Ethnohistories of Native Space

*The Shoreline: conceptual boundaries between land and sea in pre-Columbian Andean cosmologies*

Where do you draw the line between land and sea? Should both be part of a conceptually larger dimension? This paper examines a different kind of ‘native space’, the sea - above and below the waves - and how it might have shaped ethnic identities and consciousness in the Andean region.

Using evidence from a previously unpublished source dating to the 1580s, this paper draws on the case of Pedro de Cama, of the ethnic Manteño peoples of the south central (present day) Ecuador. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Manteño were sea farers and marine specialists, with antecedents drawn from maritime cultures and complex exchange systems along the west coast of Central and South America dating back well over two thousand years.

In his petition to the Crown of Spain, Pedro de Cama declared himself to be a sailor, diver and ‘man of the sea’ and this is how the Spanish understood him, as an Indian ‘ladino’ - conversant with Spanish ways and language - their ‘friend’, who provisioned the ships of their navy, who sailed in their galleons, and who, on occasion, even saved their ships from sinking. His account is firmly situated within a Eurocentric conceptual framework; his credentials are those of a seaman from within European colonial definitions of that role.

However, from an ethnic Andean perspective, we are reminded that space should include more than mere earth-bound notions of territory, that the sea itself constituted its own framework of experience. Drawing on pre-Columbian iconographic and ethnohistorical information this paper offers a view on how native space can be interpreted to include an oceanic dimension and complement purely telluric ‘Tierre Firme’ models of space in a more holistic and multi-dimensional view of the native world.

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**Introduction**

With the advent of historical periods, and the introduction of the (Spanish) written record, understanding of the Amerindian world changed, at least at a level accessible to historians and ethnographers.

Apart from very rare narratives of indigenous myths recorded in Spanish, the most important of which is the Huarochiri manuscript, there are no documents that recount in any detail the belief systems of indigenous South Americans from their own perspectives. In records of the *Extirpación de las Idolatrías*, the Jesuit trials of Idolatry prosecutes against indigenous religious specialists, or in the several accounts of the history of the Incas and their predecessors written variously by members of the Catholic and Jesuit priesthood, or by indigenous chroniclers such as Guaman Poma de Ayalá or Gacilaso de la Vega, the accounts we read have already been filtered through a Eurocentric interpretive framework, employing Renaissance Aristotelian concepts of ‘natural law’, and Christianised concepts of demonology. Through these heavily obfuscating filters we must endeavour to reach the cognitive process of native peoples as to how their pre-Spanish world was understood.

We know from the earliest dictionaries of Quechua and the struggles of different lexicographers to find equivalent glosses for Spanish and Quechua terms, that many of the subtle yet profound differences in understanding of concepts between Renaissance Europe and the pre-Colombian Andes became irreversibly lost in translation. Translators were motivated first and foremost with the catechising imperative. Although this, in part, sought to understand native religion and rituals on their own terms, it was wholly with the objective of uprooting and destroying them.

So, in the absence of any significant or credible literary source, the world of iconography, which encodes indigenous narratives and myths in pictographic form offers the only viable alternative which, together with information from the archaeological record, can shed light on how pre-Colombians understood their worlds of land and sea.

The Shoreline in Pre-Colombian Consciousness (SLIDE SICAN WAVE MOTIF)

Diachronically and trans-culturally, the sea has been experienced by humanity as an ambivalent world, simultaneously the provider of rich resource wealth, the medium for transport and trade, but also a magical realm, home to mythical beings and deities, which could bring devastation and catastrophe. In South America this is particularly pertinent in that, throughout the trajectory of human occupation from the 12th millennium BP onwards, the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) climatic perturbation has massively impacted human settlement all along the west coast of South America. ENSO with its elevated sea temperatures and torrential rains, and the tectonism consequent on the subduction of the Nasca oceanic plate causing regular seismic events with associated tsunamis, were the context within which the southern Amerindian cultures evolved and which shaped their notions of the real and mythic worlds. The very ocean itself at times might invade the land, making the notion of the shoreline itself negotiable and the experience of living there fraught with uncertainty.

