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Ritual Commensality between Human and Non-Human Persons: Investigating Native Ontologies in the Late Pre-Columbian Andean World

In anthropology, it has become axiomatic that social relationships are constructed through food practices and embodied in food. This paper suggests that both ritual and quotidian commensality have as either a goal or a consequence the construction of specific relations of sociality, and in this regard are not so different. What may distinguish these spheres of commensality, however, are the types of persons engaged in the act of shared consumption. The paper considers ritual commensality as a means of exploring the social universe and indigenous ontology of native Andean peoples, using both archaeological and ethnohistoric data. The role such commensal activities may have played in the construction of, and engagement with, other-than-human persons in the late pre-Columbian Andes is considered.

Andean archaeology; commensality; feasting; *huaca*; Pre-Columbian Andes; ontology; relationality.

In der Kulturanthropologie gilt es mittlerweile als selbstverständlich, dass soziale Beziehungen zum einen durch Praktiken konstruiert werden, die im Zusammenhang mit Nahrungsmitteln und Ernährung stehen, und zum anderen in Lebensmitteln verkörpert sind. In diesem Beitrag wird vorgeschlagen, dass sowohl rituelle als auch alltägliche Kommensalität, die Gestaltung spezifischer sozialer Beziehungen als Ziel oder Konsequenz haben. In dieser Hinsicht unterscheiden sie sich nicht sehr voneinander. Dagegen ergeben sich Differenzen im Bereich der Kommensalität aufgrund der in den Akt des gemeinsamen Essens eingebundenen Personen. Rituelle Kommensalität wird als Möglichkeit gesehen, das soziale Universum und die Ontologie indigener Gruppen in den Anden zu untersuchen, dabei werden archäologische und ethnohistorische Daten herangezogen. Ebenso wird die Rolle untersucht, die diese kommensalen Aktivitäten in der Konstruktion und Auseinandersetzung mit nicht-menschlichen Personen in der späten präkolumbianischen Zeit in den Anden spielten.

Archäologie der Anden; Kommensalität; Feste; *huaca*; präkolumbianische Anden; Ontologie; Gestaltung von sozialen Beziehungen.

1 Introduction

Social theorists of different stripes have long recognized the rich webs of meaning associated with food preferences and practices.¹ From early functionalist concerns with physiology and nutrition,² to structuralist interests in the semiotics and symbolism of

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1 e. g., Lévi-Strauss 1966; Lévi-Strauss 1968; Rubel and Rosman 1978; Goody 1982; Mintz 1985; Kahn 1986; Harris and Ross 1987; Adams 1990.

2 Richards 1932; Richards 1939; Fortes and Fortes 1936.

food,³ to more recent explorations of the power of food to shape identities, behaviors, and bonds,⁴ anthropologists have amply demonstrated that a focus on food offers insights into human social relations on many different levels. The old adage “you are what you eat” is a biological fact. But there are also social dimensions to this slogan that can be captured in the notion of “you are *how* you eat,” as well as in relation to “with *whom* you eat.” What, how, and with whom we eat are among the most fundamental ways that humans define themselves as social beings and as members of a specific group.

In this paper I explore the analytical utility of commensality—the question of with whom one eats—for garnering insights into the social universes of non-western peoples. Specifically, I am interested in approaching ritual commensality as a method for ascertaining the kinds of persons with whom it is or was possible to establish social relations via shared consumption. My thesis is that both ritual and quotidian commensality have as either a goal or a consequence the construction of specific relations of sociality, and in this regard are not so different. What may distinguish these two spheres, however, are the types of persons engaged in the act of shared consumption.

If, for instance, everyday commensality is understood to produce and re-produce social relations among kin,⁵ we might posit that ritual commensality serves as a means of constituting social relations with extra-familial others—a process which (not coincidentally) constitutes such others as social beings. Along these lines, I suggest that an investigation of ritual commensality may offer a window onto ontological systems distinct from our own in which other-than-human persons might conceivably exist who would be identifiable via the activities or remains of ritual commensality. In other words, if evidence of commensal activity (to be discussed below) was found in association with non-human entities or phenomena in such a way as to suggest intentional inclusion in acts of food-sharing, this may be construed as a sign that such entities were recognized as possessing the ability to participate in the social realm and were purposefully engaged in such. In this capacity such entities might be described as “non-human persons.” I will investigate this proposition in the local historical context of the late pre-Columbian Andes using both archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence.

