

### **Review / Reseña**

Brosseder, Claudia. *Inka Bird Idiom: Amazonian Feathers in the Andes*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. 400 pp.

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Growing up in Peru, I was taught to associate the Inkas, the Andean polity that for over one hundred years dominated most of what we now call South America, with the Andes. For most Peruvians, the Inkas are central to our conceptualization of the “Andean region.” The association between the Inkas and the Andes has fueled our perceived division of the country in three distinct geographic regions: the Coast, the Andes, and the Amazon. Since we were never taught about the relationships that the Inkas developed in the Coast and the Amazon, we naturalized the idea that the three regions historically existed in a vacuum, with very little contact with one another. Ethnohistorian Claudia Ruth Brosseder’s latest book *Inka Bird Idiom: Amazonian Feathers in the Andes*, challenges those assumptions. It shows how the Inkas established deep and enduring relationships with the Amazon. In particular, it demonstrates the deep ties the Inkas maintained with Amazonian birds and their feathers.

To uncover the intimate relation between the Inkas and Amazonian feathers, Brosseder develops a framework she has called “Inka bird idiom.” The ethnohistorian defines the term as a “rich Inka vocabulary, which relates humans to birds” (5). She argues that Inka Bird Idiom can be “recovered from dances and songs and from the description of representations of Inka deities” (5). Brosseder looks for the idiom

particularly in archeological and ethnohistorical records from what she calls the “Long Late Horizon” period, which encompasses the fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century.

Brosseder explores archeological findings in several sites across South America, including Pachacamac in coastal Peru, Cusco, and Mount Llullaillaco, a volcano located on the border of what we now call Argentina and Chile. In regard to the ethnohistorical records, the author focuses in particular on two colonial chronicles: the Murúa Manuscript and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala’s *Primer Nueva Crónica Y Buen Gobierno*. Unlike previous analyses of those records, the author reads the documents literally, arguing that the texts are not merely descriptive, but interpretive and meaning-making, as they are imbued with local ways of knowing and being. The author’s engagement with the chronicles goes beyond traditional textual analysis, as she also pays careful attention to things like the pigments the authors privileged to color their drawings. In this case, Brosseder becomes a textual archeologist, carefully uncovering layers upon layers of meaning in the words and drawings of the chroniclers.

Brosseder’s main argument is that birds and their feathers played a central role in shaping the way the Inkas understood the world, their role in it, and the relationships they developed, both with other humans and more-than-humans—including non-human animals, the landscape, and the cosmos. More broadly, Brosseder demonstrates the deep and transformational influence that Amazonia and the eastern montane forest had on the Andes during the rule of the Inkas. To make those claims, the author argues that the Inkas did not understand themselves as superior to the environment. Instead, they saw themselves as enmeshed in a complex network of relationships which they mediated through, among other things, feathers. For the Inkas, feathers had the power to establish and recreate loyalties, offer protection, grant special abilities, and enable communication between beings. Unlike Europeans, the Inkas did not see feathers as symbols whose meaning was derived from the objects they pointed towards, but material agents with their own agency and power.

While Brosseder’s focus is on birds and feathers, her book also provides an in-depth study of the relationships between the Inkas and other more-than-humans, such as llamas. Given the specific way in which the Inkas related with the cosmos, it would have been limiting to study specific relationships as if they happened in a vacuum. Instead, Brosseder showcases the complex networks the Inkas established,

in which several humans and more-than-humans constantly influenced and transformed one another. A clear example of those processes is the Inka sacrifice of three children (one boy and two girls) in Mount Lulluillaco. The children, carefully wrapped in cloth and ropes, were killed on the volcano and their bodies were left in specific positions, surrounded with various ritual items. The deceased children stayed on top of the volcano for around five hundred years, buried under the surface where icy conditions preserved their bodies.