Experience of and interactions with the ocean are demonstrable from early pre-Ceramic times along the west coast of South America, with marine life of every variety and exploitation of marine resources amply portrayed. Ethnohistorical records suggest that the marine environment was made up of discrete fishing and resource areas of different kinds, in much the same way as were terrestrial regions (Netherly 2009). These units were apportioned among the corporate groups of fisher folk in a manner analogous to the apportionment of particular resources on land among the different sections of the farming population in a particular polity. Thus the landscape, in the sense of the political economy, of a particular segment of a valley— a moiety or section of a moiety— would have access to both terrestrial and marine resources through specific component groups or *parcialidade*s and represents an extension of the transverse landscape of the larger valley and sub-valley socio-political units (Netherly 1977, 2009).

Although the iconography of coastal pre-Colombian Peruvian cultures is rich with marine symbolism, there is little reference to coastal peoples’ ideas about their world other than generalist myths recorded in the 17th century, that pre-Spanish coastal peoples believed that every night the sun and the moon would disappear into the western ocean and do battle there with marine monsters in its depths, before emerging each day victorious anew, above the horizon of the Andes mountains to the east (Rostworoski 1977). In one of the rare written accounts of pre-Colombian Andean notions of the world, the Huarochiri manuscript gives us to understand that the earth itself originated in the ocean, imagined as ‘rising up from the waters of the surrounding ocean’, but Salomon and Urioste (1981) observe that “Although the Pacific Ocean plays a key part in organizing mythic space, it is not personalized [as are other natural phenomena] in the-manuscript. In more recent Andean myths, the ocean – Mama Cocha, or Mother Lake is imagined as female and the 'huaca’ most closely associated with the sea is Pacha Camac, although Pacha Camac is not clearly defined as a maritime deity” (Salomon and Urioste 1982: 15).

Although the myth tellers of the Huarochiri manuscript unquestionably identified themselves as people of ‘high land’ ancestry, nevertheless they imagined salt water as part of their humanized and culturalised ‘land’ scape. Salomon and Urioste tell us that ocean fish were understood to actually be a form of feral fresh water fish - “runaways turned wild”:

‘At that time there wasn't a single fish in the ocean.

Only Urpay Huachac used to breed them at her

home, in a small pond'

It was these fish, all of them, that Cuni Raya angrily

scattered into the ocean '”(Salomon & Urioste 1982: 12 quoting chapter 2, section 26).

**The Iconographic Record SLIDE TEXTILE.**

Without the benefit of written accounts of the experiences and beliefs of coastal South Americans - fishermen or mariners - we must turn to a particularly rich corpus of pictographic material from the Peruvian north coast, where we find some of the richest iconography of pre-Colombian South American cultures. The vivid drawings which decorate textiles, funerary ceramic vessels and the rich, colourful murals and bas reliefs on the walls of temples, palaces and pyramids attest to a long trajectory of cultural development wherein the sea played a vital part in the consciousness of coastal peoples and their mythological worlds. SLIDE: SUPERNATURALS FISHING The iconography of Moche and succeeding Chimú cultures is one replete with images of the sea, with a rich marine life of sea birds and mammals, fish, rays, crabs and other sea creatures, and perhaps most tellingly of all, the representation of ‘anthropomorphized’ waves, which start to appear in Moche fine line drawings on pottery vessels by the latest Moche period V, from around 750 CE, and upon later temple friezes and murals SLIDE ANTHRP WAVE. The sea at this time apparently acquired the characteristics and powers of anthropomorphic beings, rising up along the crests of the waves.

The pivotal role of the sea in the viability of all of life is most clearly evidenced by the core symbolism of sea shells and their association with the bringing of water (rain or river) and with it, agricultural fertility. The red clam, the so-called ‘thorny oyster’ - *Spondylus princeps* - SPONDYLUS SLIDE - is particularly important, and is an association which continued across the Spanish conquest into historical periods, down into contemporary Andean agricultural practices (Murra 1975). Seashells were often used for sacrifices, particularly to ensure the rains and abundant crops (Cobo 1990:51, 117 [1653]), and ethnohistorical accounts record sea shells being sacrificed to springs and flowing waters, and that indigenous peoples called the shells "daughters of the sea, mother of all waters" (De Acosta 1962:246, 247 [1590]). In this way it seems that the sea penetrated the land itself, underpinning the cycles of life, bringing fertility.

