

Inca

Practices

People were buried, sometimes in groups. Often, the deceased person, whether commoner or noble, was placed in a fetal position (lying on one side with knees curled up to the chest) or placed sitting up with some of his or her belongings and wrapped in a special cloth or mat. The nobility, however, were often buried with many more belongings and dressed in elaborate clothing. It was important that the body was not burnt, as it was believed that the body played a part in the journey to the afterlife. Burial vaults were located near residences for easy access to the mummified bodies and often painted red.

Important persons, such as nobles were often mummified. They also continued to play a role in society and were, fed, clothed and brought out to participate in festivals.¹

In the central highlands the deceased were placed in a burial tower or sepulcher. The body was eviscerated, and balsamic substances were added to aid in preserving the body. The mummification process in the lowlands and coastal regions was slightly more complex. The organs and the flesh were not always removed, but when the flesh was taken off the body, it was buried next to the dead in ceramic vessels.²

The bodies of the dead were revered as huacas – something imbued with supernatural powers and honored as such. The Incas believed that the soul of a dead person protected its descendants from evil and liked its body to be brought out during festivals to be given food and chichi (a fermented or non-fermented beverage usually derived from maize).³

Death involved the passage through several different bodily states; there was no simple dichotomy established between an alive and a dead body. The first stage of death was known as wañuq, in which the individual entered the realm of the newly dead. During this period the deceased transitioned from the world of the living, in which his or her body was a live material presence, into the world of the dead, in which the spiritual body dominates. After wañuq, the body became an aya, which simply means a dead body. At this point the spiritual body has separated itself from the physical body, and the person has transitioned into his or her eternal state as an ancestor. However, this separation was not absolute. For example, physical sensation was thought to occur in the bones, which remained with the body for eternity, even after the flesh had deteriorated. Thus, the aya could still feel physical pleasure and pain even though it was no longer living.⁴

For an entire year after death the deceased undertook a journey through the afterlife. This journey took place both in the world of the living, known as Cay Pacha, and in the underworld, known as Ucu Pacha.

Pacha. The Inca underworld, was thought of as a wet, murky place below ground. As a test of perseverance and strength the deceased was put through a series of physical obstacles. For example, the dead were required to cross a treacherous bridge made from human hair, and many mummy bundles are given offerings of human hair to help complete this task. Other colonial-period accounts describe ferocious packs of dogs that menaced the newly dead on their journey. If the deceased did not pass this series of tests, he or she would remain in Ucu Pacha for eternity. If successfully completed, the dead would finally reach his or her ancestral home among the huacas (sacred shrines). This place of origin, from which all humans came, was known as pacarina. While humans resided in human-made settlements, constructed from adobe or stone, the souls of the dead returned to the original source that gave rise to human life and culture—the natural world.⁵

¹ "Old Beliefs Die Hard." Chinchorro Mummies. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Sept. 2014.
<http://chinchorromummies.wordpress.com/2010/12/07/old-beliefsn-die-hard/>

² Ibid.

³ Malpass, Michael A. "Daily Life in the Inca Empire." Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996. N. pag. Print.

⁴ Suarez, Ananda Cohen, and Jeremy James. George. Handbook to Life in the Inca World. New York, NY: Facts On File, 2011. p. 150. Print

⁵ Ibid. p. 150

Those who obeyed the Incan moral code—*ama suwa, ama llulla, ama quella* (do not steal, do not lie, do not be lazy)—went to live in the sun’s warmth. Others spent their eternal days in the cold earth (as they could not pass the trials needed to make it to *pacarina*). In addition if the soul passed the tests it was free to move between the world of the living and the dead.

