

Life and the Human Body

Introduction

To understand how people interpret health and illness, it is important first to establish how the body itself is viewed. Studies of early Colonial period documents of indigenous Andean beliefs and world views, together with more recent ethnographic studies of contemporary indigenous Andean people in more remote regions, confirm that the way these people see the human body is in fact very different to those views considered to be 'standard' in modern western societies.

In the Andes, the relationship between cosmology and the body was complex and in addition to breaking down the human body into its constituent physical components, Andean peoples, and Inca physicians in particular, subdivided the body into physical, cosmological and metaphysical parts. The human body was seen to mirror the physical cosmos (Bastien 1987; Classen 1991).

The archaeological record consisting of material culture, human skeletal and ethnobotanical evidence testifies amply to the expertise of pre-Colombian doctors and surgeons, with a very sophisticated understanding of the human body and the different pathologies affecting it. However, that human body in its wider cosmological context was visualized or understood, there is evidence for a wide range of sophisticated medical interventions including bone setting, craniotomy and trephination demonstrating a clear anatomical knowledge (Elferink 2015; Mendoza 2003).

To test these ideas, section three of the questionnaire 'Life and the Human Body' took core concepts referred to in ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature and asked people what their views were about them.

3.1 The Body as a Mirror of the Wider World

Traditional Andean societies can see the wider landscape and its features as symbolising their own bodies. For example, the Bolivian Qollaway people (Bastien 1981) see the mountain which they live upon as being a symbolic version of themselves, with its river systems being like their own circulatory system and so on. To establish whether there was

any surviving alternative understanding of how the body could be seen, respondents were asked:

“Is the human body seen to mirror the wider cosmos, or any particular feature (e.g. a mountain)?”

		Greater Salasaka		Greater Zuleta		Total	
		Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Is the human body seen to mirror the wider cosmos, or any particular feature (e.g. a mountain)?	?	6	14.3%	12	30.0%	18	22.0%
	Yes	20	47.6%	13	32.5%	33	40.2%
	No	13	31.0%	11	27.5%	24	29.3%
	NA	3	7.1%	4	10.0%	7	8.5%
	Total	42	100.0%	40	100.0%	82	100.0%

Table 1: The Body as a Mirror of the Wider Landscape by Greater Community

This question was not well understood, with a mere handful of respondents offering views that suggested they might understand, if only partially, and agree with the idea.

“Yes, I consider Mama Kinlli as my mother” (15).

“Actually I have come to think that. But I always thank nature at the start and end of the day; I thank it for the land, for the water that I have, without them I couldn’t live. For example, if I do not have land where I would go? If I do not have what I am going to live? If I do not have plants, what will I eat? and how will I breathe? That is the conception that I have had” (14).

“The earth, mountains etc is like a human body, with organs, it feels; it has rights. A plant is a living body. This is a more general community belief and is starting to be recovered from having been lost for a time, although our grandparents and great grandparents had this belief” (16).

“Yes, like the mountain has lungs” [Ugsha respondent].

However, many people just said ‘No’ or that they didn’t understand the question: “It could be, I never thought about it” (2); “I never thought it and I don’t believe it” (5).

Others responded with replies suggesting that they had understood the question differently, as meaning how people can be the mirror of a value system:

“Yes, that something natural or normal. For our children we are role models”(8).

“We are all children of God so we could be mirrors to others” (10).

In general, despite a range of views, there is no firm evidence for believing that present day Andeans are particularly inclined to see the body in any way other than as ‘human’ and in a way that people from modern westernised societies would also understand it.

3.2 The Life Force

‘Camay’ is the Andean Quechua term understood to mean ‘life force’ or vivifying energy in pre-Colombian cultures and is referred to in earliest colonial period ethnohistorical accounts of the mythical beliefs of the pre-Spanish world (Salomon and Urioste 1991:16). It is a complex term that extends not just to obviously animate life forms, but also to inanimate objects, and as a consequence was commonly dismissed in more antiquated anthropological texts as being ‘animistic’, a term which is now generally understood to be something a lot more nuanced and complex.

Respondents were therefore asked the question: “What do you believe about the ‘life force’ or ‘vital energy’? Does it animate only living creatures, or is it seen to be in all things, animate and inanimate?” People were fairly evenly divided between those that saw it as merely giving life to clearly living things and those who believed that it was an energy that was present universally, as in ‘matter is a limited phase of energy’.

