

## RELIGION

Inca religion can be defined in two ways. First, it embraced the beliefs and ritual practices of the inhabitants of the Cuzco valley, composed of the “Incas-by-blood,” descendants of the mythical founding ancestor, Manco Capac, and the **Incas by privilege**, who were not direct descendants of noble Inca lineages. Second, it was the religious doctrine of the empire, which saw many adjustments as it merged and incorporated the beliefs of the scores of ethnic and linguistic groups under the imperial yoke. This doctrine was made manifest and spread through feasts and rituals that legitimated the rule of the **Sapa Inca** (the sole, unique Inca), and his representatives.



The Incas' tutelary god was Inti, the Sun god, from whom the Inca rulers believed they descended. Guaman Poma de Ayala, Felipe, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. Edited by John V. Murra and Rolena Adorno, 232/258. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980 [1615].



Our knowledge of Inca religion comes mainly from Spanish chronicles written in the sixteenth century, reflecting the lack of indigenous sources and religious imagery. The origin of these sources has had a marked impact on the quality of the information. In the case of priest-chroniclers, they were often convinced of the original good intentions of Native peoples and that their early notion of the existence of the Christian God was corrupted by the Devil. Indigenous chroniclers, such as **Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala** and **Joan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua**, even went a step further and made supposed preconquest evangelizations the cornerstone of their writings. On the other hand, **Garcilaso de la Vega** idealized the pre-Hispanic past by pointing out the similarity between the Andean and Mediterranean belief systems. Many chroniclers clearly exhibited an interest in highlighting Andean concepts and ideas that appeared similar to the principles of the Christian faith in attempts to facilitate evangelization. Some of these analogies include the apparent, to their minds, similarity between the concept of “transgression” (*hucha*) and “sin,” the existence or inexistence of confession in Andean rituals, the Holy Trinity, and the idea of creation. As a consequence, and despite the richness of Inca myths and rites included in these accounts, information about the Cuzco elites’ thoughts of the divine and how they conceived of their gods remains scant and overly simplified. Yet another difficulty in trying to reconstruct Inca beliefs stems from the translation from **Aymara** and **Puquina** to either **Quechua** or Spanish. Translations undoubtedly changed the original meanings of several religious concepts. The people of Cuzco were in fact Aymara speakers and it is likely that the Incas originally spoke Puquina. This has great implications for the etymologies of deities’ names and some place names.

Scholarship concerning Inca religion over the last century has revolved around two main issues: the nature of the supreme deity—creator *versus* animator or demiurge; and the name of the deity and his relationship with the other deities—the Creator (Viracocha Pachayachachi, see **Deities**) versus the Sun (Inti, PUNCHAO), Thunder (Illapa), and Apu Huanacauri. Another major topic of concern has been the religious reform reportedly undertaken by the Inca ruler Pachacuti, who instilled the solar cult at the expense of Viracocha. Nevertheless, despite these debates, there was never any doubt about the existence of a supreme deity within a system that believed in one god but accepted the existence of other gods.

A new approach to the problem of Inca religion has gained strength since the 1980s. It is based on archaeological and ethnohistorical studies of sacred places or *huacas*, many of which surrounded Cuzco and were described by the chronicler **Bernabé Cobo** as part of the *ceque* system. Documents based on Native accounts became increasingly important, particularly the Huarochirí Manuscript (see **Avila, Francisco de**). Although inherent problems arise when comparing the recent ethnographic record with Colonial accounts, it is nevertheless true that Quechua- and Aymara-speaking communities maintained or reinvented rituals and practices that were deeply engrained in their cosmovision, despite some borrowings from Christianity.

One of the core beliefs of ancient Andean peoples, including the Incas, was the animated nature of the environment. Mountain peaks, lakes, springs, and rock outcrops were given life and agency, with the inherent capacity to influence human destiny and to speak



and foretell the future (see **Divination**). This power was also attributed to the mummies of certain ancestors, especially those of the dead Inca rulers and their doubles (bundles and *huanques*; see **Worship, Ancestor; Kingship, Divine; Mummies, Royal**). Many inanimate objects were considered *huacas*, or sacred, and therefore could act. Among them were the *sayhuas* and *sucancas*, stone pillars used to observe solar movements; as well as *huanacas*, standing stones regarded as petrified ancestors. *Huacas* also included movable objects such as *conopas* and *illas*—miniature images of camelids or maize, for instance—that insured the fertility of the herds and bountiful harvests. *Huacas* also legitimated rights over land and water.