2 Theoretical Concepts

Before proceeding to the Andes and a consideration of alternative ontologies, I want to offer a few general comments and points of clarification with regard to some of the concepts I will be using in this paper. First, with respect to the relationship between commensality, ritual, and feasts versus quotidian meals, I think it is worthwhile to revisit some basic definitions. “Commensal” literally refers to the partaking of food and drink at the same table. The concept of “ritual” involves elements of repetition, formality, and prescriptive behavior. While ritual may imply some degree of ceremony or sacredness, it can just as commonly refer to the enactment of routine behavior in the secular realm. In other words, both regular daily meals and extraordinary commensal events can and typically do have a ritual aspect about them. The notion of “ritual commensality” therefore may not be sufficiently clear to capture the distinction intended.

Dietler explicitly defined feasting as “a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink.”⁶ The broader, public, and communal context of such commensal events was clearly critical to his understanding of feasts as

3 Douglas 1966; Douglas 1975; Douglas 1984; Lévi-Strauss 1969.

4 Appadurai 1988; Weismantel 1988; Morales 1995; Mennell 1996; Mintz 1996; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Sutton 2001.

5 e. g., Anigbo 1987; Weismantel 1988.

6 Dietler 2001, 67.

significant arenas of political and social action.⁷ But as he also noted, “identifying feasts as ritual activity does not mean that they are necessarily highly elaborate ceremonies” or “sacred” in character. Rather, “the defining criterion of rituals is that they are in some way symbolically differentiated from everyday activities in terms of forms of action or purpose.”⁸ In the case of ritual commensality, the task of demarcation is often accomplished through the inclusion of dramaturgical elements such as singing, dancing, oratory, and inebriation—features that help to underscore the extraordinary nature of the event.

The purpose of feasts, again according to Dietler,⁹ is typically distinct from quotidian meals, as well, insofar they are often intended to “mark, reify, and inculcate diacritical differences between social groups, categories, and statuses while at the same time establish relationships across the boundaries that they define.” In this way, feasts, as with other types of rituals, can be understood to provide a critical context for the construction and maintenance of social and political relations. These various aspects of feasting, or ritual commensality—that is, the extraordinary, public, relational, and dramaturgical features of the event, are what I take as the key ingredients in the present study.

I turn now to the other main elements in the title of my paper. These include the notion of personhood, the concept of other-than-human persons, and ideas about alternative (non-western) ontologies. Much of the current theoretical work on personhood that involves a concern with agency and materiality takes as its starting point the influential writings of Alfred Gell.¹⁰ In thinking through how things may be construed as persons, Gell developed a sophisticated conceptual framework outlining the way in which objects, much like people, come to possess social agency. When objects or places participate in human affairs, or when, following Gell,¹¹ they become “targets for and sources of social agency,” they must, he argues, be treated as person-like, or alternatively, as “other-than-human persons”—to use Irving Hallowell’s earlier construction.¹² Social agency is thus understood not in terms of biological attributes but rather relationally. Within this framework, it does not matter what a thing or a person “*is*” in itself—what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations.¹³ That is, the nature of something is seen to be a function of the social-relational matrix within which it is embedded.¹⁴ Equally important is the conditional and transactional nature of the relationship between human and non-human persons (or “patients” and “agents,” to use Gell’s terminology), each being necessarily constitutive of the other’s agency at different moments in time.¹⁵

The obvious question here is whether and how we might identify “persons” of the other-than-human variety—which might in turn shed light on alternative ways of understanding the nature of being in the world—archaeologically. In order to explore these ideas in a more grounded fashion, I situate this inquiry in the context of the late pre-Columbian Andes.

3 Ethnohistoric Information

Early ethnohistoric information from the Andes provides ample cause for positing the existence of a native ontology distinct from that of Christendom and sixteenth-century Europe. The earliest Spanish reports of first encounters with native Andean peoples render a sense of the profound strangeness experienced by the European invaders. The

7 Dietler 2001, 66.

8 Dietler 2001, 67.

9 Dietler 2001, 88.

10 Gell 1992; Gell 1996; Gell 1998.

11 Gell 1998, 96.

12 Hallowell 1960.

13 Gell 1998, 123.

14 Gell 1998, 7; Latour 2005.

15 Gell 1998, 22.

alien character of this new world can be detected in comments such as those of Pizarro's secretary, Miguel de Estete regarding the "filthy wooden pole" worshiped as the great oracle of Pachacamac,¹⁶ or the reported wedding of a young girl to a sacred blue stone "no bigger than the size of one's palm,"¹⁷ or the confession that a ceramic pot dressed in female garb was venerated as the ancestor of a particular community.¹⁸ Such observations suggest a radically different understanding of the nature and categories of being on the part of native peoples in the Andes relative to the European invaders.