Spondylus, pre-eminent symbol of the sea and its associated deities, is an important ‘marker’ in the archaeological record on the Peruvian north coasts, becoming visible in the funerary offerings of elite tombs from at least as early as the Early Horizon period Chavín culture (ca 900 - 200 BCE), and its coastal manifestations Cupisnique. Important though it was clearly deemed to be at these earlier times, there is nevertheless a clear rise in the quantity of whole, fragmentary and ground up spondylus valves that are found in the latest Moche period - Phase V - which continues on into the Lambayeque or Sícan culture in the north, and Chimú further south, from around the ninth to the 13th centuries CE. That the ocean had the power to shape human experience and ideology is most clearly seen in events on the Peruvian North Coast in the later Moche periods (from ca 600 CE) and succeeding Sícan and Chimu (ca 850 - 1450 CE). Archaeologists understand that devastating El Niño flooding, documented in the archaeological record on the Peruvian North Coast at the end of Moche Phase IV sometime in the late 6th century CE, caused the abandonment of key Moche sites and led to the reorganization of occupation in the succeeding Moche Phase V. It seems likely that the conception of the Moche mythical world changed in response to this natural cataclysm. The appearance of new marine deities and elite personages, as well the appearance of the anthropomorphized wave motif, apparently documents these changes, with the ocean and its deities having acquired enlarged and new mythical roles, underpinning the maritime shift in Moche art between Phases IV (ca 600 CE) and V (ca 750 CE), an influence which clearly continued into the succeeding Sícan and Chimu cultures (McCleeland 1990: 92). With the new maritime focus of Moche V mythology, from being a magical place of ritual fishing as represented in earlier cultural periods, the appearance of new larger forms of ocean-going vessels signify that the sea became an avenue of trade and commerce, on which maritime deities now sailed. From this time, north coast Peruvian myths relate the arrival of the legendary Naymlap from the ocean on his fleet of *balsas*, with his entourage of wives, concubines and retainers, to start the Sícan dynasty of the Lambayeque valley (Cabello Balboa ([1586] 1951); Rubinos y Andrade ([1782] 1936). This important ‘watershed’ moment appears to herald a dramatic rise in the importation of Spondylus shells from Ecuador that were to be so critical to Sícan and Chimu elite ceremonies.

The power of the ocean to change people’s lives and the iconography which demonstrates it has powerful antecedents elsewhere in the world, where, for example, following the eruption of Santorini volcano in the eastern Mediterranean, a massive tsunami overwhelmed and brought to an end the Minoan civilisation of Crete. Iconography on ceramic vessels following this event clearly depict the importance of the sea through the sudden appearance, indeed the apparent invasion of myriad sea creatures, which hitherto had been hardly ever portrayed. The same is evidently true for the latest Moche period. The sea had entered the consciousness of coastal peoples as a powerful force to be reckoned with in a number of ways. And as the source of the sumptuary sea shell spondylus, the ocean was symbolically linked to the land through ensuring vital water and agricultural fertility.

**The Spondylus Saga** (SLIDE BALSA)

In archaeological terms, we understand that long distance exchange systems had most likely been in operation from as far north as the west coast of Mexico, south down to the north coast of Perú (and possibly further) since well before Common Era (Hosler 1988; Paulsen 1977; Zevallos Menendez 1986). The principal commodity of exchange, which was arguably also one of its key drivers, was the prized marine shell *Spondylus princeps*; as well also *Spondylus calcifer, Strombus* sppand *Conus* spp (Cordy-Collins 1990, 2001; Marcos 1977/8, 1995, 2005; Murra 1982; Netherly 2009: 141-145; Paulsen 1974; Pillsbury 1996).

