

Of Priests and Pelicans: Religion in Northern Peru

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I am standing in the far corner of the Plaza des Armas, excitement racing through my chest. Along the roads surrounding the plaza are long brilliant murals made of colorful flower petals lined with young school girls in bright red jumpsuits, their eyes following my every movement. A cool breeze whips around stirring the array of magenta, turquoise, royal purple, orange and various shades of green petals. 20 tall arches placed between the various flower murals are covered with bright yellow flowers (yellow symbolizes renewal and hope) spotted with white (white symbolizes reverence and virtue) and fuchsia (fuchsia symbolizes joy) roses. A stage has been erected in the street in front of the mustard yellow Trujillo Cathedral. In the center of the stage is an altar with a statue of Christ on the cross with an elaborate motif hanging on the back wall with angels carrying a large ornate crown. A band plays loud and wildly out of tune Christian salsa music to the side of the stage. A large golden sign reading Corpus Christi sits along the top of the building sidled up against the Cathedral. The feeling permeating throughout the square is carefree and peaceful. As I wander through the crowd, I cannot stop smiling at all the people dancing, shaking their hands to the sky. Some spin in circles, while others just clap their hands smiling towards the heavens. Next to me an older woman in a simple church outfit with a zebra print scarf holds a JHS (Jesus Hominum Savitore) sign in one hand and reaches for the sky with her other hand, shuffling back and forth. She sings along to the song, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips, gazing longingly towards the heavy, cloud filled sky. Nearly 13,000 people fill the square until it is heaving with Peruvians from all around the region, gathered together as a community to pray to God and take communion together. In between prayers offered by the priest are Gregorian chants and sassy little Christian songs. By the end of the hour-long mass, all the people begin turning to one another, hugging and kissing cheeks. I start with members in my field school, but turned to see several shorter older ladies who were beaming up at me. Four of them approach and give me gentle but firm hugs and kisses. They quite literally brought me into their bosom, despite me smelling like field work and sweat. I have never felt so loved and comfortable in a large crowd.

This anecdote is from my experience at the Corpus Christi Catholic celebration in Trujillo, Peru. It was a beautiful experience filled with love and unity. Religion can bring people together despite language, ethnicity, or circumstance. In this paper I will assess the change people made from the indigenous religions to Catholicism and why people in Peru have accepted

Christianity more so than any other religion. Additionally, I explore the numerous roles that religion seems to play in everyday life in this area of Peru, like being an important resource, a coping mechanism, and a form of bringing people together. Through its numerous facets in everyday life, religion serves to unify and can assist in rebuilding post natural disasters.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The region that I focused on was the La Libertad region, Peru during late May - June 2017.



Fig 1 Map of Peru taken from Google images.

Fig 2 Map of La Libertad where research was conducted taken from Google images.

Our ethnographic field school was based out of Huanchaco, but I also gathered data from Trujillo, 10 kilometers southeast of Huanchaco, archaeological sites such as *Chan Chan* and *Huaca de la Luna*, and *El Milagro* (“the miracle”), farming land turned squatter community near La Esperanza. Trujillo is the capital of the region, home to local government and an interesting religious history. The incredible archaeological sites around the region are vast with massive, beautifully decorated structures that speak to the level of sophistication, organization, and spirituality of past cultures.

The first site I visited was *Chan Chan*, a Chimu site 20 km² spanning from the ocean to the mountains. There are walls 12 feet wide that used to protect the palaces and *huacas* (temples)*. *Huacas* with walls reminiscent of fishnet stockings spot the land; each one for a different governor. These intricately decorated temples also have large plazas where the governor would be symbolically carried through the three stages of life. The entrance represents the water or the birth. In the center of the plaza is a raised platform that represents land or life. On the opposite side of the plaza is a ramp up to the exit represents ascending to the sky or death (Museo de Sitio Chan Chan).

The second site I visited was the Moche site six kilometers southeast of Trujillo. It consisted of the *Huaca del Sol*, a government building, and *Huaca de la Luna*, a Moche temple. Throughout the years people continued to build on top of the old temples. As archaeologists dug down through the old adobe, they found stages of art and depictions of the gods (Museo Huacas de Moche).