One of the key words brought forward in the early written sources relevant to an exploration of Andean ontology is "*huaca*." Garcilaso de la Vega—who was the son of an Inca noblewoman and a Spanish soldier writing at the beginning of the 17th century—attempted to convey the meaning of this word by enumerating the kinds of things called "*huaca*" by native peoples.¹⁹ He initiates this discussion by stating that *huaca* referred to a "sacred thing," be it idol, object, or place, through which "the devil spoke."²⁰ His list included "... rocks, great stones or trees," as well as things made, such as "figures of men, birds, and animals" offered to the Sun, as well as places built, such as "any temple, large or small, ... sepulchers set up in the fields, ... and corners of houses." It also included things of extraordinary beauty or ugliness, exceptional phenomena—such as twins or a six-fingered hand, and the ancestors. After enumerating the range of things encompassed by the term, Garcilaso went on to state that the Inca called them *huaca* "not because they held them as gods or because they worshiped them but rather for the particular advantage they provided the community."²¹ This is an important point to which I return later.

Another 17th century writer, the Jesuit priest Bernabe Cobo, suggested that *huacas*, could be divided into two categories:²² works of nature unaltered by human intervention, and "idols that did not represent anything other than the material from which they were produced ..." He goes on to note that "all of these idols *were worshiped for their own sake*, and [that] these people never thought to search or use their imaginations *in order to find what such idols represented*."²³ Cobo seems to suggest here that native people understood *huacas* as powerful entities in and of themselves—not as the houses or seats of unearthly or supernatural beings, but rather as efficacious agents in their own right with power to affect the world. While *huacas* have traditionally been construed as "sacred," they do not seem to be the kind of "abstract sacred" that characterizes the western meaning of the term.²⁴ Andean *huacas* were very much concrete, material things, not bodiless, abstract notions. I suggest that it was the physical concreteness of the *huacas*—their materiality—that enabled them to be both powerful and efficacious in the world, and, equally importantly, that enabled their participation in the network of relations comprising the social world and lives of Andean peoples.

3.1 Huacas as Non-Human Persons

There are various indications throughout the ethnohistoric record that native Andean peoples understood *huacas* to be persons. For instance, *huacas* often shared kin relations with members of the communities with whom they were associated. There are various

16 Estete 1947 [1534].

17 Ávila 1918 [1645], 69–70, cited in Salomon 1991.

18 Polia 1999 [1662–1664], 505.

19 Garcilaso de la Vega 1943 [1609], 72–73.

20 Garcilaso de la Vega 1943 [1609], 72.

21 Garcilaso de la Vega 1943 [1609], II, cap. 4, I, 72–73.

22 Cobo 1964 [1653], 44.

23 Cobo 1964 [1653], 45; emphasis added.

24 Rostworowski de Diez Canseco 1983; Salomon 1991; Altvaldsson 1995; Altvaldsson 2004.

reports, for example, of young women being wed to local *huacas* made of stone;²⁵ elsewhere *huacas* were said to have sons and daughters who were typically identified as the mummified remains of revered community ancestors;²⁶ in other cases, *huacas* were known to be siblings, as in the example of Guanacauri, a stone pillar on a hill that was the principal *huaca* of Cuzco who was called the brother of Manco Capac, the first Inca king. *Huacas* were also quite often named, had personal biographies, were said to speak and hear, and, in quintessential Andean fashion, were often clothed or dressed in woven garments²⁷—all signs indicative of their personhood.

In an in-depth analysis of the Huarochiri manuscript—which is a document written in Quechua circa 1598 containing important insights into native religion—one of its principal interpreters was led to conclude that *huacas* were clearly living beings: “persons in fact.”²⁸ I would suggest, though, that we are not talking here about “persons” in the familiar sense of western individualism but rather in the relational sense discussed above. Within this relational framework, “persons” are seen as multi-authored, plural entities defined on the basis of what they do rather than how they appear, conformed of their various interactions within a kaleidoscopic field of social relations involving humans, animals, things, and places.²⁹ From this perspective, social relations can be understood to provide the grounds for and the context within which persons take (temporary) shape. Given all this, it seems reasonable to suggest that a key to the recognition of “persons” within a given cultural milieu would be the identification of involvement in relations of sociality. This is where I return to the subject of ritual commensality.

