

Finding Ancestors in Archaeological Record: A Response to Whitley's "*Too Many Ancestors*"

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[ABSTRACT] A British archaeologist James Whitley (2002) warned that many mortuary archaeologists tend to focus solely on burial locations and give short shrift to potentially much more complicated conceptions and practices but simply lumping them together under the heading of “ancestor cults.” There has very little attempt to get over this critical problem at least in Andean archaeology during the last decade. In order to respond to Whitley's argument, in this article, I will demonstrate how we should approach ancestor veneration and what evidence we need to define it in archaeological record, referring to recent excavations at the site of Sicán in the Middle La Leche Valley, northern North Coast of Peru.

Introduction

This presentation focuses on a critical component of my on-going dissertation research of a prehispanic religion in the Andes. The primary goal of my dissertation is to elucidate the nature of the inferred kingship-based Middle Sicán ancestor cult (950-1,100 C.E.) at the site of Sicán in the Middle La Leche Valley, northern North Coast of Peru. At this conference last year and elsewhere, I discussed new findings from recent excavations by the Sicán Archaeological Project and framed four hypotheses to be tested. An underlying assumption was that a series of burial and ritual contexts are the preserved physical embodiments of ancestor veneration practices. However, I have not explored how we can define ancestor cult archaeologically.

In his evocative article in 2002, a British archaeologist James Whitley cautioned against oversimplifying diverse human practices and lumping them together under the heading of “ancestor cults.” He argues:

“A spectre is haunting British archaeology – the omnipresent ancestor. Ancestors were to the 1990s what chiefdoms (Yoffee 1993) were to the 1970s – the explanation of choice for a whole range of archaeological phenomena, from the siting of monuments within the landscape to the use of stone as opposed to wood in the construction of stone circles and henges” (Whitley 2002:119).

This is a common problem not only in Andean Archaeology, but also in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, there has been very little attempt to resolve it. In order to respond to Whitley’s argument, in this article, I will demonstrate how we should approach ancestor veneration and what evidence we need to define it in the archaeological record, referring to recent excavations at the site of Sicán.

What is Ancestor?: Death in the Andes

Ancestor veneration is a theme with deep roots in anthropological thoughts. The 19th-century unilineal-evolutionist anthropologists such as Tylor (1891 [1871]) and Spencer (1896) viewed ancestor veneration as the elementary form of religion associated with the emergence and growth of agriculture and related conceptions (e.g., cycles of fertility, seasonality, and possession of the land). Subsequent scholars debated the origin and function of ancestor worship (Durkheim 1961 [1912]; Flügel 1921; Jevons 1902; Malinowski 1948; Radcliffe-Brown 1948 [1922]) and the characteristics of ancestors in different parts of the world (Frazer 1933-36, 1968 [1913-24]; Gough 1958; Phillpotts 1913; Robertson Smith 1927 [1889]). Even though there is no singular generalization that can be agreed upon everywhere, we can come up with some common characteristics and provide a minimal definition based on them:

Ancestors are the dead members of society who are remembered and venerated as the source of entitlement and/or identity by their descendents, periodically or intermittently,

through active lines of communication usually in the form of rituals and sacralization of places.

As ethnographic evidence has demonstrated (Bradbury 1965; Goody 1962; Ooms 1976), people do not necessarily become ancestors automatically after they die. Ancestorhood is rather a sort of status to be gained from a transformational process of making ancestor of the dead through appropriate protocols by the living and to be constantly reproduced by means of remembering. In this regard, ancestor veneration goes beyond mortuary ritual such as interment and funerary rites (Fortes 1965; Morris 1991). It is very important to note here that the place of remembering does not necessarily correspond to the resting place of the dead (Goody 1962; Parker Pearson 2000; Shimada, et al. 2007; Whitley 2002). Among the LoDagaa of West Africa, ancestors are venerated in ancestral shrines located in byres (Goody 1962:384-389). In the course of becoming ancestors, the deceased lose their in-life personal characters and belong to a collectivity. Specific ancestors possess supernatural powers, if beneficial or hazardous, which directly affect the living descendents. In addition, ancestors can be non-human such as totemistic and mystical progenitors.

Now, what about in the Andes? – Kaulicke (1997) presents a model of the concept of death in Central Andes based on ethnohistorical sources recorded from the 16th to 20th centuries and shows its applicability to prehistoric times using archaeological data. His longitudinal overview revealed that the concept of death has not changed very much from that he infers in prehistoric times. Regardless of its complexity and variability, the basic concept of death and its mechanism oriented to maintaining physical persistence of the dead have existed since 8,000 years ago. According to Kaulicke, death in the Andes is not merely an antonym of life, but rather a state of its cyclical, transformational sequence that comes into existence under supersocietal conditions and eventually leads to regeneration. Therefore, the dead and the living cannot be separated. For the society that wishes for permanence, death is

perceived as a crisis that could disturb it. The deceased need to be transformed into ancestor so as to join a transgenerational collectivity and eternize the cyclical sequence of society.

