



1

Andean Ontologies

An Introduction to Substance

HENRY TANTALEÁN

In ancient times the sun died. Because of his death it was night for five days. Rocks banged against each other. Mortars and grinding stones began to eat people. Buck llamas started to drive men.

(The Huarochirí Manuscript, circa 1598. In Salomon 1991: 53)

Humans have long reflected on the reasons why they inhabit a changing world and have always questioned the nature of that world. Most importantly, humans have explored different conceptualizations and understandings of the substances from which objects and beings (including humans) are made, as well as the forces that animate them. In this context, thinking about the world and its constituent elements—essentially generating philosophical thought—is an inherent and fundamental human quality.

Nevertheless, the historical and philosophical display of reality is mostly viewed from Eurocentric and anthropocentric perspectives. Contemporaneous hegemonic thought has become the dominant frame through which to interpret the world. This is mostly the result of Western colonialism, which forced the adoption of westernized worldviews globally through the subordination, persecution, and exclusion of other perceptions, beliefs, and forms of knowledge. This process is quite evident in the Andes.

More and more, scholars have become aware of this bias. Social researchers

know that even though these worldviews were ignored, these societies maintained their own ways of explaining their world.¹ Their perception and understanding of the world provided, and continues to provide, a frame for their material and ideal existence, if there is, in fact, a differentiation among these types of existence.

This awareness is quite evident, and even necessary, when dealing with non-literate societies of the past. The lack of written records does not allow scholars to know and discuss profound and complex themes, for instance, knowledge of how reality was conceived, the substances from which objects and beings are made, and their essences. An understanding of past peoples' ontologies and theories of reality is essential in comprehending their views on vital reproduction and relationships with other nonhuman beings.

Fortunately, in the last few decades within the social sciences realm, there has been a substantial change known as the "ontological turn" (Alberti 2016; Kohn 2015). This theoretical approach has been essential in challenging Eurocentric, modernist, and anthropocentric perspectives of the world. In this way, there is a significant theoretical corpus from different fields, such as sociology (Latour 1993, 1999, 2005), art history (Osborne and Tanner 2007), anthropology (Gell 1998), ethnography (Descola 2013 [2005]; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2014 [2009]) and archaeology (Ingold 2000). It is precisely in this vein that there are some important theoretical contributions in archaeology. For instance, it is understood that objects and other beings have a similar status to humans in the construction of the world in what is known as symmetrical archaeologies (Olsen 2012; Olsen et al. 2012; Webmoor 2012), the theory of objects (Lull 2007), entanglement theory (Der and Fernandini 2016; Hodder 2012, 2016) and relational archaeologies (Watts 2013).

In parallel, critiques of the Western views on how to practice and think about archaeology have been developed in the last decades through decolonizing archaeologies (Gnecco 1999, 2013; Haber 2009, 2016; Hamilakis 2016), indigenous archaeologies (Atalay 2006, 2008; Nicholas 2001; Smith and Wobst 2005), and archaeological proposals inspired by Amerindian perspectivism (Lau 2013; Weismantel 2013). These three perspectives have also emerged in part due to the richness and continuity of indigenous traditions in the Americas.

As a result, an ontologic turn was generated to explain indigenous societies, especially "Amerindian societies" (*sensu* Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]), not from a classical and external view, but instead from an internal, innovative and localized view. These perspectives have incorporated worldviews from the same

indigenous societies. This turn has also been accompanied by a methodological change that invites researchers to reflect upon the sources to be considered when explaining the indigenous perspectives of these societies. In many ways, this book contributes to such changing viewpoints.

As will be discussed in this chapter, many of these studies have been influenced by work conducted in the Andes from the beginning of the twentieth century. In this way, there exists an important tradition in the utilization of indigenous perspectives for the explanation of the South American past, which emerged from local, as well as a few international, scholars. These studies have become visible, and are enhanced, through recent and contemporaneous Western academic practices.