3.2 Ritual Commensality and Huacas

The ethnohistoric (and ethnographic) data from the Andes provide sufficient grounds to hypothesize that the social world of pre-Columbian peoples encompassed powerful, other-than-human persons. How might we go about testing this proposal archaeologically? One way, I would suggest, is to look for evidence of social relationships as traditionally constructed via commensality and the exchange of gifts. Where and with whom were commensal relations established beyond the domestic context? What food stuffs were shared and how were they consumed? Evidence of ritual commensality in the archaeological record could be expected to provide insight into who was or could be included in the social universe of a given community or ethnic group. The identification of such relations would, theoretically, inform upon indigenous notions of personhood; local systems of classification and taxonomy; and, perhaps, offer a window into other ways of understanding being in the world, e. g., alternative ontologies. In the case of the pre-Columbian Andes, it is clear that not every rock, tree, or mountain was considered a *huaca*—that is, superlative in its class, possessed of special power, and as being a non-human person. Recognizing which entities were so construed, however, via, for instance, evidence of ritual commensality would provide deeper insight into our understandings of the archaeological landscape, community boundaries, and the social relational universe of Andean peoples.

As outlined above, the ethnohistoric data provide good reason to suspect that native Andean ontology differed significantly from the western European model at the time of contact, and we might be inclined to take it or leave it at that. But I suggest that the archaeological evidence can also shed light on these very interesting questions

25 Arriaga 1968 [1621], 36–37; Ávila 1918 [1645], 69–70.

26 Arriaga 1968 [1621], 89.

27 Albornoz 1967 [1581/1585], 37; Arriaga 1968 [1621], 76.

28 Salomon 1991, 18–19.

29 Strathern 1988; Chapman 2000; Brück 2001; Fowler 2004.

independently of the ethnohistoric record. In what follows, I will offer a few examples of how the “archaeology of commensality” might help identify the existence of non-human persons and further our understanding of alternative ontologies in the Andean context.

Recent investigations at several important late prehistoric period sites in different parts of the Andes have either targeted or accidentally encountered features that have been interpreted as *huacas*. The archaeological material found in association with these lends itself to an interpretation of ritual commensality. The first example is found at the site of Pueblo Viejo, located in the lower Lurin Valley of the south-central coast of Peru. This site was occupied during the period of Inca expansion from approximately AD 1470–1533.³⁰ Here Peruvian scholars recorded a large modified rock outcrop on a hilltop near an important residential compound interpreted as being that of a local lord.³¹ Excavations in this sector revealed that the outcrop contained a number of carved niches and was surrounded by a low wall (Fig. 1a-1b). Inside the enclosure, excavators uncovered significant quantities of broken cooking vessels, large-sized serving jars, and individually-sized plates and bowls. They also recorded several concentrations of disarticulated llama bones and ash; numerous worked and broken pieces of spondylus shell; a few small metal items; and a small stone effigy (*conopa*) in the shape of a corncob (*zaramama*).³² The assemblage readily lends itself to an interpretation of feasting activity conducted in very close proximity to a significant natural feature that I would not hesitate to identify as a *huaca*. The presence of cooking and serving vessels around the modified outcrop, the evidence for cooking fires, and the finds of camelid bone indicative of meat consumption strongly suggest that this was a site of ritual commensal activities. I would posit that these activities were conducted at this location for the specific purpose of including the *huaca* in the affair, thus recognizing its “personhood” and forging or reaffirming its relationship to the local community.

In another example, archaeologists working at Choquepukio, a late intermediate period site in the Cuzco valley in the south-central highlands of Peru, uncovered a large stone outcrop in a restricted-access structure in one sector of the site.³³ On the south side of this outcrop, which the investigators refer to as a *huaca*,³⁴ was a small, stone-lined well connected to a covered canal (Fig. 2). The floor of the patio surrounding the outcrop produced large quantities of polychrome pottery that the investigators described as “banquet wares.” Large-sized serving containers as well as individual-sized vessels were reportedly found in similar proportions in the structure. The vessel types comprising the assemblage included both Lucre and Killke style face-neck jars, cooking pots, serving plates, and drinking cups and bowls. The investigators also recorded a number of special artifacts including several metal objects; turquoise and shell beads; fragments of gold laminate; six small silver discs; and a carved bone spoon that were found in association with the raised platforms located around the interior perimeter of the room.³⁵ Again the researchers interpreted the archaeological remains as evidence of ritual activities involving feasting. The fact that such ritual commensal activity was conducted in the presence of a large and specially demarcated lithomorph would again suggest that the intent was to include this *huaca* in the act of food sharing and consumption—arguably as a means of recognizing its status as an other-than-human person whose membership within the community was important enough to denote through commensal acts involving elite members of the society.