The third site consisted of three different structures, *El Brujo*, *Huaca Cao Viejo*, and *Huaca Prieta*. *Huaca Cao Viejo* was like *Huaca de la Luna*, with a rich history that took nearly 15 years to unearth. *El Brujo* was like the *Huaca del Sol* in that it is believed to be a government building. *Huaca Prieta* was truly incredible because it is estimated to be 15,000 years old, making it the oldest site in the Americas. Unfortunately, it was greatly altered by grave robbers and has not received enough funding for archaeological excavations to be conducted to learn more from the site (Museo de Cao).

* Throughout I will be using the term *huacas* in place of temple, in part because the sites also include this term.

El Milagro is an area that was especially devastated by flooding following heavy rains during El Niño in February 2017. The local government gave the land to a select few people, but instead 20,000 people moved onto the land that was actually intended for agriculture. Due to heavy rains and increased miners redirecting the natural water flow, the entire region was destroyed. All buildings made of adobe and some brick buildings along with people's belongings, livelihoods, and futures were washed away in 10-foot-high waters. In this area people gathered together and set up the *Olla Común* ("common pot") or a community kitchen comprised of 42 families, that cook and eat together.

HISTORY OF RELIGION IN PERU

Before the famous Incans several peoples ruled in Peru, like the Moche in 200 - 800 CE. They were complex societies with sophisticated social hierarchies and impressive structures. They had religions based on many angry, vindictive, powerful, and untamable gods (Museo Huacas de Moche). The Moche people's main god was *Ai apaec*, with long spidery legs, black hair like waves, large eyes of an owl and sharp teeth like a feline (Huaca Cao Viejo). He was believed to be the creator god, providing food, water and protection for the Moche. When El Niño would destroy the land, or when food was scarce, the ruler would arrange a sacrifice. The blood of the victim was taken by the ruler and spread throughout the land to appease this god. Group battles were organized in the *huacas* after which the losers would be sacrificed. Some prisoners were sacrificed on altars where whole crowds of people could come to watch. Occasionally, they would take prisoners of war to the tops of mountains near the *huacas* to be sacrificed. Sacrifice was a very large component of their religion, as it was their only way of pleasing the gods and ensuring safety and prosperity.

Following the Moche were the Chimu people around 800 - 1400 CE. To plan the elaborate palaces, *huacas*, and walls they constructed, they would need to be food-secure and well organized (Museo de Sitio Chan Chan). If there was a famine or a flood, the king would give out food that he had been gifted by the people. They valued the ocean, a wild feminine god that was life-giving. She gave fish for food, a governor from her waters to rule the land, and took the dead back in Totorá reed boats. Chimu people also worshipped the Moon, who was stronger than the sun, because she controlled the tides. Throughout the *huacas* in *Chan Chan*, there were depictions of the moon in her different phases. There were also many symbols of the ocean such as pelicans, who signaled the presence of fish, the fish and the waters engraved in the walls of the *huacas*. The Chimu people also valued sacrifice. To these people death was not an end, but a start to a new life. Many people that were sacrificed did so willingly for their people. Although it was an honor to be sacrificed for your people, juice from the San Pedro plant was given to these people to keep them tired and more compliant. Workers on the temples were sometimes buried alive in the walls. Four babies were sacrificed and buried in the four corners of the temple; it was believed they balanced out the temple (Museo de Sitio Chan Chan).

Following the Chimu were the Incans, who were in power of the area when conquistadores entered Peru. Spaniards brought many things with them, including Catholicism. They built large buildings, with brilliant colors and large screened balconies, including many large churches. In Trujillo alone they built 12 Catholic churches and a cathedral. They even took to building churches right on top of indigenous sites. Artists accompanied them to design the altars and statues in the European style. While their churches were elaborate, the indigenous people had simple, but lovely churches. Throughout the years sacrifice slowly diminished to what it is now, a symbol of sacrifice in the form of sacrament. Today 81.3% of the Peruvian

population is Catholic and another 12.5% is a variety of other Christian denominations, sometimes specified as Evangelical (CIA World Factbook).

