Review of People of the Volcano. Andean Counterpoint in the Colca Valley of Peru

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Noble David Cook with Alexandra Parma Cook, People of the Volcano. Andean Counterpoint in the Colca Valley of Peru (2007), 319 (Duke University Press, Durham, $84.95).

Cook traces the challenges faced by Collaguas and Cabanas, the original inhabitants of the Colca Valley in southern Peru, from pre-Hispanic times to the early seventeenth century. Although mindful of environmental transformations, his investigation, Cook asserts, aims at exploring the social foundations that permitted the natives to survive in a difficult environment that the Spanish conquest rendered especially challenging.

The first chapter describes the Collaguas and Cabanas’ pre-Hispanic social and economic organization, and also documents the natives’ cosmology and explains the direct, total control of the area that the Incan elite accomplished by late pre-Hispanic times. The second chapter illustrates the first encounters between Andeans and Spaniards in the Colca Valley. It documents the first encomiendas and the impact that this early form of labour coercion had upon native society. The chapter also details the initial clash between Christianity and native religion, as early agents of Catholicism rushed to destroy all expressions of pre-Hispanic beliefs.

Chapter three describes the disruption that the civil wars and debates about the perpetuity of encomiendas among Spaniards caused in the new colony. Such turmoil was mirrored among Andeans, according to Cook, by the eruption of a nativist movement known as Taqui Onqoy. The next chapter carefully details Francisco de Toledo’s reducciones policy and its impact on the Colca Valley. According to Cook, the spirit of the plan, turning Andeans into docile Spanish citizens useful to back an imperial regime, carried the seeds of its failure. For Indians, he asserts, ‘the true Andean utopia meant the return to [their] pre Inca past, when local ayllus and ethnic units were autonomous’ (104).

Chapters five and six detail the social and economic pressure that the colonial system imposed upon Collaguas and Cabanas. This view is complemented in chapter seven, which explains the strains that forced labour drafts (mita) caused among the native groups. According to Cook, such an economic system accelerated Indian migration, poverty and environmental degradation.

Chapter eight highlights the early conversion efforts accomplished in the valley by mendicant orders, particularly the Franciscans. The Andean response to these efforts can be observed by the late sixteenth century, Cook claims, when Peruvian clergy discovered some cases of Andean ‘idolatry’ in the area, a finding that confirmed the resilience of native religion. The final chapter explains the economic and social decline that encomenderos in the Colca Valley experienced by the early seventeenth century. The crisis was aggravated by natural disasters such as earthquakes, and recurrent plagues which caused a sharp Indian population decline.

Cook’s study is based upon solid archival data and scholarly research accomplished by the author over several decades. It constitutes an insightful, well documented analysis of the impact of the Spanish conquest upon a specific valley and its native groups. Not surprisingly, Cook’s proposals can easily be applied to the whole Andean region and to major areas of colonial Latin America.

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