In the Andes, like many other societies, the sequence of making ancestor through dead-living interactions is expressed in a complex system of rituals that begin before physical death and are repeated over time even after the final placement of remains of the deceased individual to memorize him/her who became an ancestor. These ritual practices are in turn expressed materially in various contexts such as burials in special places, body treatments, grave goods, and iconographies related to the themes used during the rituals. Kaulicke (1997) categorizes those funerary contexts into three basic components: (1) structures (natural or artificial, underground or aboveground); (2) individuals (with primary, secondary, and tertiary treatments); and (3) associated objects.

As seen in the anthropomorphic funerary bundles recovered from the excavations at El Brujo Complex and Huaca Las Ventanas (Elera Arévalo 2009; Franco Jordán 2009), the remains of Sicán dead elites seem to have been wrapped in textile bundles and given a false face or mask before final interment, although the textiles cannot always be well recognized due to poor preservation conditions. This sort of practice to preserve physical persistence of the deceased individual is one of the most compelling evidence for ancestor cult. Vestiges of secondary or tertiary body treatments (e.g., rewrapping of funerary bundles) indicated by material evidence such as loss of bones and disarticulation of joints in those funerary bundles would also be strong evidence for the continuous ritual practices that Kaulicke pointed out.

The symbolic expressions of Sicán mortuary program seem to be twofold: masking and highlighting individuality. On one hand, faces of Sicán dead elites were covered with metal mask with standardized features (e.g., inverted comma eyes). By masking their individualities, they seem to have been able to gain ancestorhood and join the collectivity. On the other hand, their individualities were expressed by Kaulicke's three basic funerary components: funerary structure, body treatment, and associated objects.

These expressed the premortem social role by which the living recognized the dead individual and the desires and intentions of the living. Nevertheless, there is no prescribed way to know which one of the various roles is being represented by those components.

Taking into account the aforementioned definition of ancestors as well as these salient characteristics of Andean counterparts, critical defining factors and conditions for the deceased to become an ancestor would include: (1) some beneficial belongings of the deceased that helps to gain and maintain the well-being of his/her group (e.g., proprietary or use rights of resources and his/her role as the source and symbol of group identity); (2) the presence of his/her successor(s) who take over those belongings; (3) legitimizable, genealogical linkage between the dead and the living successor(s); (4) transformational rituals for making the deceased an ancestor, which may include mummification of the corpse and its curation and display; (5) the place and structure for final interment of the preserved corpse; and (6) periodical or continuous ritual services and tendance, which are to be provided by the descendants not only at the burial location, but also at some other place(s). By finding out material vestiges of human practices through which these factors and conditions are embodied, it would be possible to define ancestor cult archaeologically. In the case of Sicán, an ancestor's burial may be identified by: (1) a mask as the symbol of transgenerational collectivity worn by the interred individual; (2) special body treatment for preserving the corpse (e.g., making *fardo*); (3) alteration and renewal of the preserved corpse (e.g., rewrapping and exhumation of body parts); (4) close genetic affiliations with other individuals interred nearby; (5) postinterment rituals and feasts to commemorate the deceased and reinforce the linkages to them, and so forth. More importantly, a ritual practice that is found spatially separated from funerary context may also turn out to be a part of or related to ancestor cult. Contrasting artifactual components of that ritual with those of funerary contexts would be most promising. In other words, if artifacts that have been found only within funerary contexts are recovered in some other context, a symbolic linkage can be inferred between those two contexts and may indicate

the existence of ancestor-cult-related practice away from the final resting place of the deceased. Such artifacts would involve: (1) miniature funerary vessels (a.k.a. crisoles), (2) cinnabar used to paint the preserved corpse, and (3) exotic shells (e.g., *Conus fergusonii*).

Archaeological Record: PAS2006 and 2008 Field Seasons

With the intent to delineate the trajectory of the protracted interactions between the dead and the living, recent excavations by the Sicán Archaeological Project in 2006 and 2008 focused attention on two different ritual contexts at the site: (1) the locus of ritual activities unveiled by test excavation in 1997 above a nearly intact Middle Sicán burial ground under and at the west base of Huaca Loro (designated PAS-HL'06-Trenches 1-3); and (2) an inferred ritual ground located some 50 m east of Huaca Loro near the west edge of the Great Plaza, which is circumscribed by the four major monumental structures: Huaca Loro to the west, Huaca Colorada (a.k.a. El Moscón) to the north, Huaca Las Ventanas to the east, and Huaca La Merced to the southwest (PAS-HL'08-Area 3). The excavations documented deep layers of material vestiges of various activities near and away from burial location, which may or may not have been related to ancestor veneration and commemoration.