Andean Ontologies

How did the inhabitants of the pre-Hispanic Andes understand their world? Which beings, substances, and forces formed these worlds? What were the relationships between humans, animals, plants, objects, and landscapes? What explanations were given to understand events and changes?

All of these questions may be thought of as mostly philosophical or metaphysical; however, they are based on the experience and empirical knowledge of the world, both past and present (Broda 2018: 4; Mannheim and Salas Carreño 2015; Swenson 2015). Ontology deals with questions related to being and existence. In the past, as well as today, there were various ontologies, even synchronic, that cohabited within a spacial and temporal frame as extensive as the Andean region and with a long prehistory (see also Trever et al. 2009: 11). The challenge, of course, will always be to try to adapt any recovered ontology from a particular spacial and temporal context to a different archaeological and anthropological setting. I think that, epistemologically and methodologically, the use of ontological Andean categories can contribute significantly to our understanding of social practices in this part of the world. In fact, as demonstrated by the history of archaeology (Trigger 2006), the praxis of scholars dealing with the past has always been characterized by the use of Western ontologies. In this sense, I believe that, at the heuristic level, Andean ontological concepts possess an important explanatory potential that complements Western explanations, and that they are worth exploring. As will be seen in this book, Andean ontologies fit very well when applied to local contexts, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon ontological concepts or other European models derived from ethnographic cases,

which are spatially and temporally removed from the Andes. When using such concepts, it is important to highlight the fact that the adaptation of Andean ontologies to pre-1532 realities will depend, for the most part, on the nature of the archaeological contexts to be studied (also see Swenson 2015).

It is also necessary to keep in mind that the Incas, the late pre-Hispanic empire of the Andes, imposed an official culture and a dominant ideology which was used to establish order and to justify their power within conquered territories (Silverblatt 1990: xxiv). As such, one needs to be cautious when using certain Inca notions across all Andean settings, cultures, and time periods, as they most likely represent a narrative developed by one particular indigenous group in a specific period of time, and in part by the Cuzco elite. As such, this book does not seek to essentialize the ancient and present peoples of the Andes under a single ontology or understanding, as this would not encapsulate the diversity of philosophies, ideologies, and worldviews adopted by Andean cultures and peoples throughout time (discourse also known as “Lo Andino”).

For this reason, it is also important to emphasize the fact that, in a society, there are not only general ways in which to interpret the world, but there are also particular, coexisting ways in which to view the world. Depending on the nature of the organization of a society, ontologies may even be in conflict (see Salomon 2018, chap. 6, for a discussion from the ethnography). This happens, for instance, when a community is invaded by another, or when, in the same society, a new view of the world is generated (also known as an ideology) by elites (or other social groups with power) and forced upon the rest of the society (Patterson 1987). These ontologies in conflict need to be “situated,” “tied,” and “adjusted” in order to fit the archaeological and social context under scrutiny. In this book, the authors offer a variety of case studies whose main goal is to “situate” ontologies in the empirical field.

Thus, in this book the authors support the existence of a variety of Andean ontologies, defining the Andean region as the vast areas that encompass the coastal shores watered by the Pacific Ocean, the Andean mountains, and the areas that stretch to the eastern slopes of the Andes (see also Depaz 2015: 21). This region overlies the countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina and coincides with two of the most widely spoken native language families in the area: Quechua and Aymara (Mannheim 2018).

This book is not the first attempt in this effort. In fact, in the last few decades there have been significant discussions of Andean ontologies (Bray 2015; Depaz 2015; Jennings and Swenson 2018; Quilter 1990, 1998; Swenson and Roddick 2018;

Szremski et al. 2009; Trever et al. 2009) and the publication of a series of studies dealing with the way Andean societies, both in the past and present, describe and define their world and constituent elements (Allen 2008 [1988]; Bray 2015; Earls and Silverblatt 1978; Urton 1981, 1997). Many of these ontological perspectives have reconstructed the worldview of these groups from different perspectives and with differing results. Obviously this is an extensive discussion and is beyond the scope of this chapter.² Instead, I will focus on three main themes:

- 1) Main ontologies found in the Andes and their primary sources
- 2) Four fundamental Andean concepts: *Camay*, *Pacha*, *Huaca*, and *Runa*
- 3) Advantages of using Andean ontologies in archaeological explanations and narratives in the Andes.

