

ARMAS SIGNIFICANTES: TRAMAS CULTURALES, GUERRA Y CAMBIO SOCIAL EN EL SUR ANDINO PREHISPÁNICO

SIGNIFICANT ARMS: CULTURAL PLOTS, WAR AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE PRE-HISPANIC SOUTHERN ANDES

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Este artículo discute la relación entre guerra y cambio político en los Andes circumpuneños durante el Periodo de Desarrollos Regionales o Intermedio Tardío. La perspectiva adoptada pone énfasis en los aspectos significantes de la práctica, bajo la premisa de que es necesario considerar las lógicas culturales en que se desarrolla el conflicto para comprender sus consecuencias sociales. En la primera parte se analizan los significados asociados a diversas armas y otros objetos vinculados a la guerra andina como aproximación al sistema semántico articulado en torno a esta práctica. En la segunda parte se discute el modo en que significados y prácticas políticas se transformaron recíprocamente bajo condiciones sociales y ambientales cambiantes.

Palabras clave: Andes circumpuneños, Periodo de Desarrollos Regionales, guerra, teorías de la práctica, armas

This paper discusses the relationship between warfare and political change in the Andean puna (a high plateau region) during the Regional Development, or Late Intermediate Period. Emphasis is placed on the importance of practice, in accordance with the premise that by understanding the cultural logic behind a conflict, the social consequences can be determined. The first part of the paper contains an analysis of the meanings associated with various Andean weapons and war-related objects to approach the semantic system that was articulated around war; the second part, is a discussion of the way in which meanings and political practices were transformed reciprocally under shifting social and environmental conditions.

Key words: Andean Circumpuna, Regional Development Period, warfare, practice theories, weapons

Comment by Bruce Owen begins on next page.

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COMENTARIOS

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Nielsen proposes to advance beyond “common sense” analysis of warfare and social change in the Circumpuna and, implicitly, the Andes, considering the social impact of war in light of the particular cultural logic and agencies involved. While he makes useful progress, it is largely independent of his semiotic analysis.

Nielsen wisely rejects the “real” versus “ritual” violence dichotomy that plagues current debate. Despite adopting LeBlanc’s definition of (real) warfare as involving a state of insecurity, he notes that “real” and “ritualized” warfare are extremes of a single Andean conceptual continuum, and promotes an elegant model in which consistently threatening warfare at a settlement’s walls evolves into ritualized, contained warfare at territorial boundaries as intersettlement integration develops through segmentary fusion, as proposed by Platt. This process, driven by competition caused by long-term drought after a wet period population expansion, produces different political forms than do Middle Period processes based on the attraction of an economic and ceremonial center such as Tiwanaku. The model fits local evidence of increasing regionalization and decorative impoverishment of material culture, and it suggests testable hypotheses applicable anywhere.

Another promising direction is Nielsen’s call to study precisely how exchange coexists with warfare, as it obviously has recently and in prehistory. The idea of unaffiliated caravaneros is one of several specific, testable suggestions.

Nielsen argues that it is difficult to understand warfare as simply a response to environmental stress or strategies of personal aggrandizers. That depends on the scale of analysis. In broad strokes, these culture-agnostic concepts are useful. For finer-grained understanding, particularistic semiotic analyses may be necessary. Whether these can succeed in a given case is an empirical question. The odds may not be good.

The semiotic analyses here are weakened by some common methodological flaws.

First, association is insufficient to establish significance. A few instances of association between a potential

sign and its proposed referent do not demonstrate that people read the sign as signifying that referent. For example, Nielsen links warfare with shamanic transformation by citing warlike motifs on certain snuff tubes, and two stories involving transforming warriors. However, the vast bulk of snuff paraphernalia is decorated with other motifs, and similar transformations occur in other stories without warfare. Snuff paraphernalia, the trope of transformation, and warfare were all common. A few associations between them in a sea of other associations do not demonstrate that contemporary observers would have read any of the three as referring to the others. Nielsen's excellent observation about pectoral disks is the exception that proves this rule. Guamán Poma illustrates these disks only in connection with battle, never on armed men in other contexts. Unlike the association of snuff tubes and war motifs, this association is frequent and exclusive, suggesting that these disks indeed signified combat to Guamán Poma.

Second, semiotic analyses often overgeneralize the sign. They begin with an unexamined typology of signs, identify an association with one example or variant, and assume that other members of the supposed type signify the same referent. Here, Nielsen argues that since Guamán Poma associates metallic plaques with combat, metallic plaques in the circumpuna also signified warfare. However, all of Guamán Poma's plaques are a consistent size and form of undecorated disk with a pierced suspension tab. The *circumpuneño* examples vary widely in size and form, have various mounting provisions suggesting different uses, and are frequently decorated. It is not clear that they were the same sign as Guamán Poma's pectoral disks, nor that they signified the same referents. Similarly, Nielsen's category of "severed head" apparently includes any face depicted without a body. Some such motifs may have signified severed heads, but the apparent proliferation of this sign and referent may be an artifact of an overgeneralized typology of signs.

Third, the analysis conflates modern uncertainty with prehistoric multiplicity. Many meanings have been proposed for severed heads. Nielsen suggests that this may indicate multiple referents in the past. These multiple meanings would link many semantic domains into a single system intersecting in the sign of the severed head, making it a key metaphor in prehistoric ideation. However, it may be simply that scholars cannot agree on what this sign meant, rather than that prehistoric readers of the sign perceived all of the suggested meanings. The apparent multivalence of severed heads may reflect disagreement among modern researchers, rather than prehistoric semiotics.

Finally, the connection of warfare and metallic plaques to the deified sun, the use of trumpets to mobilize complementary destructive and constructive powers, and the interpretation of "manoplas" as weapons and their occasional zoomorphic decorations as signifying shamanic transformation, are essentially speculative.

Nielsen synthesizes a compelling vision of late circumpuneño prehistory and highlights the need for semiotic analyses of war, power, and politics, but fails to show that such analyses can reach sufficiently convincing and complete conclusions to fulfill their promise.