Here are the major findings. The excavation in 2006 revealed mortuary activities in a nearly intact Middle Scan burial ground – designated the West Cemetery – that consisted of Tombs 1 and 2, other smaller and simpler funerary structures, and two sacrificed bodies. Burials contained bodies in either seated, flexed, or extended positions, and a few of them were painted with cinnabar. Above this cemetery were a minimum of 14 occupational surfaces together spanning over 500 years. Each revealed evidence of ritual offerings and feasting activities such as burnt surfaces, burnt items (e.g., maize and textile), ash concentrations, fire pits, buried ollas, adobe-lined hearths, disarticulated animal bones, and so forth. The burning activities, in particular, were extensively found throughout the Huaca Loro area

and were sandwiched between thick fluvial deposits of sand and clay most probably due to heavy rains and subsequent floods.

During the excavation in 2008, we made three major findings in the Great Plaza. First, we documented various lines of evidence for simultaneous, multiple activities occurring in the plaza such as cooking, rituals involving exhumed body parts or preparing of the funerary bundles, and craft production. For example, in and around a 3-by-3 m adobe-lined hearth similar to the one excavated in 1990 nearby, we found a thick ashy soil deposition containing a whole variety of food remains, fragmented serving and cooking vessels, exotic items (e.g., cinnabar bits and a *Conus fergusonii*), craft production tools (e.g., spindle whirrs and sewing needles), and some human bones. The Great Plaza seems to have been dotted with extraordinarily large hearths and is posited to have prepared substantial amounts of food at a time. The high frequency of llama bones – other than the skull and limbs usually devoted to burial offerings – seems to indicate that the rest of the body was processed for consumption. In regard to the craft production, a Middle Sicán metalworking area was, indeed, found associated with scraps of gold sheets, chisels, tuyere fragments, and slag lumps in another excavation unit of the 2008 field season. Second, we documented an inferred ritual canal one level above the occupational surface associated with the aforementioned cooking hearth. Some elevation measurements led us to conclude that the liquid in the canal would have flowed from the Huacas towards the La Leche River. Third, on at least five occupational surfaces above the inferred ritual canal, we found a series of burning activities quite similar to those documented in 2006 in the West Cemetery.

Discussions: Finding Ancestors

Now let me go back to our question: “How can we define ancestor cult archaeologically?” Please recall the list of material manifestations expected for Sicán Ancestor Cult. Regarding the first, out of 30 burials and tombs were recovered seven metal masks made of different kinds of metal (e.g., arsenical

copper, copper and silver alloy, and gold). The placement of the masks varied; three were placed over either the face or the chest of the interred body, two near the body, and two buried together with other grave goods but without any human remain. In regard to the second and the third, various activities documented in the Great Plaza seem to support an ancestor cult during the middle Middle Sicán. People produced craft items (e.g., textiles, metal, and shell beads) most likely to prepare and attire funerary bundles. Old bundles may have been rewrapped periodically. A large amount of food was probably served for those who were involved in these activities. The fourth is also suggested by an incomplete skeletal remain, which clearly illuminates the possibility of exhumation of body parts and secondary burial, although there is no direct evidence of rewrapping of funerary bundles. The fifth awaits the results of genetic analyses that are under way. The judgment of whether your materials represent the existence of ancestor veneration needs to be made through multiple lines of evidence. In addition, inferred ritual and feasting activities in the Huaca Loro area and in the Grand Plaza are linked not only by their stratigraphic positions but also by symbolic ties between them. Some specific artifacts such as cinnabar and *Conus fergusonii*, which have been found only within funerary contexts thus far, were indeed found outside them as well. They may be used as material indicators for ritual activities related to ancestor cult but away from burial location.

Conclusion: A Response to Whitley's "Too Many Ancestors"

In conclusion, my answer is quite simple. Based on the material correlates that I observed in archaeological record, I argue that ancestor cult can indeed be defined archaeologically in and away from funerary contexts. The exclusive focus on burial locations and the hasty, uncritical use of the term "ancestors" – which James Whitley justifiably pointed out – may be relinquished simply by broadening our perspective to cover wider and deeper areas and carefully looking at our contextual data.

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