deities existed. The gods were embraced as an explanation for natural phenomena. As an example, a god named Cuichu represented rainbows. Goddesses represented bodies of nature. Inti's wife, Mama Kilya, served as the goddess of the moon, Mama Qoca as the goddess of the sea, and Capa Mama as the Earth Mother. The Incans embraced many gods to explain ever day occurrences of their lives. Religion also shaped the calendar; religious festivals allowed the laboring Incans to take a break from the strenuous tasks of terracing, planting, tending, and harvesting.

The Apus are another example of lesser deities that affected both natural phenomena and the Incan calendar. The Incans believed that the Apus were gods of the mountains and served as protectors of nearby villages. Animal sacrifices were made as tributes to Incan protector gods. In addition, the sacrifices were believed to increase the fertility of the type of livestock that were offered.³ The sacred rite provides an example of behavior at religious ceremonies. The Apu sacrifices involved burning offerings, drinking corn beer and cane alcohol, shortly before saying incantations and finally slaughtering one llama or other herd animal.⁴ Incas offered crops and livestock in hopes that the gods would reward them with better yields and fertility so the villages could prosper and grow.

² Steele, *Handbook of Incan Mythology*, 198.

³ Sacrifices to the Apus are still made today by ancestors of the Incan people.

⁴ Peter Gose, "Sacrifice and the Commodity Form in the Andes," *Man*, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Jun., 1986): 296-310.

Earthquakes were another natural phenomena for which Incans sought mythological explanation. Earthquakes are fairly common in the Incan homeland because of the tectonic activity of the Andes mountain range. To account for the seismic activity the Incan turned to myth; specifically they looked to Pachacamac, the god of major changes in the world. They decided that Pachacamac was shaking the earth, causing the ground to tremble. This serves as a great example of how the Incans used myth to account for seemingly inexplicable natural phenomena, since there was no science to explain how the earth moved, the gods must have been responsible.

Religion reveals a lot about the values of Incas. Clearly survival was the most important aspect of Incan religion. Inti, the sun god, represented not only the sun, but also indirectly food, since the sun is needed to grow crops. Illapa, the god of thunder, elevated the value of a good harvest by controlling the rain, which was also invaluable to the growth of crops. They grew potatoes, maize, cacao, and quinoa as well as raised livestock like llamas and alpacas. The Inca people worshipped their gods for giving them the necessities to live. However, Incan religion extended beyond an explanation of nature and a way to show thanks; Incan religion enshrined values of the society as a whole by explaining why society worked as it did, and by establishing credibility of the leader.

In everyday life, religion played a major role. Society functioned communally; all men, women, and children had important roles. Religion was a great motivation for the peasant class because it provided an outlet for entertainment. The calendar was scattered with festivals like the Kapac Raymi where people gathered to ask Illapa for rain on the winter solstice.⁵ This festival celebrated Illapa by sacrificing llamas and children who were associated with lightning for one reason or another. Same-sex twins, thought to have been split by lightning in the womb, were often sacrificed on the holiday. Though sacrifice may not seem worthy of celebration, the festivals also included music, dancing, and alcohol, all of which the Incan laboring class enjoyed. These festivals helped to establish and promote the sense of community that was necessary for a functioning Incan society.

Another crucial piece to the success of the Incan empire lay in the authority of the emperor. The myth of the Incan Empire's origin helped solidify the power of the emperor by linking the ruler's heritage to the most powerful of Incan Gods, Inti.⁶ This religious heritage legitimized the immense power that one man was to yield. The myth is that Manco

⁵ Daniel W. G. Ade, "Lightning in the Folklife and Religion of the Central Andes," *Anthropos*, Vol. 78, No. 5/6 (1983): 770-788.

⁶ Brian S. Bauer, "Pacariqtambo and the Mythical Origins of the Inca," *Latin American Antiquity*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Mar., 1991): 7-26.

