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# RECOVERING LESBIANISM IN PRE-COLONIAL ANDEAN PERU



**Aim:** to recover knowledge of female homosexuality in the context of the pre-colonial Andean Peru and to discuss the role of the Spanish conquista in ignoring its existence

## INTRODUCTION

El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno (1615), a Peruvian chronicle by indigenous Peruvian nobleman Felipe Guáman Poma de Ayala, contains one of the few records on the practice of lesbianism within pre-colonial Andean society. He argues that not only should lesbians be tolerated but also highly respected (1). Aside from this, there is a large gap in this area of queer studies. The concept of obligatory or compulsory heterosexuality, explored by thinkers like Adrienne Rich (2) and Gayle Rubin (3), argues that heterosexuality should be understood not as a political institution, underpinned by repressive understandings of gender, which subordinates women in several societies and represses, demonizes, and erases lesbian existence. It does this through the creation of asymmetrical gender relations, constraints on female sexuality, and "Great Silence," or the silencing of lesbian existence from common discourse. My research aims to recover lesbianism in the context of pre-colonial Andean Peru and discuss the role of the Spanish Conquista in ignoring its existence. It will explore the ways in which pre-colonial Andean Peru, with its positive view of lesbianism, serves as a paradigm of a society with a lack of compulsory heterosexuality.

The fifth Sapa Inca had "a special affection for [lesbians] (un cariño muy especial por ellas)" and they were allowed to openly embrace their sexuality

## THE ACTS PARADIGM

The "act" versus "identity" debate within queer theory often critiques the use of terms like "lesbian" in this context as it suggests a modern understanding of lesbian identity purely based upon individual sex acts. The "acts paradigm" specifically states that prior to the late nineteenth century, same-sex identities did not exist, there were only same-sex acts (4). My choice to use the term "lesbian" is very intentional — not only am I using it as a category to specify a certain romantic or sexual interest, but I am also using it in order to emphasise my opposition to any attempts to erase lesbianism as so often has been done by scholars of culture and history.

## METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of resources on this topic, this research will utilise a close reading of recorded Andean rituals and myths to recover the subaltern female homosexual view. Utilising Rich and Rubin's theories, I will explore Andean gender roles and the female role in society to extrapolate how differing gender roles might have resulted in the positive view of lesbianism. This research will also explore colonial-era Hispanic legal documents, Catholic confession manuals, and popular entertainment to Spanish erasure of female homosexuality.

## COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND ANDEAN LESBIANISM

The asymmetry of European gender roles lead to a strong incentive for women to enter into heterosexual relationships. As Rich puts it, "Heterosexual preference and taboos on homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely" (2). Spanish gender ideologies, however, were unfamiliar to those of Andean peoples. Andean understood nature as existing through an ideology of gender complementarity. While Andean norms did define certain tasks as male and female, they did not prohibit any sex from doing a task if need be. Male and female tasks were both seen as equally necessary for the reproduction of a community. This demonstrates the clear economic independence, or at least, interdependence, of both women and men in Andean society. Women and men could each survive individually without each other's economic support (though the whole of society required both male and female labour) (5). As women did not require male economic support, they would have been able to enter into a long-term lesbian coupling without the necessity for a male partner. Through weaving, women also recorded accounts of their lives, which may have been beneficial in the reproduction of knowledge on lesbianism perhaps going against this "Great Silence" on lesbian existence. While community norms differed, in many Andean communities, premarital sex was encouraged as was trial marriage in order to encourage the satisfaction of both parties with the arrangement (5). Further, in The Huarochiri Manuscript, a transcription of native oral myths and practices, we find several myths of female huacas (goddesses) which depict their sexual autonomy (6). This ability to explore various sexual practices counters the constrained female sexuality Rich describes in the theory of compulsory heterosexuality. As narratives of pre-colonial Andean society emphasise the free practice of female sexuality without scrutiny, it would be safe to assume that these norms allowed lesbianism to be explored.

## SPANISH ERASURE

We now turn to the Iberian Peninsula to reveal why lesbianism seemed of so little interest to the conquistadors, especially considering their intense policing of male homosexuality. The early modern doctrine that defined sexual relationships between people of the same sex was the phenomenon of sodomy. Sodomy was described as either "perfect" (copulation between two same-sex partners and consummated with sperm effusion) and "imperfect" sodomy (intercourse between two women or carnal access between a man and a woman) (7). The effusion of sperm was considered a waste of God's procreative seed and any deviation in this "economy of creation" was an act against God (8). Several jurists, however, like Antonio Gomez also considered any two women who utilised a phallic object to be guilty of perfect sodomy. In a Catholic guide imported used in Peru by confessors, the questions to ask if a woman confesses to same-sex activity were greatly heterocentric. Several forms of male-authored entertainment in Early Modern Spain contained depictions of lesbian practices though their presence was always a temporary transgression or moment of comic relief until the heterosexual conclusion gave way. Maria de Zayas' novella Amar sólo por vencer, a novella tells the story of Esteban who disguises himself as a woman in order to get closer to his love interest. The novella frequently defends same-sex desire though completely desexualizes it. That said, the reactions to Estefania's confessions of love for another woman are met with laughter taken to be a joke by the other characters (4).

"Have you sinned with another woman? With how many women? How many times? When you were doing this abominable sin, were you thinking about married men? Single men? Clergy? Monks? Relatives? Your husband?" (9).

## CONCLUSION

Pre-colonial Andean Peru offers a poignant paradigm of a society in which the model of compulsory heterosexuality does not apply as readily. Due to the belief in gender parallelism, which allowed women a large degree of economic independence, the encouragement of women's sexual autonomy and exploration, and the role of women as scribes of history all counter the forces of compulsory heterosexuality that Rich described. While the Spanish's unclear definition of sodomy, heterocentric bias in the questioning of lesbianism, and devaluing of lesbianism as a true possibility for a relationship, knowledge on Andean lesbianism was erased from the historical records. It is important we continue to unpick these narratives of lesbian existence from the historical canon. It is necessary that we continue to attempt to recover these hidden narratives utilising nontraditional methods of historical inquiry. The "Great Silence" on lesbian existence that Rich described must not prevail.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for granting me this wonderful and fulfilling opportunity. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the University of St Andrews Laidlaw Team as well as my fellow Laidlaw research scholars for their support throughout the process. Lastly, I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to Dr. Caron Gentry for her unwavering support throughout the process. Thank you for all of the encouragement, the great conversations, the book recommendations, and, most importantly, for believing in the potential of my project.

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