		Greater Salasaka		Greater Zuleta		Total	
		Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
What do you believe about the ‘life force’ or ‘vital energy’?	?	1	2.4%	2	5.0%	3	3.7%
	Yes-All	30	71.4%	18	45.0%	48	58.5%
	No	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Yes-Some	10	23.8%	18	45.0%	28	34.1%
	NA	1	2.4%	2	5.0%	3	3.7%
	Total	42	100.0%	40	100.0%	82	100.0%

Table 2: Beliefs about the Life Force by Greater Community

Interestingly, many respondents, particularly from the Salasaka participants, understood this also to mean the way we interact and affect one another in terms of the nature of the energy (positive/negative) we have in our lives:

“All living beings have internal strength. Between people that energy can have an effect but it cannot cause an effect on nature”. (5)

“I do have the vital force and I think that all living beings have to have the vital force, which depending on it (bad / good), can affect the family and the others” (6).

“All living beings have the vital force and this can affect the others. For example, when we are motivated we infect others, likewise our anger affects others” (10).

“Yes, I believe so, but I can’t describe it” (11).

“The ‘vital force’ exists in all people and this energy is transmitted to the other living beings (creatures). For example, I am happy when I share with others, when I am alone I become sad.” (13).

From Zuleta, marginally different views were expressed that suggested people better related to the idea of the life force being a vivifying in-dwelling energy:

“It’s in all, animate and inanimate; [as] a vertical column distributed in many things” (16).

[The] ‘Pachamama’ is a general vivifying energy that animates all.

“It’s in everything, there wouldn’t be existence without it.”

Although many respondents also believed that it was only present in obviously ‘living’ things like plants and animals.

“Yes, but only in animals, plants and people; not stones”

People from Ugsha tended to express more traditionally and devoutly Christian views: “It’s the Holy Spirit and only [present] in living things”.

3.3 The Bodily Symbols of Life

Many people cross-culturally relate to the idea of ‘blood’ as being symbolically important in expressing the essence of a person, often specifically their identity in relation to their shared family lineage and so on. Yet many bodily substances can be seen in similar ways. In the pre-Columbian and early Colonial period Andes it was “fat, and not necessarily blood, which continued to be an Andean symbol of the essence of life and of the power to endow ritual acts, objects, and human beings with vital force” (Brosseder 2014:126). Indeed, fat was symbolically important in medieval and early modern European folk beliefs too, as noted by De Prybil (2010) who presents evidence for the existence of the ‘*Pishtaco*’ – the fat stealer - based upon historical evidence of the use of human body parts, blood and body fat for the making of unguents, talismans and magical charms in many European cultures from the Middle Ages at least to the 17th century (Currie and Ortega Perez 2017). In the Andes, fat (‘*sepo*’ – as with llama fat) has long been a critical component in ritual offerings. So what survives of these ideas now?

People were asked: “Are any bodily substances (e.g. fat, blood, sweat etc) understood as having special properties, or to be symbols of life?”

		Greater Salasaka		Greater Zuleta		Total	
		Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Are any bodily substances (e.g. fat, blood, sweat etc) understood as having special properties, or to be symbols of life?	?	10	23.8%	4	10.0%	14	17.1%
	Yes	21	50.0%	26	65.0%	47	57.3%
	No	9	21.4%	7	17.5%	16	19.5%
	NA	2	4.8%	3	7.5%	5	6.1%
	Total	42	100.0%	40	100.0%	82	100.0%

Table 3: Substances as Life Symbols by Greater Community

By and large responses confirmed a view that for many people, bodily substances had relatively little symbolic significance, outside of blood as symbolising family relationship: “For me, I don’t believe this.”

“Blood has a special property, as our children are our own blood” [Salasaka respondent].

“For my part, I do not believe that bodily substances are symbols of life, but I have heard that other people do these things” (3).

However, there were several respondents in Salasaka, Zuleta and Ugsha who agreed that they all had special curative properties, and were also symbols of life:

“All these substances have ‘power’, but mostly reflect the state of the mind.”

“Yes, sweat and fat used as a lubricant or a charm by people in the past.”

“I do believe that the bodily substances of people are symbols of life. Because I’ve seen that the donkey fat helps to get rid of diseases, but I can’t say how “(4).

“Yes, bodily substances have special properties to prevent many pains and diseases. For example, the blood of a large rat serves to alleviate back pain, while a dog’s blood is used to treat epilepsy” (9).

“I have heard this, but I’ve never done it. Personally yes I believe it, because the natural substances have spirit which can help and heal or [also] power to the one who practices it” (15).