Capac, son of Inti, was the ruler who united the Incan empire and founded the city of Cusco. He came out of a cave in a region directly south of Cusco and made his way north to the city teaching the Incas along the way, how to dress and farm. Because he established the empire, he was crowned ruler, and his future descendants would follow. Each new Incan emperor could trace his lineage to Manco Capac, and even further to Inti. This heritage vested in the emperor absolute authority because he was the representation of Inti on Earth.

As exhibited by the myths of Manco Capac and Viracocha's creation of the Incan state, lineage had to be legitimized. These myths demonstrate that society adhered strictly to the significance of heritage. In one specific myth this belief was enshrined by creating a pseudo-caste system. In the myth, one the very first human beings asked Inti to make more humans, to which Inti reciprocated by sending three eggs. Each color corresponded to a class of people: "the golden egg was the origin of the cuaracas and nobles; the silver egg gave rise to women; and from the copper egg came the commoners and their families."⁷

Myths are a particularly effective way to secure beliefs across classes. To expand on the role of social hierarchy even further in Incan society, the wealthiest citizens were mummified after death. These *Mallqui*, or mummified ancestors, were significant to their respective *ayllus*, or clans, who revered the ancestors greatly and believed that they would help the crops grow.⁸ Mallquis were usually preserved in caves near a town so the descendants could dress them and offer food and drink to honor them. Many have been discovered since the Spanish conquest when the practice was eradicated because its association with idolatry. From the area surrounding the settlement of San Pedro de Hacas, one count of mummies reached 1,825 bodies.⁹

The Incan people spoke Quechua and had no written languages. The only written record of myths is attributed to the Spanish conquistadors, who took interest in writing them down. Later criollos, mestizos, and educated natives began recording mythology, but probably not without the influence of Spanish conquistadors. The Incan myths have undoubtedly been changed by many people who have transcribed them over the centuries including: Cieza de León, who as a Spanish soldier recorded notes on his years of travel throughout Peru; Juan de Betanzos, whose marriage to an Incan noble woman gave him an intimate look at the Incan perspective in the years immediately after the conquest; Garcilaso De La Vega, the son of a Spanish conquistador and

⁷ Gary Urton, *Inca Myths*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 69.

⁸ Steele, *Handbook of Incan Mythology*, 200.

⁹ Urton, *Inca Myths*, 69.

an Incan princess, who in 1609 wrote *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*.¹⁰ Perhaps the most significant of the chroniclers was Guaman Poma whose unique position between Spaniards and Quechua allowed him to produce a 1200 page manuscript that detailed religion through written accounts and when his Spanish failed him, drawings. He has since become a person of interest for Latin American historians, as very little is known about him, but his account of Incan culture is one of the most detailed.¹¹

Through all these chroniclers, one would assume that the mythology of the Incas would be well preserved; however, the writers learned the mythology from different regions of the former empire, which each had varying versions of myths. The myths have most likely lost some of the meaning in translation. As twenty-first century historians and anthropologists try to sort through the mythology of the Incan empire, one single set of myths cannot be readily identified. There are several versions of each myth, more than one name for gods, and other complications that make a universal Incan mythology impossible to identify. From what pieces historians can gather, they can learn a lot about Incan society especially when coupled with archeology and the records from the Spanish following the conquest.

The Incan religion was polytheistic, rich, varied, and because of the range of chroniclers, fairly well preserved. Despite the inconsistencies from chronicler to chronicler, the overall themes of Incan religion present themselves. Survival and heritage are the key aspects that the myths promoted, but the stories also worked to explain natural phenomenon, like the weather and earthquakes. Looking at Incan religion demonstrates some of the core values of Incan society, while explaining that through communality, their society was able to thrive. Religion united people through festivals, sacrifice, and universal devotion to their deities and their emperor. The myths of the Incan empire provide clear insight into the inner workings of a vast empire that has largely been lost to the centuries.

¹⁰ Urton, *Inca Myths*, 29-33.

¹¹ Valerie Fraser, "The Artistry of Guaman Poma," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 29/30, The Pre-Columbian (Spring - Autumn, 1996): 269-289.