The difference between the ancient gods of Chimu and Moche and Catholicism is love. Before Christianity fear was the primary tactic used by leaders to get commoners to comply and give everything – their food, their labor, and their lives – to the leaders and to the gods. I believe that the reason Christianity grew such thick roots in Peru is because Catholicism was offering a God who offered his children everything, asking for only respect and love in return. It encouraged unity between the people, love for religion, and hope for their futures; things that the fearsome gods of their ancestors could never offer Peruvians. Despite the clear differences between ancient religions and Catholicism, many Peruvians choose parts of both that they like and meld them together in different degrees. This syncretism is important when studying religion in Peru, as will be discussed later.

METHODS

To gain a complete view of religion in the region La Libertad, I employed a variety of methods, including asset questionnaire, observation, and semi structured interviews. The first method used to gain understanding of religion's influence in El Milagro was an asset questionnaire that my team wrote and conducted. We learned about demographics, including relationships and origin, the assets that members of the *Olla Común* brought to the community, and what people valued. I drew from two of the questions specifically. The first was, “What church do you attend?” The second was, “Considering aspects of life - physical, spiritual, mental and social - which is most important to you?” This question was helpful in gathering beneficial information to analyze, but was also leading and could have affected answers. The second

method was unobtrusive observation. It gave me the opportunity to see how people in a community such as the *Olla Común* versus a city like Trujillo interacted following a natural disaster such as the flooding in Peru. Although I attempted to blend in, I also influenced my surroundings, as I stood out like a sore thumb as a tall blonde woman in a sea of shorter dark haired Peruvians. The third method I employed was participant observation, similar to the one I conducted at the Corpus Christi celebration in Trujillo and at the San Pedro festival in Huanchaco. The final method I utilized was semi structured interviews. After reading results from the asset questionnaires, I realized I needed a bit more depth into the extent religion played in the lives of people. This was when I decided to conduct these interviews during later visits to El Milagro to gain additional information.

THE ROLES OF RELIGION

Throughout my five weeks in Peru, I attended many religious festivals, all in honor of different saints or holidays, but all conveyed the same emotions. There was a clear desire for unity between the people, a need for safety and support, and incredible hope.

Religion as Valued Asset

I gathered data from our asset questionnaires mentioned above that helped me quantify the feelings I experienced throughout La Libertad region. My team gathered 17 questionnaires from the people of the *Olla Común*. Ages of participants ranged from 16 to 61. 10 of the 17 interviewees were female. All 17 were members of a Christian denomination. Although 11 of the people were Catholic, there were also Seventh Day Adventists, Assembly of God members, Iglesia Dios de Amor members, and Evangelical Christians. It was interesting to see that every person identified with some Christian faith.

While conducting asset questionnaires, my colleagues and I asked questions about religion and what the interviewee valued the most. When evaluating answers to this question, I identified five common values throughout the 17 interviews; God, unity, health, career/education, and family. Although spirituality did not vary much by age, women seemed to be much more spiritual than the men of the area. The first day we were in El Milagro, the people present sat in a circle and Dr. Bonnie Glass-Coffin conducted a needs assessment. She came to one older woman, who had been quietly knitting on a low bench. This woman stood and cried as she explained that she was grateful to God because although many people had lost all they had, they still had their lives and their families with them. She also voiced a fear for the souls of their children, especially if the rains returned.

While in Peru I noticed an interesting use of lay religion. For instance, when visiting different homes near the *Olla Común*, I was invited to walk through some of the houses that remained standing. One woman, Elizabeth*, lived next to the kitchen. Beyond the crumbling cherry red doorway, a small room with only three walls standing was visible; one wall was just four wooden poles supporting a large blue tarp. In the far corner across from the doorway was a white tile shrine several feet off the ground. There was clear cellophane covering the many pictures of the Virgin de la Puerta, a painting of the last supper, and several other photos along with a bouquet of large red roses in the shrine. The saint has a large red ornate crown, matching her scarlet red gown. Today she wears rich blue robes and she stands on top a silver sliver of the moon. At the front of the shrine, four white candles burning. The Virgin de la Puerta is a saint of the mountain town, Otuzco. Her shrine used to be placed at the entrance to towns back when pirates would attack and pillage towns. She protected the towns and the people, and since then

* All names of members of the *Olla Común* have been changed for their own privacy.

has served as a symbol of protection. Although Elizabeth is not from Otuzco, she depends on the protection this virgin saint provides. Many cars even have a mini shrine to the Virgin de la Puerta attached to their windshields to protect the car while they drive.