Main Ontologies Found in the Andes and Their Primary Sources

Today, in Andean archaeology, it is possible to talk about multiple lines of research that are related to ontology. These have been developed from many disciplines including linguistics, ethnography, anthropology, and/or history. In this respect, the singularities of these approaches are based on the types of sources used to establish, explain, and/or interpret Andean ontologies. Obviously, researchers use many of these sources when expressing their views on Andean ontologies. Here, I will synthesize these perspectives, based on their approaches, starting with the earliest ones up to the most recent ones. These ontologies are based in ethnohistory, linguistics, ethnography, materialities studies, iconography and semiotics, and phenomenology. By no means is this an exhaustive account of all the research that deals explicitly with ontologies of the Andes, but these are the works that have had an important impact in the field. From a methodological and hermeneutic perspective, the sources that provide an important contribution to the understanding of Andean ontologies are the ones that are related to the description of religion, mythology, ritual practices, and pre-Hispanic Andean beliefs.

A significant element that needs to be highlighted here is the existence of different historic narratives that challenge the work of the first chroniclers. This has to do with the fact that history was perceived differently in the Andean setting. This aspect of perception is relevant, as these particular temporal coordinates are the ones used to organize our viewing of the world and to locate different phenomena within a particular sequence. As an example, for societies such as the Inca, for which there is quite a bit of information, the succession

of facts and temporal coordinates are significantly different from Western narratives. As Frank Salomon points out (1984: 8): “For Andeans, the sources of diachronic knowledge are completely different and, furthermore, were never organized on principles of absolute chronology, cause and effect, or eschatology. The useful past was centered on the dynastic oral tradition, the knotted system of *kipus*, the constellation of royal mummies, and the spacial-ritual calendar, [and was] structured on the system of sanctuaries that surrounded the Inca capital.” In this respect, scholars are confronted not only with the conception of phenomena in the pre-Hispanic world, or ontology, but also with the temporal order of these phenomena. This represents a methodological challenge when locating Andean phenomena and their materialization in a frame of time and space, as pre-Hispanic societies did not have a writing system (Salomon 1999: 20). Because of this, the acknowledgment of the existence of a different perception of space and time from that of literate, European, and European-derived societies, is an important element in this book.

Finally, it is necessary for the reader to note that perspectives developed in this chapter are predominantly based on studies from Peru and a few neighboring countries. This chapter does not intend to be an encyclopedic treatment of the topic. However, I hope to offer a series of axes that I believe are essential to begin working on the explicit correlation of Andean ontologies and their materializations in the Andean world.³

Ontologies Based on Ethnohistory

Ethnohistory has been an important source in establishing and explaining the existence of Andean ontologies. In fact, the explanation of archaeological remains from an ethnohistoric perspective is an important scholarly tradition in the Andes, especially during the twentieth century (Jijón y Caamaño 1919; Murra 1955; Rostworowski 1988; Rowe 1946; Tello 1909; Valcárcel 1912; and so on). Its relevance is rooted in the fact that ethnohistorical accounts were the best sources from which to translate earlier views of the inhabitants of the Andes upon the arrival of the Spaniards.

Many earlier works by chroniclers such as Miguel de Estete (1891 [1534]), Pedro Cieza de León (1995 [1554]), Juan de Betanzos (2010 [1551]), Polo Ondegardo (2012 [1571]), Cristóbal de Molina (2008 [1572]), Guamán Poma de Ayala (1987 [1615]), Martín de Murúa (2001 [1616]) and Bernabé Cobo (1964 [1653]) which described the Andean worldview, and various concepts discussed in this book, are based on these sources.