Each river basin was integrated and organized around the axis of water circulation and divided into four parts in relation to the main river course, which was a reflection in each basin of the celestial river—the Milky Way, *Mayu*. The waterway divided each basin into two halves, each one on a different bank. The earthly river, which echoed the mythical celestial river, interconnected these two halves, or *sayas*: the upper one (*hanan*) with snow-covered peaks or *apus*, lakes, and canals that irrigated the pastures and crops; and, the lower one (*hurin*). Andean people believed that water circulated between the ocean in the underworld and the sky, uniting in the foremost confines of the earth. There was a biannual irrigation rhythm determined by the change in seasons: a wet and hot season, and a cold and dry one. Agrarian and pastoral rituals took place on specific dates noted in ceremonial calendars and the main goal was to make sure that water reached fields and pastures alike on time and in sufficient quantities. These rituals were also incorporated into the Inca state cult.

Inhabited space in Tahuantinsuyu was organized by river basins and regions, *suyus*. Each watershed had its own tutelary deities. The sacred geography of Cuzco included 328 or 350 *huacas* and followed the principles discussed above, with the valley's Huatanay River as its axis (see **Ceques; Temples**). According to the **origin myths**, Cuzco's first settlers, later venerated as ancestors, came from a *pacarina*, or origin place, usually a lake or cave with a known location within the watershed. The Inca ancestors, for instance, emerged from the cave of Tambo T'oco, in Pacariqtambo.

In this sense, Inca religion lacked the characteristics of revelation religions such as those of Asia and Europe; instead, it possessed many of the particular traits regarded as animistic. The rural landscape surrounding Cuzco and public and residential spaces were filled with sacred places and mobile objects, which were also considered deities. Most of the nonmobile *huacas* were related to rivers and canals. Others (such as *sucancas*) were related to places for astronomical observations at sunrise and sunset. None of the principal deities seems to have had the nature of a creator god. The capacity to animate, to give life—*camaquen* in Quechua—was shared by all divine beings, including the **Sapa Inca**, regardless of hierarchy.

Despite the fact that the Inca religious system was described as polytheistic because of the multiplicity of sacred beings it included, Andean deities were not like their counterparts in Greco-Roman mythology. They lacked an anthropomorphic persona, or a nature or craft, which would describe their essence as gods of fire, air, water, war, or the arts. Their powers overlapped and complemented each other. They had no single material expression because they transformed, unfolded, and multiplied their very being. They could appear as



birds, eggs, rocks, a constellation of stars, a dark spot in the Milky Way, or even as human beings. The conceptualization of the Andean *numen* was expressed in the idiosyncrasy of the farmer and herder who fought for survival in an extreme environment. From their perspective, every supernatural capable of animation must also combine the forces of sun and water at the appropriate time of the annual cycle in order to make barren lands fertile.

This interrelation is expressed through the identity of the four main male gods of the Inca state pantheon. Their differences reflect whether they controlled the sky or the earth. In the world inhabited by mortals, the daytime sky was under the domain of the Sun—Inti—tutelary deity of the *Sapa Inca* and the empire. On the other hand, Apu Huanacauri, one of Cuzco's most revered mountains, represented the lineage of the Ayar siblings, the founding ancestors of the Incas-by-blood (see **Myths, Origin**). The mythical account of the siblings' arrival and the founding of Cuzco was revived during rituals on Huanacauri. Meanwhile, the god Viracocha ruled over the waters of the universe and the origin of life itself. Illapa, Thunder, was imagined as a resplendent warrior brandishing a slingshot; he ruled the nighttime sky. Deceased Inca rulers were considered incarnations of Illapa, while the living sovereign represented the Sun—Punchao—among the mortals. There is evidence to support the notion that each of these gods could unfold to attend to both halves of the animated universe. The feminine counterpart was represented in the Inca pantheon by, respectively, the Moon, Quilla; the morning and evening stars; the earth, Pachamama; and the sea and the lakes, Cochamama. The mummy bundles of *Coyas*, the queens and principal wives of the Inca ruler, were worshipped in Quilla's sacred chamber in the temple of **Coricancha** in Cuzco.