SLIDE SPONDYLUS ORNAMENTS The extensive debate over the exact role of Spondylus in the development of these complex exchange systems in prehistory, and its wider ritual symbolic significance to the peoples who used it in such quantity, is largely beyond the scope of this paper. However, archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates the growing importance of the marine shell industry and focus on the production of marine shell ornaments, and of Spondylus products in particular, at many of the archaeological settlements along the coast of Ecuador and the north coast of Peru, particularly from Late Formative periods onwards (Carter 2008; Currie1995a,b; Estrada 1957b, 1962; Hocquenghem 1993, 1994; Mester 1990; McKewan and Delgado Espinosa 2008; Stothert 2001). There is a concomitant increase in Spondylus and Strombusspp. found in burial caches at later Moche and Sícan sites on the Peruvian north coast (Shimada 1990, 1994).

(SLIDE DIVERS)The need for specialist divers to harvest Spondylus (and other inter-tidal and deeper water species[[1]](#footnote-1)), is generally acknowledged (e.g., Cordy-Collins 1990; Netherly 2009:141) and seen in the iconography from jewellery and other ritual objects dating from the Middle Sícan period in northern Peru ca AD 900-1110 (Shimada 1990), and in architectural reliefs such as ‘*Los buceadores*’ (The divers) from walls at the Chimú city of Chan Chan (Pillsbury 1996), which explicitly represent divers harvesting spondylus valves from balsa rafts.

It seems likely that Manteno merchant adventurers of what is now coastal Ecuador were still actively pursuing their pivotal role in the spondylus exchange dynamic until the arrival of the Spanish off the west coast of South America in 1526 spelled its demise.

**An Andean at Sea**

In whatever way the peoples of pre-Colombian South America understood the sea, the first narratives from the indigenous perspective come to us through the ethnohistorical records. As an archaeologist by profession, I had been searching the archival records at the AGI in Seville for documents relating to the part of the world that was the focus for my research interests - south coastal Ecuador, and specifically the last pre-Colombian culture in that region before the arrival of the Spanish in 1532 - the Manteño culture dating to from around 800 CE to contact. We know that the ethnic group known as the Manteño- Guancavilca were great seafarers, building upon what archaeologists believe to be a centuries-long tradition. They occupied a pivotal role in the long-distance exchange systems extending probably from the West coast of Mexico, at least as far as the North coast of Peru, and the commodity they trafficked was the highly prized marine shell *Spondylus princeps*, together with other many other sumptuary goods for elite and ritual consumption.

Our view of them is captured most clearly by the ‘snapshot’ taken of it during the now-famous encounter between Pizarro’s pilot Bartolomé Ruíz and a large balsa trading raft which was intercepted off the Bahía de San Mateo, Esmeraldas, Ecuador towards the end of 1526, during Pizarro’s second exploratory expedition. It was this encounter which alerted the Spanish to the riches of the Inca Empire which lay now within their reach, and also provided them with four Manteño-Guancavilca sailors, whom they took captive to train as interpreters. Although we have the first hand description of the encounter as the Spanish experienced it, inevitably that of the indigenous seafarers themselves is missing.

SLIDE: PLEITO It seems that the first time we have a first-hand narrative of the life and experiences of a Manteño sailor, is from an account of the life and adventures of one Pedro de Zama, principal of the town of Zama, (north-central coast of Ecuador and well within the geographical extension of the Manteño-Guancavilca archaeological culture) in his petition the Consejo de Indias in 1586, for a reward for his services to the Crown of Spain. The *probanca* is dated some 60 years after the capture of the balsa raft, but in it we clearly see the continuity of the tradition in the account of Pedro de Zama, and his fleet of ‘*balsas*’.

Pedro de Zama himself, and the witnesses who testified in support of his petition, say that he was a native of the port of Manta, a settlement on the Pacific coast of present day Manabí, Ecuador. In ethnic terms he seems likely to have been of the Manteño-Guancavilca people, who, at the point of first European contact in AD 1526, occupied a region from southern Esmeraldas province to the north, down to the Guayas basin in the south (Estrada 1957a ; Stothert 2013). We learn that he is married with four children, is a brother of the present chief (‘*principal*’) of the town of Zama, and the son of chiefs (*caciques*), so he is a man of some social standing, at least in the Spanish quasi-apartheid half of the Kingdom of Peru: the ‘*Republico de los Indios*’. Notwithstanding, our hero has also fallen upon hard times, as evidenced in his plea, wherein he states himself to be a poor man and in debt to diverse parties.

