The Movement of Women, Beer and Feast Foods in Establishing the Inka Empire

Marie Hopwood

Abstract: At its heart, empire is about movement with borders ever expanding outwards and tribute ever flowing inwards. For the Inka these aspects were gendered, with the conquest seen as masculine while the care and control of the conquered was feminine. Both forms of power were essential and functioned in tandem. From the feminine powers of provisioning came the bonds of reciprocity. Accepting Inka food and drink was not optional, but through its consumption bonds of reciprocal obligations were forged between the Inka elite and the non-Inka conquered communities. These bonds were made visible through feasting events involving maize beer (*chicha*) and splendid cuisine. Both the chicha and the foods were produced by the Chosen Women (*Aqllakuna*) allow us to see dual movements of empire in practice. The first movement is directed inwards towards the heart of the Inka Empire as daughters of conquered elite are taken as tribute to become *Aqllakuna*. The second movement is that of the *Aqllakuna's* labour outward through hospitality and the subsequent reciprocal obligations produced. All feasting foods were created by the *Aqllakuna*, and thus through each sip of *chicha* their cultural capital is mobilized, reinforcing obligations that allowed the Empire to flourish.

At its heart empire is about movement, with borders ever expanding outwards and tribute ever flowing inwards. Under the Inka Empire of 15th century Peru these directional aspects of empire took on a uniquely gendered turn through the tribute-based movement of women, alcohol and food. As the Inka seized territories conquest was seen as masculine with the primary gender role of men as military conquerors. Holding onto those hard-won territories was a different matter entirely, and one in which the Inka made use of women's traditional roles as provisioners. Food and *chicha* (maize-beer) were cultural items that created reciprocal bonds between those who feasted and those who provided. Thus through an exploration of Inka feasting and the labor used in their creation, a greater understanding of the lives of Andean women can be crafted.

Feasts have long been known archaeologically as power broker events (Bray 2003, Dietler 2006, Dietler and Hayden 2010, Hayden and Villeneuve 2011). Seen archaeologically as experiences of heightened reciprocity, feasts served to bind people together in meaningful ways. For ancient Andeans, when work was required that involved many people, the labour of the *ayllu* (kin-based communities) could be called upon by a patron. The patron would then provide any tools and raw materials necessary to the workers, as well as food and drink, in exchange for their labor (Gose 2000, Silverblatt 1987). This *mit'a* tradition created strong bonds of reciprocity and obligation, a system that would be used by the Inka elite to create and maintain empire (Garrido and Salazar 2017).

Under Inka control the labor-patron feast pattern continued with the feminine roles as providers of food and drink, but the power was co-opted away from the community and toward empire. Through conquest, the Inka elite took the land and resources of a region and then annually reallocated parcels back to the local *ayllus* in exchange for their labor as tribute (Covey and Quave 2017, 278, Hu and Quave 2020, Vaughn 2006). Labour was required from conquered subjects, but the expectation and need for the sustenance both physically and socially was also quite real. The conquered subjects likely relied on the Inka-gifted foods for sustenance. Feast foods and drink were prepared by a group of women called *Aqllakuna* or "Chosen Women," who had been accepted by the Inka elite as another aspect of annual tribute. Through feasts *Aqllakuna* represented the Inka elite as provisioners, binding the empire together through traditionally feminine gender roles and the subsequent reciprocal obligations. Thus the masculine act of Inka conquest was mitigated by the feminine act of hospitality.

Putting the Inka Empire into Context

The Inka Empire emerged from a pre-existing ethnic group that made a successful bid for power in early 15th century Peru. Preceded by both the Wari and Tiwanaku empires, the Inka amassed an immense amount of territory and therefore of conquered subjects in a short amount of time. Their region was called *Tawantinsuyu*, "the land of the four corners," and was comprised of four regions covering areas now within the borders of Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina (D'Altroy 2018, 2015, Morris and von Hagen, 2011) (See Figure 1). The cultural practices discussed here did not first appear with the ethnic Inka, but instead grew out of shared practices from the mosaic of ancient Andean peoples. Both conquerors and conquered shared cultural practices that made the new power structure recognizable and navigable. For some, living under Inka imperial control did not noticeably transform their day-to-day lives, while other groups became centers of resistance with the lived-reality of Inka rule felt differently across *Tawantinsuyu* (Hernandez-Garavito 2020, Quave et al 2019).

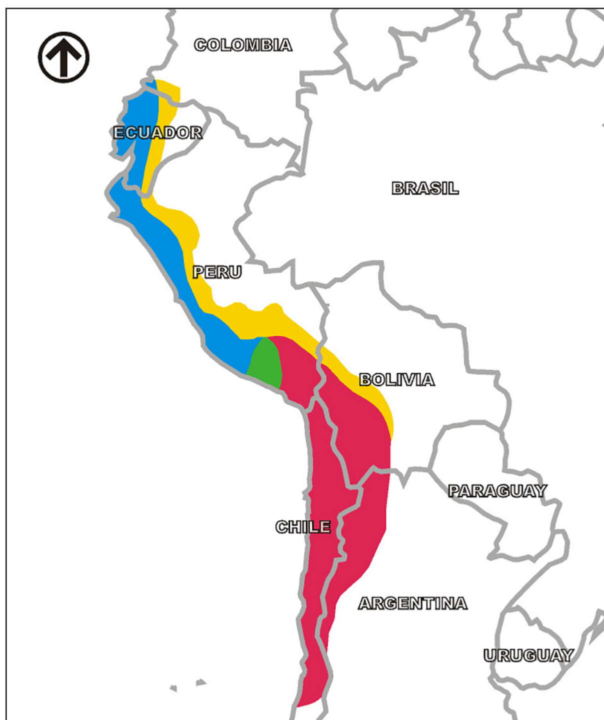

Figure 1. The Inka Empire expanded the borders of their territory called Tawantinsuyu, or the land of the four quarters, over a large swath of the west coast of South America making it the largest empire in the western hemisphere.