The main festivities in the Inca ceremonial calendar (see **Calendar, Ritual**) were dedicated to the Sun, Inti. Two festivities were dedicated to the Sun and took place just outside of Cuzco. Capac Raymi honored the Sun at the December solstice, or *huayna Punchao*, the young Sun. Inti Raymi, on the other hand, was consecrated to the Sun of the June solstice, or *Inca Punchao*. In addition to observing the movement of the sun, the ceremonies also included the ritual movement of people along the rivers. One of these movements was upriver during the Mayucati feast, following Capac Raymi, the feast celebrating the December solstice. The second took place during Inti Raymi, at the time of the June solstice, when the priests made their pilgrimage downriver. Both ceremonies also featured visits to the solar temples and to the summit of Apu Huanacauri. The ancestor Sun, Apu Punchao, was worshipped during a third ceremony, known as Citua; in this ceremony, rituals were performed in the plaza flanking the Sun temple, Coricancha. Its main purpose was to rid Cuzco of "evils" in order to prepare it for a new agricultural year; all the *ayllus* and *panacas* were present, each carrying the mummy bundle of their ancestors. This festivity was related to another one dedicated to the Quilla (Moon), known as Colla Raymi. Even though some of the rituals were led by specialized priests, all of Cuzco took part in these and other ceremonies of the ritual calendar. Particularly important rituals took place during the rainy season, when noble young warriors were initiated by participating in races. After receiving their ear spools, the warriors of opposing halves faced each other in ritual battle (see **Battles, Ritual**).

Given the local and ethnocentric character of Inca religion in Cuzco, the rulers of Tahuantinsuyu developed strategies for achieving religious legitimacy in conquered



lands. One of these strategies consisted of creating doubles of Huanacauri in the sacred geography of conquered lands and in building Sun temples and ceremonial platforms, or *ushnus*, along the road system. They also incorporated all the leading conquered *apus*, or deities, into the imperial cult—for instance, **Catequil**, Coropuna, and Pariacaca. The pilgrimage center and oracle of **Pachacamac**, on the central coast of Peru, is a particularly noteworthy case. There, the Incas built a new temple dedicated to the Sun and to the “god who animated the earth,” whose cult spread through the central and north coast of Peru. Pachacamac is the northwestern counterpart of the shrine on the **Island of the Sun** in Lake Titicaca. Both were situated at the extremes of the mythical route taken by Inti (the Sun); from his birthplace in the waters of the lake, to his setting in the ocean. At the center of this axis, traced through the night sky in the Milky Way, was the temple of Coricancha in Cuzco.

### Further Reading

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### ROADS

Heralded as one of the New World's greatest engineering feats, the Inca road and **bridge** network rivals that of the Romans in the Old World. The 40,000-kilometer (25,000-mile) network linked **Cuzco**, the imperial capital, to its far-flung domains, crisscrossing some of the world's most rugged and inhospitable environments. Although the Incas used or reengineered pre-Inca roads, the imperial roads and installations built along them were probably conceived as a whole, and together they display state planning on a scale never before seen in the Andes. On the eve of the Spanish invasion in 1532, the road system embraced parts of the modern nation states of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina.

Two roads formed the backbone of the system: a highland road and a parallel coastal road. The highland road ran from a point just shy of the modern Ecuador-Colombia border, down through the Peruvian highlands, skirting Lake Titicaca and south into what is today northwestern Argentina. The coastal road, on the other hand, ran from Tumbes, in what is today northern Peru, through desert punctuated by the occasional lush river valley, down through one of the world's most arid deserts, the Atacama, and on to Santiago, Chile. A dozen or more lateral roads linked the two main north-south roads, while still others headed into the cloud forest flanking the eastern slopes of the Andes. Some roads, among the highest ever built, led to mountaintop sanctuaries, towering more than 5,000 meters (16,400 feet) above sea level (see **Capac Hucha**).