Based on a careful study of all the elements of the sacrifice, Brosseder argues that the ritual specialists who conducted the sacrifice “put Inka deities, Inka history, and Inka beliefs into action” (56). Ritual specialists used the boy’s body and the objects they left close to him to simultaneously highlight his identity in life as a llama herder and his new identity in the afterlife: that of the “napa,” a mythical white llama that belonged to Inka rulers. Among the clothing given to the boy was a headdress made of egret wing feathers. The feathers mediated the transformation of the herder boy into the mythical llama. They acted as networkers, establishing a connection between human and llama, and allowed the human boy, in his new life, to access “powerful qualities of other realms in the cosmos” (61). Through the sacrifice, the Inka ritual specialists aimed to empower the napa-boy and the two young women sacrificed with him to mediate with various entities (including the Sun, the Moon, Thunder, and Mount Lulluillaco) to obtain their favors.

All throughout her book, Brosseder highlights the Inka ontological principles of balance, complementarity, and fluidity. Those principles are even present in interactions between the Inka and the Peoples they conquered. Brosseder explains, for example, that when subjugating other Peoples, the Inkas were not looking to bring “civilization” or “order” (268). Instead, their process of annexation involved an exchange of knowledge that transformed both the Inkas and the Peoples they had annexed to their polity. After a conquest, for example, the Inkas would bring back the conquered People’s *wak’a*—a sacred entity—to their main temple in Cusco, adding it to their own pantheon. While the Inkas imposed some of their own traditions and beliefs into the Peoples they annexed, they also incorporated new ideas and beliefs into their own polity, effectively transforming themselves.

Brosseder mentions in her narrative that one of the goals of the book is to decolonize Inka history. For example, she renames a garment often referred to a “black-and-white checkerboard tunic” as the “mountain caracara or corequenque tunic” (36), given that it resembles the image of a mountain caracara bird soaring high

in the sky. She argues that referring to the tunic that way “decolonizes Inka history and captures Andean meaning-making processes from an Andean perspective” (37). Given the time Brosseder spends describing the transformational ways Inkas related to the Peoples they annexed to their polity, I wish she had also engaged in a discussion about the use of the term “empire” to refer to the Inkas. The concept of empire continues to be intimately related with European processes of conquest and domination. While those processes in some ways relate to Inka processes of annexation, the Inka focus on transformation and balance also differs vastly from the ways in which European powers impose their values and ideals through conquest. Even the name the Inkas used for their polity, *tawantinsuyu*, is embedded in Quechua notions of balance and complementarity. The Quechua suffix *-ntin*, included in the name, refers to a generative union of elements. Is it accurate then to call the Inkas—and by extension other Indigenous polities like the Mayas and the Aztecs—an “empire”? While Brosseder’s efforts to decolonize Inka history are extremely valuable, taking it a step further by challenging foundational European notions about Indigenous “empires” in the Americas would have fully showcased an effort to decolonize Inka (and other Indigenous) history and knowledge.

Among the book’s biggest accomplishments is its ability to explain the extremely complex Inka ways of knowing and being in a language that is engaging and accessible, even for academics not familiar with the Andean region. Brosseder always takes the time to define and explain complex Quechua concepts, such as the above-mentioned *wak’a*, which can refer to entities, places, and/or objects. On top of the explanations provided in-text, the book includes a glossary with definitions of all the central Quechua concepts used throughout the book. Brosseder shows the same care when introducing the chronicles she discusses in her book. The author provides vital historical and cultural context to better understand the goals and frameworks of the writers and illustrators of the texts. This is particularly important because it not only helps readers who are unfamiliar with the Andes to follow the arguments of the book, but also because it illuminates the biases in Brosseder’s sources. Given the patriarchal gender ideology of the time, for example, the author explains that “Long Late Horizon Inka bird idiom comes down to us with an obvious gender imbalance” (24). While maintaining the utmost academic rigor, the book is an inviting text for anyone interested in learning more about the Andes, the Amazon, the Inkas, birds, and feathers.

