

Frank Salomon and Mercedes Niño-Murcia, *The Lettered Mountain: A Peruvian Village's Way with Writing*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Durham, NC; 2011. 368 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5044-6

In *The Lettered Mountain: A Peruvian Village's Way with Writing*, Frank Salomon and Mercedes Niño-Murcia make a brief reference to the written word's pivotal role in the legendary opening scene of the Spanish colonization of the Andes: the meeting between Atahualpa and Pizarro (150). Atahualpa had every reason to believe that Pizarro and his fellow countrymen were truly extraordinary beings and, as king, it would have been Atahualpa's job to deal with such beings. So he agreed to meet Pizarro in Cajamarca's plaza on November 16th, 1532. He was first approached by the priest Valverde who held a book in his hand. We can't know what Atahualpa must have thought of the book, but according to a multitude of sources, he was told by the priest that the book contained the literal word of God. As the legend goes, because there was no way to translate "written" -- since the Andean recording tradition did not involve writing -- Atahualpa interpreted the message to mean that the Spaniards were claiming the book itself was a sacred object capable of speech. When the book failed to speak to him, he decided the Spaniards' God was not as powerful as they had boasted. The book somehow ended up on the ground and Atahualpa was soon captured, thus initiating the colonial period (Lamana 2005).

Tragically, the introduction of letters to the Andes would forever be associated with their downfall. This story has served as a convenient explanation for the purported antiliteracy of the Andean campesino but Salomon and Niño-Murcia assure us that from that moment on, Andean people have embraced literacy and used it for their own purposes. Outsiders have often described the Peruvian countryside as isolated and illiterate, but the authors prove the charge entirely baseless. The archives show that over the last 500 years, Andeans have attained literacy as quickly as possible. Campesinos had already "thoroughly internalized the graphic order" by the dawn of the republic despite the complete absence of schools (10).

Unsurprisingly, one of the defining and ongoing motivations behind Andean literacy has been its usefulness in defending oneself and one's community. In Tupicocha, the titular village, "literacy is associated with self-defense against fraud and abuse. Writing is even spoken of as the *arma* ('weapon') of the community" (25). One elementary schoolbook from the 1940s persuaded its young readers to "[s]tudy in order to never let ourselves be fooled" (134). As the authors explain, this is why much of Andean writing is written in a grandiose legalistic style. Legalese not only defended communities from actions of the state, it also conferred prestige. Importantly however, the primary function of writing in Tupicocha has been the performance of internal administration as opposed to communication with the state.

Salomon and Niño-Murcia had access to village documents never before seen by outsiders that reveal a rich writing culture in which nearly everything is recorded in handwritten (Spanish) script. Most of the writing in Tupicocha consists of the acts and minutes of their corporate bodies, the non-state-based institutions responsible for administering the commons. The state has no interest in these writings which has likely contributed to the campesino's enduring false reputation as illiterate. The village writings show just how essential writing has become to village life. Successful village administration depends on the documentation of the reciprocal duties that constitute the local economy. Record-keeping is seen as a vital form of accountability in a society built upon shared responsibilities: "[A]ny communal activity is by definition a literacy event; if a group event occurs and it is not written down, it is almost as though it never

happened” (47). An event is not considered truly complete until it is written. Writing is required to perform the most basic cultural acts, including rituals involving communication with pre-Christian Andean deities.

At this point, readers are likely wondering what role the khipus played in the development of the writing culture, for which we are grateful that Salomon and Niño-Murcia dedicate an entire chapter to this fascinating subject. The Andean society into which writing was introduced was not exclusively oral; they had been using the knotted cords of the khipus to record information since at least 500 years before the arrival of the Spanish and they continued to use them while simultaneously acquiring literacy. In their analysis of the village writings, the authors find evidence of a transition from a combined khipu-paper recording system to a strictly paper one, providing further insight into the type of information that might have been recorded by khipus.

Tupicocha's administrative logs don't begin until 1876, indicating that the villagers were able to manage their internal affairs entirely with khipus before then. Early village writing was “maximally linguistic” in contrast to the efficient, concise knots of the khipus (91). Numerals were written out in longhand and everything had to be written as a complete sentence, no matter how cumbersome (for example, in an inventory). Villagers were still relying on the cords to record information in convenient graphic displays. Throughout the early 20th century, the village writers gradually began to incorporate elements of the khipu system into their writing. This change is evinced by the increasing use of data graphics, such as tables and lists, in their writing. Andean writing appears to have absorbed many of the khipu's characteristics rather than simply replaced it. This contributed to the “romance of the precise” that distinguishes village writing (123). Indeed, if there's one thing I learned from this book, it is that I never want to be audited by a Peruvian village.

Evidence of khipu absorption further bolsters Salomon and Niño-Murcia's position that Andean literacy has never radiated from the political center. When the state has acted, it has only been in response to campesinos' demands and efforts. The authors obliterate the centuries-old myth of the powerless, illiterate campesino and introduce Andean scholars to the richness and distinctiveness of their writing culture. While the story of Atahualpa's rejection of letters has been used to perpetuate the rumors of an antiliterate countryside, couldn't it just as easily explain the Andean enthusiasm for literacy? Rather than cowering from writing like victims, isn't it just as plausible that Andeans would have eagerly sought its power? After all, that seems to be what happened.

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