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Pictographic Catechisms

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Andean pictographic catechisms are little-known works produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most are ink pictographs or abstract drawings used primarily to portray the creed, the Pater Noster, and other parts of the catechism, the standard handbook of Roman Catholic doctrine, for Quechua and Aymara speakers. All of the catechisms with good provenance data are from the Lake Titicaca area of Peru and Bolivia.

The Andean catechisms have been likened to the betterknown Testerian catechisms of Mexico (Durán 1984; Glass 1975; Robertson 1994 [1959]: 52-55), but it is unlikely that the two traditions are closely related historically, aside from being more or less independent responses to the Roman Catholic practice of teaching the catechism by means of pictures. The Mexican and Andean traditions are iconographically distinct. They are also separated by a large chronological gap. The Testerian catechisms were produced between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, while the Andean ones can be firmly dated no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century. Both pictographic traditions have also been compared to the ledger art of the nineteenth-century North American Plains Indians (see, for example, Ibarra Grasso 1953, 1991) and the Cunas of Panama (Nordenskiöld 1979 [1928-30]), but there is little resemblance other than the ledger medium of some catechisms (Dunn 1969; Lettner 1973; Mallery and Swan 1886; Métraux 1963; Young 1986: 59).

We have identified some forty-three Andean pictographic catechisms in the literature or in private collections (Mitchell and Jaye 1996: Appendix I). Most of these were described and presumably produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Short statements by José de Acosta and Alfred Métraux, however, suggest that some sort of pictorial representation of Roman Catholic doctrine may have been found in the Andes earlier. Acosta (1962 [1590]: 288-90) refers to a single situation in which a pictorial Ten Commandments was being used as a confessional aid in the sixteenth century, but we suspect that the common acceptance of his terse comment as testifying to general use of Peruvian pictographic catechisms is in error (see Mitchell and Jaye 1996: 10). Métraux (1963: 14) gives a seventeenthcentury date for "graphical representations of Catholic prayers" by Jesuits working in Juli around Lake Titicaca, but he gives no citations or other evidence to help us evaluate the date or the nature of the "graphical representations." In spite of these two statements, we believe the existence of Andean colonial pictographs before the nineteenth century remains uncertain. All other discussions of catechetical teaching in the colonial Andes that we have found omit any reference to early pictographs (see, for example, Armas Medina 1953: 86-105, 244-52, 294-305; Oré 1992 [1598]; Vargas Ugarte 1953: 49-61; Wood 1986).

It is only in the nineteenth century that we find the first clear descriptions and reproductions of Andean pictographic catechetical aids. In 1869 Johann Jakob von Tschudi (1869: 282–84, 314–17) described two pictographic hides from Bolivia depicting Roman Catholic texts in Aymara that he had observed during his travels between 1838 and 1842. Charles Wiener (1880: 772–75) briefly and somewhat fancifully described two texts a short time later. All of

the other examples that we have identified were collected in the twentieth century, although some of them were certainly made earlier (see the Finding List in appendix I of Mitchell and Jaye 1996).

The most thorough descriptions of Andean pictographic works are given by Dick E. Ibarra Grasso (1941, 1953, 1991: 482-91), Roswith Hartmann (1984, 1989, 1991), Barbara H. Jaye and William P. Mitchell (1999), and William P. Mitchell and Barbara H. Jaye (1996). Although Ibarra Grasso (1991: 484) also reports that there are examples from northern Argentina, he provides no illustrations or texts. His texts and those of Hartmann describe material from southern highland Peru and the Bolivian altiplano. Ibarra Grasso (1953) saw Quechua and Aymara catechisms still being made in the 1940s, but unfortunately he provides little information on social context. Ibarra Grasso also provides useful commentary on and reproductions of many texts (see also Kauffmann Doig 1973; Lettner 1973; Naville 1966), but his work is marred by problematical interpretations of the signs (Mitchell and Jaye 1996: 13, 33) and by an extreme diffusionism in which he seeks to establish that Mediterranean hieroglyphic writing spread to the Americas, where it continued in a degenerated pictographic form that was used to produce the catechisms (Ibarra Grasso 1953: 11, 53, 1991: 483, 489-90; see especially the critiques of Lettner 1973; Mitchell and Jaye 1996: 15-24, and Naville 1966). Because Ibarra Grasso worked on the catechisms in the 1940s, before modern copying techniques, many of his texts consist of his hand-drawn reproductions of the originals. Hartmann (1984, 1989, 1991) has described two clay catechisms in museums in Bonn and Mannheim, Germany. In 1996 we published a literature review and a Finding List that provides the most complete information on the catechisms (Mitchell and Jaye 1996). We have also described and reproduced a facsimile of the Huntington Catechism found in the Huntington Free Library and Reading Room in New York City (fig. 12; Jaye and Mitchell 1999; Mitchell 1978; Mitchell and Jaye 1996).