A culturally knowledgeable indigenous respondent from Zuleta supplied additional information:

“The blood and fat of certain animals had power. [Our] grandparents ate condor, to have a long life and drank the blood of a fierce bull to protect against bad energies or witchcraft. This belief still persists. [You eat the] heart/blood of a fox to protect against bad energies”. (16)

Occasional respondents understood these substances as having even darker protective powers:

“I have heard that you should drink the blood of another person not to die, and so that they don’t do witchcraft against you. But I have never done this” (13).

Overall then, there continues a somewhat ‘loose’ belief in this notion, but it does not seem to be as clear cut and important as it was in earlier periods.

3.4 Mind and Body

The Cartesian concept of mind and body as two separate things continues to dominate modern western ideas of physical reality, extending to the world of modern medicine with physical and mental health treated as entirely separate things. However, people of more traditional and/or indigenous beliefs generally see the mind and body as part of the same thing. So the question was asked: “Are the mind and body separate, or are they part of a larger ‘whole’?”

		Greater Salasaka		Greater Zuleta		Total	
		Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Are the mind and body separate, or are they part of a larger ‘whole’?	Whole	39	92.9%	38	95.0%	77	93.9%
	Separate	1	2.4%	1	2.5%	2	2.4%
	NA	2	4.8%	1	2.5%	3	3.7%
	Total	42	100.0%	40	100.0%	82	100.0%

Table 4: Beliefs about Mind and Body by Greater Community

Ninety four per cent (93.95) of respondents replied that they saw the mind and the body either as one thing, or as two aspects of the same unified whole:

“The body and the mind is a single whole, everything is united” (2).

“I feel that the body, the mind and the rest of the body is one. What I do not understand is why when there is some pain in my body it is not felt in the whole body but it is felt only in a specific part of the body” (15).

“They are part of a greater whole” (16).

“They have different functions but are part of a single whole” [Zuleta respondent]

Some respondents had a slightly more esoteric understanding:

“The body is God’s creation, so the mind and the body is part of God” (1).

Rarely, the prevailing modern 'western' Cartesian notion was also expressed: "I think that each one is separate" (9).

3.5 The Functions of the Body

Continuing the enquiry into how the body is viewed in Andean cosmology, people were then asked: "What are the functions of the body (e.g. breathing, eating, circulation, mind and feelings)?" to establish how similar these ideas are to modern western notions of anatomy and physiology. As noted above, whatever the cosmological interpretation of the body, we know that pre-Colombian physicians and surgeons had a very sophisticated understanding of the human body and were capable of performing skilled surgical interventions.

It was hard to tell if people genuinely did not relate to the question, or simply understood it at its most basic level, but the majority of answers were wholly practical, with people seeing body parts as equating to the basic function they performed. In this, it might be seen that the indigenous view of what sustains life – work – is essentially a pragmatic and functional one.

Therefore, there were answers that understood the functions of the body in relationship to the overall maintenance of life:

"To live" (Zuleta respondent).

"They give life" (Ugsha respondent).

"[They are] all the same; you need all" (Zuleta respondent).

They are all those [things] that give life to the organism" (Zuleta respondent).

"The mind serves to think. For the rest, all parts of the body are interrelated. Without these body parts we wouldn't have life" (14).

Although the question actually asked about the *functions* of the body (e.g. breathing, eating, circulation, mind and feelings), many people understood this as meaning the different physical parts of the body:

"[The body parts are] all one, but with their own functions" (Salasaka respondent)

"Each part of the body has its own functions. Thus, the hands serve to work, the head to think, the mouth to converse, the nails to harvest¹ the potatoes" (11).

¹ The word given in Spanish was 'deservar' to preserve, which doesn't make sense, so it has been translated as 'harvest' which would be 'cosechar'.

“Each part of the body has different functions. For example, the head to think, feet to walk, hands to work” (1).

“The feet serve to mobilize us from one place to another, the mind serves to think, the hands serve to work and the heart gives us life and generates energy” (3).

More rarely, a respondent might offer a different, more esoteric view altogether:

“The functions support the life [and] soul. When you die, the soul enters another dimension.” (16)

3.6 Mind, Body, Spirit

Whether people identified or believed in such things as ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, and ‘shadow’ and how they understood the inter-relationship between them, was asked in the final question:

“Do you believe that people have:

- i. mind
- ii. body
- iii. soul
- iv. spirit
- v. shadow
- vi. other”

Although question 3.4 had asked people whether they saw the mind and body as being separate, or part of a larger ‘whole’, given that their belief in the insubstantial ‘spiritual’ and metaphysical aspects of what eastern yogic philosophy calls ‘the subtle body’, was being considered, it was deemed important to establish that people did also believe that they had a mind and a body too, even if they had earlier affirmed that they understood these to be part of the same thing.