30 Makowski et al. 2005.

31 Makowski et al. 2005.

32 Makowski et al. 2005, 307–313.

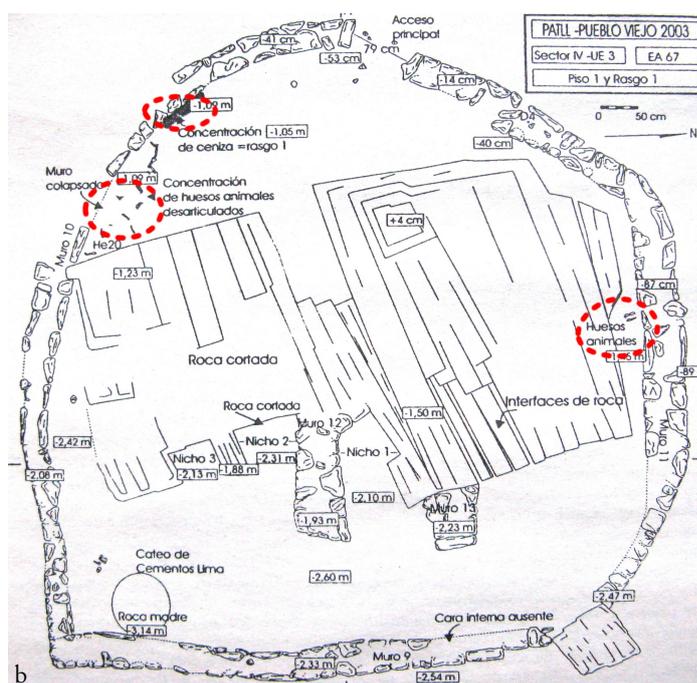
33 McEwan, Chatfield, and Gibaja 2002; McEwan and Gibaja 2004; McEwan, Gibaja, and Chatfield 2005.

34 McEwan, Gibaja, and Chatfield 2005, 266.

35 McEwan, Gibaja, and Chatfield 2005, 266.



Fig. 1 | (a) Photograph of Summit Temple at the site of Pueblo Viejo consisting of carved rock outcrop surrounded by low stone wall. Courtesy of K. Makowski, (b) Sketch map of Summit Temple with areas circled in red indicating concentrations of llama bone and ash. After Makowski et al. 2005, 312; original sketch map drawn by Manuel Lizárraga.



In other parts of the Andes, upright monoliths, sometimes demarcated by stone platforms or other enclosures, were also clearly recognized as *huacas* (Fig. 3). Various such monoliths located throughout the Callejon de Huaylas region of the central highlands of Peru are identified still today by local communities as sacred sites. In a recent survey of the region, limited test excavations were conducted adjacent to one of these monoliths.³⁶

36 Bazán del Campo 2007.



Fig. 2 | Large stone outcrop (*huaca*) at far end of restricted-access room at site of Choquepunkio surrounded by flagstone floor (*huaca* and stone-covered canal at far end of room). Photograph courtesy of Gordon McEwan.



Fig. 3 | Upright stone monolith surrounded by low stone wall at site of Q'enko located above and outside the city of Cuzco.

The 1 × 2 meter excavation unit reportedly produced dense quantities of undecorated domestic pottery, together with camelid, deer, and *cuy* (guinea pig) bones. These materials were interpreted as evidence of large-scale feasting carried out in direct association with the *huaca*.³⁷

Further to the north, at the important late period site of Tucume on the Peruvian coast, excavators uncovered a small structure with a large, deeply embedded monolith in the center (Fig. 4). The building was subsequently designated the Temple of the Sacred Stone. Numerous offerings were found in pits located directly below and in front of the stone *huaca* consisting principally of spondylus shell and miniature representations of objects such as pottery vessels, corn, plants, birds, fish, jewelry, tools, and musical instruments all produced in sheet metal.³⁸ The researchers describe in particular a series of miniature metal vessels consisting of a double-spout and bridge bottle, a high neck jar, and two plates. Such items, I would suggest, could all be construed as accoutrements of ritual feasting rendered particularly fit for an extraordinary personage through their miniaturization and their production in precious metal.