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS: SIGN, SOUND, AND SENSE

The Andean catechisms vary in the quality of their execution: some are beautifully made and others crudely done.

Most of them are on paper (Ibarra Grasso 1991: 482), but some are modeled in clay (see the drawings in Hartmann 1991: 175 and Ibarra Grasso 1953: facing page 16) and, less frequently, painted or incised in leather, wood, or stone (Ibarra Grasso 1953: 16–17). A few catechisms such as the Huntington follow the familiar European left-to-right, top-to-bottom order. But most of the Andean paper texts (and the Testerian catechisms from Mexico) are written boustrophedon, that is, like oxen plowing a field, the pictographs zigzag back and forth; often beginning at bottom left, they are read alternately from left to right, right to left, left to right, and so on. A few texts, mainly those in clay or on hide, spiral in or out. In all the texts, however, the pictographs generally follow Quechua and Aymara rather than Spanish or English word order.

The Andean pictographic catechisms utilize both naturalistic and abstract signs or glyphs to portray ideas. A few catechisms, especially the Huntington and Tschudi's material, utilize signs that are outstanding in their naturalism. It is usually possible to recognize both the object and the idea represented once one knows what the text is. Most of the other catechisms also employ naturalistic pictographs, but many of their signs are so abstract or stylized that it is often difficult to recognize the objects pictured let alone discern their meaning (fig. 13).

The catechisms convey ideas by means of phonetic rebus signs and semasiographs (also called ideographs). In a rebus the picture of one thing represents the sounds of something else. In a common U.S. example found in children's books, the pictures of an eye, a carpenter's saw, and an ant are used to represent the phrase "I saw [my] aunt." The rebuses are used to create rough syllabaries, a process similar to the method sometimes used in the Testerian manuscripts. Because rebuses portray sounds, they are tied to a particular language, and the ones in the Andean catechisms conform to the sounds, meanings, and symbolic associations of Aymara and Quechua. In one of the catechisms, for example, a piece of cloth (p'acha) is used to signify "the earth" (pacha), the two words being near homonyms (Holmer, Miranda Rivera, and Rydén 1951: 183; Hartmann 1991: 174). In the Huntington Catechism an eye (ñawin) is used to indicate "first" or "beginning," following Quechua usage in which ñawin not only means "eye," but the "beginning" of something such as the ñawin of an irrigation canal. Andean rebus signs still await a detailed study (Mitchell and Jaye 1996: 13, 33).

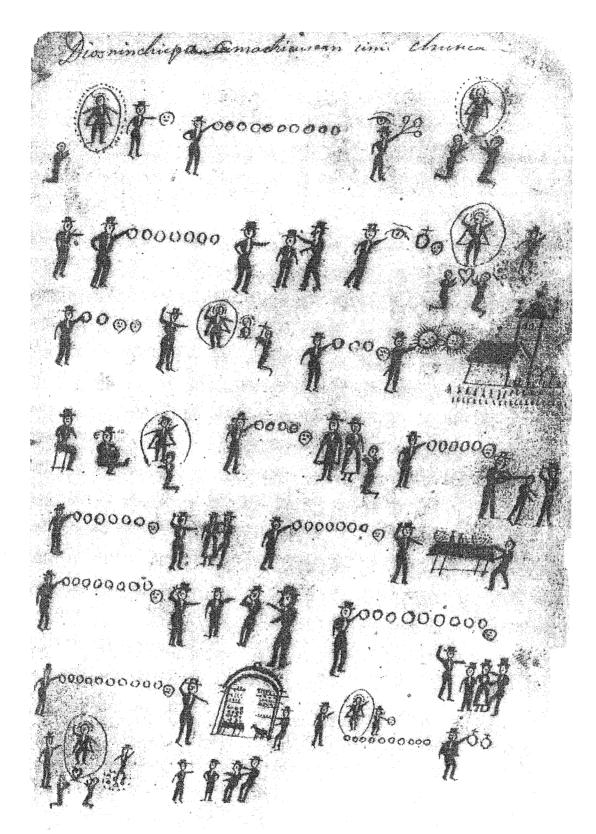


Fig. 12. The Ten Commandments from the Huntington Catechism, mid-nineteenth century. Courtesy of the Huntington Free Library and Reading Room, Bronx, New York.