		Greater Salasaka	Greater Zuleta	Total			
		Count	Column N	Count	Column N	Count	Column N
			%		%		%
Do you believe that people have a mind?		0	0.0%	1	2.5%	1	1.2%
	Yes	31	73.8%	19	47.5%	50	61.0%
	No	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	NA	11	26.2%	20	50.0%	31	37.8%
Do you believe that people have a body?	?	1	2.4%	0	0.0%	1	1.2%
	Yes	30	71.4%	20	50.0%	50	61.0%
	No	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	NA	11	26.2%	20	50.0%	31	37.8%
Do you believe that people have a soul?	Yes	42	100.0%	31	77.5%	73	89.0%
	No	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	NA	0	0.0%	9	22.5%	9	11.0%
Do you believe that people have a spirit?	Yes	42	100.0%	35	87.5%	77	93.9%
	No	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	NA	0	0.0%	5	12.5%	5	6.1%
Do you believe that people have a shadow?	?	1	2.4%	0	0.0%	1	1.2%
	Yes	36	85.7%	26	65.0%	62	75.6%
	No	5	11.9%	3	7.5%	8	9.8%
	NA	0	0.0%	11	27.5%	11	13.4%
	Total	42	100.0%	40	100.0%	82	100.0%

Table 5: Mind-Body-Spirit Beliefs by Greater Community

Responses to this were mostly coded up for the statistical aspect of the study only, but the in-depth recorded interviews of four Salasaka respondents offer some additional information about how people understand the idea of what their 'shadow' is. This can be anything from the literal shadow cast by a physical form in sunlight, to the notion that people have another hidden aspect of their personalities, that would be far more in accordance with modern Depth Psychology and Jungian notions of what constitutes the unconscious aspects of a person's psyche.

"Yes. People have two shadows, one you can see from far away [or looks away] and the other is close to us. The shadows are or represent our parents that is why when we go out somewhere we always tell our shadow to accompany us and take care of bad things. And you realise that we are accompanied by our parents when we are alone in the house and suddenly you hear someone calling from outside, you go out to see and you cannot see anyone, or it also happens when you are between the two, you hear voices very close, but you don't see anyone, that's when you realise that the spirits of our parents are with us" (12).

"The shadow serves to see the time according to the position of the sun. For example, when the sun is located in the centre of the sky just in the direction of the crown (of the head), it's 12 midday" (13).

"Yes, when I see myself in the shadow I feel complete. I feel that the shadow protects [you]" (14).

"Yes, I feel that the shadow is my reflection" (15).

"Yes [I believe in the shadow], but in a spiritual way. You can lose it. It's part of the 'immaterial' (16).

The majority of respondents answered in the affirmative to all these, but were unable to distinguish clearly how they saw the soul and spirit, as being the same or somehow different. A man who was also a yachak did observe a difference:

"Yes; they (soul and spirit) are different. The spirit is in the nature of 'genio' mood or character; the shadow is not the same as the soul" (17).

For most people, however, it seemed that the two concepts were functionally interchangeable.

Discussion and Conclusion

As noted above, we know that according to pre-Colombian epistemology, the body was subdivided into physical, cosmological and metaphysical parts, with the human body seen to mirror the physical cosmos. From the range of answers given by respondents to questions in this section, it is at best unclear if there is much surviving now of such a belief system. The impact of modern 'western' systems of knowledge and medicine and the now more general provision of modern medicine, together with the impact of education and access to TV and internet, has made substantial inroads into the traditional cosmology of indigenous Andean peoples. Older people and traditional healers may to some degree maintain an idea that the human body mirrors the wider cosmos, or feel that a regional land form offers them some symbolic comparison to how they view themselves. But this seems to be becoming increasingly rare. Mostly people see the body in simplified ways that accords with how modern western anatomy and physiology defines it, and the body parts themselves and their basic functions are what serve to keep you on your feet, able to think, breathe, eat and – importantly – work.

The belief in the metaphysical dimension survives well enough, but again people have little more than a vague comprehension of what it means to them. They feel that their mind and body are part of an overall whole and that they have a soul and a spirit, as well as a shadow (however this is interpreted). But how all these inter-relate and any deeper nuanced understanding that might have come from older belief systems seems not to have survived the passage of time and, importantly, the more recent impacts of the 'modern technological world'.

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