

Ritual and Remembrance in the Ecuadorian Andes

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Ritual and Remembrance in the Ecuadorian Andes

By Rachel Corr. Tucson, AZ:
University of Arizona Press, 2010. ix
+ 184 pp. US\$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-
81652830-1.

This book is based on fieldwork carried out over a period of 18 years among the Salasaca people of the Central Ecuadorian Andes. It focuses on how Salasacan culture has adapted to, interpreted, and reshaped Catholic tradition and the roles that individual actors and their interactions with the landscape have played in this process. I found this to be an informative, interesting, and well-researched book. However, I have to admit to a certain degree of bias. I carried out fieldwork on ritual and social change in an indigenous community in the neighboring Canton of Patate over the course of 17 years. Niton, one of the peaks sacred to the Salasaca, was a dominant feature of the landscape on the far side of the Patate River valley from where I did fieldwork. I passed through Salasaca each time I went to Ambato or Quito and stopped in Salasaca a few times to purchase some of the famous weavings. Reading this work makes me feel that I am on very familiar ground, geographically, ethnographically, and theoretically.

Chapter 1, "The Salasaca Runa" offers a brief historical, political, cultural, and religious overview of the Salasaca. The term *runa* means people, and this is how indigenous Andean peoples refer to themselves. The Salasaca are distinct, however, from neighboring indigenous groups insofar as they trace their cultural origins back to being a group displaced from Bolivia during the Inca Empire. This degree of "difference" is a source of pride for the Salasaca and is physically represented by their very distinctive "traditional" modes of dress. The notion of

history is important to Salasaca ideas of identity, as demonstrated in this first chapter. After this introduction, the book is divided into two parts. Part 1 looks at "Collective Rituals and Memories" and contains chapters 2 to 5. Part 2, "Individual Acts and Personal Narratives," contains chapters 6 to 8.

The aim of part 1 is to examine how the Salasaca interacted with colonial and postcolonial Catholic administrators and priests. Rather than depicting the Salasaca as passive actors in the processes of colonialization and evangelization, historical documents and oral history are used to demonstrate the agency of the Salasaca. Chapter 2, "The Catechist and the Qishuar Tree: Religious Transculturation in the Andean Contact Zone," and Chapter 3, "Textual Strategies and Ritual Control in Early 20th Century Salasaca," explore how a sacred tree was linked to the birth/discovery of the image of a Catholic saint and how this saint was appropriated by authorities outside the area and regained by the local people. Such stories are common in the Andes; they serve to attach a Catholic saint to a particular location in the Andean sacred landscape and to a particular people. It should be noted that the landscape (mountaintops, the earth, caves, streams, paths, crossroads, moon, sun, stars, wind, lightning, etc) are key sites of sacredness in pre-Conquest Andean cosmology that continue to have relevance in the syncretic forms of Catholicism we see today in the Andes. The political maneuverings involved in regaining the saint's image are also significant and illustrate the power struggles between local and regional authorities and the Salasaca people. Festival sponsorship is an interesting example of this. While getting locals to sponsor saints' feast days is well recognized as a colonial/Catholic form of oppression, it is equally well documented as a form of resistance and as a medium for sustaining indigenous collective

memory. Chapter 4, "Prayer and Placemaking in the Andes: Staffholders and Cultural Memory," continues with this theme by looking at how learning Catholic prayer has been appropriated by indigenous political authorities in order to recreate and manipulate cultural memory (including kinship and links with the landscape), as demonstrated in placemaking rituals and Corpus Christi. Chapter 5, "Life Lessons at a Time of Death," finishes off this section by looking at commemorative death rituals. As the title implies, death rituals can very often tell us about the living. In the case of the Salasaca, death rituals demonstrate the value of kinship and social relations. They are occasions where we see the enactment of religious transformations and reversals, such as the mimicking of festivals during a wake.

Part 2 moves from the study of commemorative collective rituals to the experience of individuals. A theme of this part of the book is how wider cultural patterns affect the ways in which individuals maintain their relationship with the sacred through shamanism and offerings to the mountain spirits. Chapter 6, "Tales of Amazonia: Personal Narratives of Healing by Yumbos," looks beyond the Andes to focus on Andean perceptions of the Amazon and its shamans as being powerful. While the Andes and the Amazon are two very distinct geographical and cultural regions, the history of trade and "knowledge exchange" between these areas predates the Inca. One reason why Amazonian shamans are regarded as more powerful than Andean ones is the belief that they retain knowledge that has been lost to Andean peoples. Chapter 7, "Shamanism," looks at the historical and contemporary links between Salasacan and lowland shamans. Shamanic healing rituals focus on making offerings to the mountain and earth spirits along with Catholic saints at key locales in the sacred landscape. Chapter 8, "Narrating the Sacred Landscape: Religious Ethnographies of the Particular," brings

the book to a close. It focuses on the narratives of individual Salasacan people relating to their religious experiences.

While I think that this is an excellent ethnography that looks at social change, memory, and ritual among the Salasaca, one of my criticisms is highlighted by the author in the final pages. Here she acknowledges that the forms of Andean religiosity described in the book are being affected by current economic and social changes in Ecuador. While the data in this book cover 18 years of research, I

do not get much of a feel for how life has changed over this period. We see glimpses of change, but this is not part of a sustained narrative. I see this book as appealing to Andeanists, particularly those like me who are interested in ritual and religion. In order to give the book wider theoretical appeal, however, I would have liked to see the final part of the book engage with broader theories of ritual, particularly those involving ritualization, such as we see in the works of Catherine Bell (1992) and Caroline Humphries and James Laidlaw (1994).

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