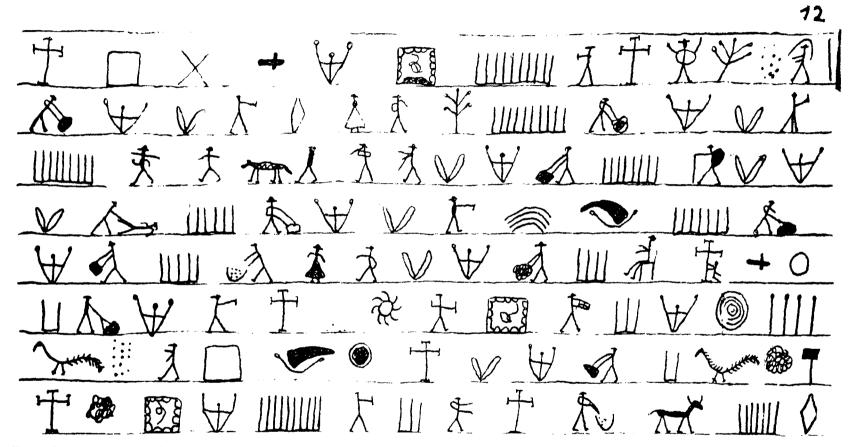


Fig. 13. The Ten Commandments from the Cuaderno de Ocuri, mid-nineteenth century. From Dick Edgar Ibarra Grasso, *La escritura indígena andina*, 1953, p. 210 (La Paz: Biblioteca Paceña, Alcaldía Municipal).

The majority of signs used in the catechisms appear to be semantic signs or semasiographs. In a semasiographic system the signs are divorced from a particular language and represent ideas rather than sounds (Boone 1994: 15). The icons on a computer are semasiographic, as are international road signs. Some of the semasiographs in the catechisms are simple representations, as, for example, when loaves of bread are used to represent bread (tanta) (Hartmann 1991: 176; Ibarra Grasso 1953: 27-28). Other signs are not simple representations but are used as symbols of something else, such as an encircled church representing "the earth" instead of a church in the Huntington Catechism. Still other signs are grouped together to form a complex iconographical program that is easily recognizable. In the Huntington "Salve Regina," for example, two figures shedding tears before the Virgin Mary represent not sounds or words per se but the phrase "to thee do we cry," as it would be rendered in English.

The signs utilized in the different texts vary considerably, and it is likely that many of the catechisms are distinctive products of particular local traditions. While drawing on shared iconographical themes and traditions, they are often idiosyncratic: they were developed by individuals to help themselves or the people they taught to remember particular texts (see Ibarra Grasso 1953: 24-29). Ibarra Grasso (1953: 24) reports that there are several thousand different signs in the manuscripts that he has examined. The same sign, moreover, may have several different meanings, depending on context, even in the same text. Thus, in the Huntington "Ten Commandments," a man encircling a woman's leg with his own designates both the action of adultery in the sixth commandment and "covet[ing] thy neighbor's wife" in the ninth commandment. This profusion of signs and variability in their meaning would make it impossible to translate any of the material if the nature of the texts were not standard or, as in the Huntington Catechism, the incipits or opening words of the texts were not given in alphabetic script at the top of each page.

A few signs are common to several different Andean catechisms, especially such standard European pictographs as the cross, the steepled church, the kneeling man, the cassocked priest, chairs and tables, halos and mandorlas

(whole-body halos), stylized eyes, doves, hearts, and Virgins. The catechisms also employ pictographic stick figures, including such European images as a man plowing with oxen or horses. Most of the catechisms represent numbers by means of vertical strokes, sometimes connected by a horizontal stroke producing a comblike effect (fig. 13). The Huntington and a few of Ibarra Grasso's manuscripts indicate numbers by small circles (Ibarra Grasso 1953: 247–56).

Ibarra Grasso, William Bollaert (1870), Porfirio Miranda Rivera (1958), and Arthur Posnansky (1912: 74-76) maintain that the catechisms embody an ancient form of Precolumbian writing, but this interpretation is problematical (Bandelier 1969 [1910]: 89; Tschudi 1869: 314-19; Métraux 1963: 14). Even with the rebuses, the Andean catechisms appear to be primarily semasiographic mnemonic devices that function much like the Stations of the Cross in a twenty-first-century Roman Catholic church rather than glottographic transcriptions of local speech (Mallery and Swan 1886: 219-23; Mitchell and Jaye 1996; Posnansky 1912: 76; Tschudi 1869). That is certainly the case with the Huntington Catechism, which we have studied. Although some modern authors have argued that semasiographic systems should also be considered writing (Boone 1994), we prefer to use Carlos J. Lettner's (1973: 109) phrase "systems of communication" to refer to the pictographic texts.

In spite of their source in European belief and iconography, the pictographic catechisms are manifestations of Andean religious practice. The pictographs employed in the production of these catechisms, therefore, merit greater attention than they have received so far by scholars. It would be especially useful to study the signs used in all the Andean catechisms more carefully. We think it unlikely, but it is possible that they preserve some Precolumbian elements. The use of rebuses also merits more study. Such analysis would be facilitated by clear reproductions of original texts made with modern photographic equipment. We particularly need to know, moreover, what Andean peoples themselves say about these texts. Before even more of the memory data are lost, we need a careful community and archival study of catechetical production, one that focuses on both the social context and use of the catechisms.

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