Funerals were solemn affairs that lasted about five days for the common man, involving the entire community to which the deceased belonged. Despite their solemnity, however, they were far from stoic; performances, speeches, song, and interactions with the dead were all integral to the Inca mourning process. Singers and dancers performed hymns that extolled the virtues of the individual throughout his or her lifetime. Processions occurred throughout the town in the person’s honor. The widow and other relatives wore all-black mourning clothes for weeks, and sometimes months, after the person’s death. Animal sacrifices were made a few days after the initial mourning period.⁶

The tomb contained many grave goods intended to provide materially for the person in the afterlife. Sacrificed animals, food, coca leaves, pottery, and objects related to the profession and social position of the deceased were deposited into the tomb. Some of the individual’s possessions were burned upon death, including a small tract of farmland that had been cultivated by the deceased during his lifetime.⁷

Royal funerals were even more elaborate. The funeral plans were kept secret until a successor was named. Along with the customary animals, children were ritually sacrificed in male–female pairs at mountain shrines located throughout the empire. Many of the king’s secondary wives were served large quantities of *chicha* until drunk and then strangled and deposited in his grave as sacrificial offerings to accompany him in the afterlife.⁸

The body was treated with great care; it was first sprinkled with cornmeal and the blood of the sacrificed llama, and on the fifth day it was ritually washed by the widow and other relatives at the meeting point of two rivers. Washing was seen as a spiritual purification and cut down on the toxins produced by the body. Mourners typically placed a lump of silver, gold, or precious stone in the mouth, hands, and chest of the deceased. The body was placed in a seated position with the head facing down and dressed with great finery, often wearing clothing and accessories that exaggerated the individual’s social and economic position.⁹

Deceased Incas were worshipped by their direct descendants for two generations. This entailed periodically visiting the ancestral mummy; providing him or her with food, *chicha*, and other sacred offerings; and incorporating the mummy into public ceremonies that commemorated the dead. On the outskirts of most villages, where the *pucullos* were located, were also ceremonial platforms known as *cayan*, intended for the performances of such ceremonies.¹⁰

Families also consulted with ancestors to aid in decision making and to provide favors and predictions for the future. Prior to marriage the bride and groom were presented to the ancestors for approval.¹¹

Deities and Important Concepts

- **Inti**
The principal god of the Incas. The rules of the Inca were said to descend from this sun god.
- **Virachocha**
Neither male nor female this god created the earth, sky, stars, and all living things.
- **Mama Quilla**
Goddess of the moon. Silver was sacred to her as it was considered the tears of the moon.

⁶ Ibid. p. 151

⁷ Ibid. p. 152

⁸ Ibid. p. 152

⁹ Ibid. p. 152

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 156

¹¹ Ibid. p. 156

Modern Adaptations

- Include red cloth with the body and bury it. Given that textiles were a key part of Inca life this would be a way to incorporate the color red, found in so many burial sites, in the funeral.
- Speak of the deceased as a huacas, an honored one who will protect their loved ones.
- Talk about the fact that the loved one gains power in death to influence those of us who remain.
- Offer up food and a fermented drink to the deceased as a symbol that they are still an important part of our lives.
- Talk about the journey that the deceased will make from newly dead to finally accepting and moving past their physical body to finally merge with the source of life and nature. Compare this to the journey we all make when mourning one who has passed on.
- Bury a bit of hair given from family members to help the deceased cross over easily. To know that they have the families support to move on.
- Have singers and dancers perform hymns that extolled the virtues of the individual throughout his or her lifetime.
- Include a procession to the funeral site to honor the deceased.
- Burn pictures of items that were near and dear to the departed. Be sure to use pictures printed on paper rather than true photos.
- Sprinkle the body of the deceased with corn and also wash it.
- Let it be known that the deceased shall reside in pacarina where they will spend their days in the sun's warmth.
- Declare that deceased shall be venerated for two generations. Be sure that arrangements are made so that the deceased shall be remembered by at least two generations of the family. This could include invoking the deceased for a blessing at a wedding, for example.

Sample Readings

The Incas did not invent any sort of written language. However some scholars believe they used a series of knots and colors known as khipu as a form of communication. The khipu was believed to work much like ASCII codes, where a specific set of knots represented a symbol. The current hypothesis is that this system was extended by adding color to the basic 7 knots symbols (plus no not).

Thus it might be fitting to either create a work of knots or have participants tie knots that are added to an overall work to be given to the family.

Resources

Handbook to Life in the Inca World. New York 2011 by Suarez, Ananda Cohen, and Jeremy James.