Pedro de Zama declared himself to be a sailor, diver and ‘man of the sea’ and this is how the Spanish understood him, as an Indian ‘ladino’ - conversant with Spanish ways and language - their ‘friend’, who provisioned the ships of their navy, who sailed in their galleons, and who, on occasion, even saved their ships from sinking through his professional skills. His account is firmly situated within a Eurocentric conceptual framework; his credentials are those of a seaman from within European colonial definitions of that role.

The probanca itself is as much notable for how a complex set of sub-narratives became condensed finally into a more generalised account, as analysis of the text reveals up to six different episodes involving a galleon, where Pedro de Zama was perceived to have played a key role in saving a ship from sinking. In addition is also cited his coming to the rescue of a failed *entrada* - a mission of exploration and conquest - into Las Esmeraldasprovince to the far north west of Ecuador, wherein Governor Diego López de Zúñiga and his men were lost on the ‘wild coast’ and under grave threat from ‘enemy Indians of war’.

In one of the incidents recounted for 1580, a ship called the Santiago de Romero, was sailing from Guayaquil to. She was laden with many people, arms and other of His Majesty’s goods relating to the treasuries of Quito and Guayaquil. A big storm blew up in front of the port causing the ship to take on water and start to sink, together with all on board. The narrative is rather unclear about the whereabouts of Pedro de Zama, who is said to be also on board the ship, but then the account says he ‘sets sail’ after the storm passes. However, he removed the waters from the ship with two pumps and thus the ship and its passengers were saved.

In another incident in 1584, during the course of the voyage from Panamá, so much water was discovered in the ship that they were pumping with two hand pumps day and night, and the ship found to be sinking, in the middle of the gulf. Pedro de Zama, because he was such a great diver, dived down many times and removed the waters the ship was taking in, then he covered [the hole] with plates of pewter and nailed them down. He was said to have gone [down] diving many times in the gulf, but also said to be ‘sailing in his ships with a lot of wind’. And it was said publically amongst the soldiers and people that if it hadn’t have been for Pedro de Zama, they would all have been lost. The passengers were determined to ‘throw in their lot with him’ (*de dar con el*) on enemy coast and come [back] by land, something that was heard said to Captain Heredia and Captain Hernando Alonso and other officials who came with the fleet.

**Discussion**

There is a tantalising void between Pedro de Zama’s account of his experiences as a sailor and a diver and those of his forebears, the people who were key drivers in the upsurge in the consumption of spondylus in the north coast Peruvian kingdoms, first through acquiring the commodity by diving for it in their own home waters, then, possibly when steeply increasing demand had resulted in a diminishing of supplies, by trading for it even as far as Western Mexico. From this perspective, in that whole conceptual time shift marked by the advent of European culture and language, biblical mind sets and Renaissance understandings of the world and ‘natural law’, the sea as a magical realm, home to deities and monsters, harbouring sumptuary shells in its depths that legitimised the thrones of kings, sanctioned agricultural fertility cycles, the preferred food of the gods, had reverted to being merely a highway for trade and traffic, where the skills of indigenous sailors and divers were sought in the most practical of sea faring ways.

We may never know how or where to ‘draw the shoreline’ in pre-Colombian Andean understandings of their world. There are too few accounts of Andean beliefs to do so. The beneficence of the ocean had supported sedentary communities all along the west coast of South America from pre-Ceramic times dating back to before the 5th millennium BCE - onwards, and a rich iconography of marine life imagery against a backdrop of stylised wave motifs had long been represented in the art of coastal cultures.

SLIDE: CHIMU WAVE The one real account we have of an Andean Amerindian experience of the ocean and its depths is, frustratingly, framed entirely in European terms, from a European ideological perspective. Juxtaposed against this account is the rich if seemingly impenetrable pre-Colombian iconographic world of mythical beings, deities and monsters of the depths, framed itself by a liminal anthropomorphic shoreline through which we are challenged to interpret how Amerindians understood their watery world.

1. Such as the pearl oysters *Pinctada mazatlanica* and *Pteria sterna.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)