It is important to point out that the book does not limit its gender analysis to expressing the gender bias of its sources. Instead, Brosseder makes a particular effort to overcome the limitations of the archive by discussing gender ideologies and female roles among the Inkas. All throughout her book, the author points out the importance of human and more-than-human women for the Inka. For example, the author mentions that the Inkas only embarked on warfare when the Moon was visible. They believed that if they engaged in war during a new-moon phase, she and the Sun deity could not collaborate. Human women played a key role in the fusion between Inkas and non-Inkas, as intermarriage was considered “the synchronic force necessary to achieve fusion” (232). Also, during her discussion of the sacrifice in Mount Lulluillaco, Brosseder devotes ample space to discuss the role of the two girls sacrificed with the napa-boy. The three children played complimentary roles in the ritual and, only through their shared presence and interaction, Inka ritual specialists were able to “[restage] the collective memory of the Inkas and [try] to transcend human-scaled limits of space and time” (99) to attain the favor of the entities they were engaging with.

Arguably the book’s most engaging chapter is the second one, where Brosseder discusses the Inka sacrifice in Mount Lulluillaco. While the analysis of the sacrifice is outstanding, sadly the author does not address any of the tensions that arise when archaeologists dig Indigenous sites. During her discussion of the sacrifice, Brosseder mentions that the “sacrifice and its objects tell the story of the desperate attempts of Late Horizon humans to forestall a catastrophe” (54). If the Inkas resorted to human sacrifices to stop what they understood to be an impending disaster, what are the implications of digging out the sacrifice, potentially breaking the communication the Inkas had established with their environment? It is very unfortunate that the author never engages with this extremely complex ethical question about tampering with spaces that have extremely ceremonial value for the sake of “knowledge,” particularly in a book that seriously considers the agency of both the human and the more-than-human. Can we honestly justify digging out the bodies of the children in Mount Lulluillaco and the other elements of the sacrifice so we can learn a little more about Inka ways of knowing and being? Does our thirst for knowledge trump the possibility of disrupting an agreement between the Inkas and their environment that arguably prevented a catastrophe? What are the consequences, ethical and otherwise, of the archeological project that retrieved the sacrifice from Mount Lulluillaco? After the sacrifice was studied, why haven’t the bodies and other

objects been returned to the volcano? Why haven't Indigenous peoples who are direct descendants of the Inkas taken a leadership role in the decisions regarding the bodies of the children and the rest of the objects that were part of the sacrifice? A serious engagement with such questions would have allowed Brosseder to make a powerful intervention in the field of archaeology. Moreover, it would have allowed her to engage with disciplines like Native American and Indigenous Studies, in which scholars have been seriously discussing those issues from a distinct Indigenous perspective.

In addition to the text, *Inka Bird Idiom* includes almost fifty images that portray, among others, the birds described in the text, illustrations from the chronicles analyzed in the book, and photographs of objects from various archaeological sites. The images are both a highlight and a limitation of the book. While the images are all of high quality and provide a much-needed visual representation of what the text is describing, their placing in the book is not intuitive. Instead of being placed as close as possible to the text that references them, the images are gathered together after three of the seven chapters. Having to leave the text to find an image was tedious and distracting. Also, in some cases, there were not enough visual aids. In the chapter that describes the sacrifice at Mount Lulluillaco, for example, the book does not include a full diagram of the sacrifice, or even images of the three children. While readers familiar with the archeological site may be able to follow the narrative with the limited visual aids, fully grasping the complexity of the sacrifice can be very challenging for those who are learning for the first time about what happened at the volcano. I believe this book (and others of the same nature) would benefit from digital technology to enhance its visual components. An e-book in which you can make images pop up as you read the text, and which includes interactive representations of scenes like the sacrifice at Mount Lulluillaco would have really made Brosseder's book an even more valuable teaching resource for students in several disciplines and all academic levels.

I hope that my criticisms of *Inka Bird Idiom* do not take away from the quality and value of the book, though. Brosseder's book makes key interventions in various academic disciplines, including Ethnohistory, Environmental Studies, Latin American Studies, and Andean Studies. It provides key insight into Inka ways of knowing and being. It proposes pathways for future research, like when it mentions that Amazonian feathers continue to be protagonists of Andean rituals and celebrations. Finally, Brosseder challenges academics of the Andes to always think about and engage with the region in relation with the Amazon and the Coast. She also proposes

a framework based on relationality and fluidity, which has the potential to reshape scholarship about the Andes. I hope that the book is translated into Spanish soon—and, why not, also into Quechua—so that the key insights the author makes about the Inkas are also available for local readers and academics who are not fluent in English.