Religion as Coping Mechanism

Especially after the flooding, it seemed that religion could help people get through the devastation and begin rebuilding. Some churches, such as Iglesia Dios de Amor, provided direct help, for people like Roseline from the *Olla Común*. She is an 18-year-old mother of a beautiful little baby with big chocolate eyes. She has soft pretty features with a calm, timid voice to match. Her husband left her, so she is forced to live with her mother-in-law, who works her like a live-in servant. Although the church could only provide the services during the flood, they donated a mattress, tent, baby clothes and food to Roseline. Being a part of the community kitchen guarantees that she and her baby are fed. However, not all churches could aid every member. The church members instead came together to help each other with love, like they believe their God would have done. The president of the *Olla Común*, Frances, believes that we all pray to one God. She said that when she is invited, she goes to other religions and will always feel welcome; because in the end we all pray to the same God.

Religion as Cultural Bridge

At one point along our journey into the mountainous region Julcàn, our bus broke down in Otuzco. People all around stared at us as we sat outside the van hoping that it would stop smoking. One of the police officers, who had stopped to see what was wrong, quickly excused himself and left the group. He returned a few moments later with a priest in cream colored robes from the church across the street. Using a clear jar of holy water and a metal dowel the priest blessed the engine and the inside of the van before blessing each of us individually. I would

never have imagined that a car could be blessed, and, even though I am not a Catholic, I suddenly did not feel like quite the outsider. The people staring and crowding around just wanted to make sure our van did not break down permanently and we could continue our adventure further into the mountains.

PRESENT DAY RELIGION HYBRIDITY

Given the roles of religion, it is not surprising that we see Christian and Chimu/Moche representations at the same time. The week we were leaving was the San Pedro festival in Huanchaco. All week there were fireworks, bands, and parades leading up to the main event on Thursday, June 29. At noon below the Huanchaco church, a procession of locals, nuns, monks, band members, and a litter carried by about 10 men gathered to start the parade. On top of the platform was a small white boat trimmed in blue and red. A statue of San Pedro in an emerald robe and a tall emerald miter stands in the center of the boat surrounded by blue nets. All around the boat there were bouquets of white, pale yellow, and blood red flowers. Somehow, I found myself in the procession right in front of the ornate float walking down the narrow street, nearly 250 people shuffled along with me towards the ocean. Once on the beach the statue of San Pedro was transferred onto a large Totora reed boat. With a man in Chimu warrior garb on the bow of the boat, in the position of protecting the saint, they set sail across the waves with fishermen in reed boats or on surf boards all around. For the people, it did not matter that they were combining Christian and Chimu traditions; they cheered and sang and danced together, celebrating their fisherman saint. I was surprised to see such syncretism in the religions, but realized it brought everyone together and helped them move past the trauma of the floods. As

long as the community places value on the religion and can rely on it in times of need, I realized the name of the religion itself does not matter, much like Frances said.

CONCLUSION

Christianity, specifically Catholicism, is centered around love for God, for self, and for your neighbor. It encourages unity between and support for all people. It was amazing to see arms open to me during my entire stay in Peru. Peruvians made a drastic change from sacrificing foreigners to their gods to welcoming them with open arms and warm smiles. Although they have switched by and large to Christianity, they still had a desire to showcase and celebrate their rich heritage passed down from the Moche and Chimú people. Despite the devastation brought by El Niño this year, religious festivals showcasing their religious hybrid were nearly every week with huge turnouts of celebratory people. When faced with difficult times, Peruvians can turn to their neighbor and their religion, whatever amalgamation it may be, for love and support. Religion, if used post natural disaster, can be beneficial in rebuilding and ending isolation.

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