37 Bazán del Campo 2007, 16.

38 Heyerdahl, Sandweiss, and Narvaez 1995, 111–112.



Fig. 4 | Temple of the Sacred Stone at the site of Tucume on the north coast of Peru. Photograph courtesy of Dan Sandweiss.

I offer one final example from the northern highlands. In late pre-Columbian times, one of the most renowned deities of the Andean realm was the powerful oracle known as Catequil. Archaeological excavations recently undertaken in the vicinity of the mountain traditionally associated with this oracular *huaca* (Cerro Icchal) have produced significant architectural remains.³⁹ At one of the artificial mounds situated near the base of this mountain, an architectural complex interpreted as the main sanctuary of the oracle Catequil was unearthed with a network of associated canals and drains, and a patio made of river rolled cobbles. On another mound located slightly below this and dating to the earlier Middle Horizon period, investigators recovered quantities of fine Cajamarca cursive style pottery bowls.⁴⁰

Analysis of organic residue adhering to the interior of some of these bowls indicated the presence of corn starch (sometimes accompanied by maize pericarps), an unidentified tuber starch, and mammal hair. The presence of red ochre was also detected in several examples. In addition to the pottery, numerous fragments of poorly preserved camelid and deer bone were also recovered, as well as various groundstone tools, including concave metates used for the grinding of maize, manos, and a single stone pestle.⁴¹ On the basis of these materials and the context of the finds, the researchers concluded that significant food preparation and consumption activities had taken place at the site and that these feasting activities were likely associated with the cult of Catequil. I would suggest that the commensal events that occurred here were held specifically to include the mountain itself, which was the material manifestation of the *huaca* Catequil.

4 Concluding Thoughts

A century of anthropological research provides clear indication that commensality is an arena in which social relationships are produced and re-produced.⁴² One way we might consider approaching commensality, then, is as a practice aimed at the construction of social bonds and networks, with all the attendant benefits and obligations implied in such. If everyday commensality solidifies social relationships internally within the domestic or consanguinal sphere, then we might understand ritual commensality as a strategy aimed

39 Topic, Topic, and Melly Cava 2002.

40 Topic, Topic, and Melly Cava 2002, 317–318.

41 Topic, Topic, and Melly Cava 2002, 317–318.

42 Mintz and Du Bois 2002.

at establishing social relationships in the external or affinal realm. In other words, we might approach ritual commensality as a mechanism for bringing others into one's own social order, in this way and through this process, making them into social beings and true persons.

In this paper, I focused on ritual commensality as a way of considering what kinds of beings might be included within the social universe of non-western, pre-Columbian peoples in the Andes. A number of examples were presented in which archaeological evidence for commensality was found in association with significant rocks and rock outcrops interpreted as *huacas*. The food-related evidence was construed as pertaining to the ritual sphere due to the non-domestic context of the finds, the special kinds and quantities of foodstuffs involved, and the seemingly large-scale and public nature of the activities. Foodstuffs, including meat (e. g., camelid, deer, and *cuy*), corn, cornmeal (*sanku*), and corn beer (*chicha*), as well as the containers and vessels in which these items were prepared and served, were among the most significant components of the archaeological assemblage at several recently identified *huaca* sites. The data suggest that ritual commensality may have been an important way of recognizing and interacting with significant non-human entities as members of the humanly constructed social universe. While in some instances the archaeological remains might be construed as one-way offerings, in many other cases, there was clear evidence of shared ritual consumption among large numbers of participants at these sites. The archaeological evidence for ritual commensality found in association with *huacas* provides support for the conjecture that such entities were understood as non-human persons.

Various ethnographic studies in the Andes have shown that for indigenous peoples, "all material things (including things we normally call inanimate) are potentially active agents in human affairs."⁴³ This would suggest that native Andean people operated with a radically different set of ontological premises than those that dominate western thinking. The archaeological data presented in this study offers further insight into and support for this proposition.

43 Allen 1998, 20; see also Bastien 1978; Allen 1982, Allen 1988, Allen 1997; Gose 1994; Salomon 1998.

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