While the Inka elite controlled a massive swath of territory, their conquered subjects were not Inkan nor did they consider themselves to be. These myriad groups had their own practices while also sharing some ways of knowing in the broader cultural mosaic. One example of shared ways of knowing was the parallel control structure of gendered tasks called gender parallelism. Under this structure, women and men each had separate and well-defined roles including tasks and responsibilities related to "descent systems, ritual obligations and political offices" (Gero 1992, Gose 2000, Silverblatt 1987, 1978,). Women traced their ancestry through the female line, carried out their own ritual obligations, had their own gendered tasks, and were in charge of mandating what happened within those feminine realms. Men similarly had their own roles, descent lines, and tasks, maintaining control and order for the masculine realm. This does not imply perfect equality between women and men, but it shaped the power balance of Andean societies. Women inherited land and had powers that others of their sex did not have in Spain, which would soon impact them greatly. One of the feminine realms of influence was hospitality, with women's primary roles revolving around cooking, brewing and provisioning daily lives and feasts.

While the act of conquest was masculine, the act of provisioning was feminine. From the Andean viewpoint feminine tasks of cooking and brewing were not subservient but were highly valued and traditionally powerful. These were female-controlled activities, taught by one generation to the next, and sustaining communities over time. The activities related to cooking and brewing, were taught to young girls who would eventually pass those traditions and skills along to the next generation. Through their actions and production, reciprocal bonds were created within the communities, binding those groups together.

Andean life under Inka control was structured through tribute obligations that were always collected as labour, never as goods (Gose 2000, Hayashida 2019:51). This distinction is important since as long as *labour* was collected, this continually created bonds of reciprocity, much like the feminine tasks related to feasting. These tribute obligations took many forms, such as requiring farmers to share their agricultural bounty as tribute in exchange for working Inka land (Gose 2000). Another way that the Inka extracted tribute was through the *Aqllakuna* (*Aqllakuna* = Chosen, *Kuna* = Women) (Bray et al 2005, Ceruti 2015, Gose 2000, Rowe 1982).

Becoming Aqllakuna

The *Aqllakuna* were "chosen" as tribute at a young age (8–10 years old) from settlements across *Tawantinsuyu* (Bray et al 2005, Ceruti 2015, Gose 2000, Rowe 1982). They were to be physically perfect, beautiful, without blemish, and be virgins. Sent as tribute every year, many would travel great distances to the imperial capital at Cuzco, where they were cloistered in *Aqllawasis* (special housing for the *Aqllakuna)*. Here the girls were trained by *Mamaconas* (senior-*Aqllakuna*) in cooking, brewing, and weaving, the three primary feminine roles, as well as in performing rituals for the Inka that maintained the empire spiritually. The ranks of *Aqllakuna* were replenished annually with new tributes, while at the same time some women were completing their service, and others were offered as sacrifice.

Aqllakuna served the Inka for a minimum of three years, some remaining in Cuzco and others housed in *Aqllawasi* across *Tawantinsuyu* (Gose 2000). At the end of their novitiate period most *Aqllakuna* were given the choice of remaining in service and rising in the ranks *Mommakona*, or they could be married to conquered subjects of the Inka's choice. The elite status and powers of *Aqllakuna* could have been a strong enticement for some of the women to choose to remain in the service and train to become *Mommakona* (Gose 2000, 88, Ortner 1996). Otherwise, upon leaving *Aqllakuna* service the women were distributed across the empire as brides to loyal subjects, and would rejoin the realm of women in those roles.

A smaller number of *Aqllakuna* were given as sacrifices, such as the *capacocha* ritual (Bray et al 2005, 83). These sacrifices were not limited to *Aqllakuna*, but young boys were sacrificed as well. A detailed discussion of Inkan human sacrifice is beyond the scope of this paper, though it is not my goal to gloss over this practice. See important works such as Bray et al (2005, 91), Ceruti (2005), Socha et al (2021a, 2021b), and Tung and Knudson (2010) for further discussions.

The training of the *Aqllakuna* under Inka control is curious due to the fact that a majority of their work (cooking, brewing and weaving) were the same tasks that traditionally taught in their home *ayllus*. Why then was it important enough for the Inka elite to annually collect women from across the empire for this set of activities? With the *mit'a* practice of collecting labour rather than payment, the usage of *Aqllakuna* labour co-opts the reciprocal power of feasting. The value of women's labour lies not only in the actual provisions, but also in the intentionality of the hands crafting the food and drink. Hospitality meant more than mere sustenance but was deeply laden with meaning. The power of commensality structured the relationships that bound Andean society together. To understand the reciprocity created and enacted through work-party feasts, it is important to get a "taste" of what the *Aqllakuna* and other Andean women prepared.

Food is intensely cultural (Bray2021, 2003, Dietler 2006, Dietler and Hayden 2010, Hayden and Villeneuve 2011, Smith 2006, Twiss 2012, 2007). What we consider to be edible goes beyond concerns over toxicity, and instead references what we are taught is good to eat. For Andeans the primary foodstuffs included: maize, potatoes, quinoa, beans, red pepper, herbs (*yuya*) and salt, all of which are introduced below (Bray 2003a, 2003b, Turner et al 2010, 519). Meat from *llama*, *cuy* (guinea pigs) and various bird species was primarily a food for the elite with te commoners consuming it on a limited basis (Bray 2003b:100, Klaput 2020, Knudsen et al 2012). These food staples are closer to representing a list of ingredients rather than an understanding of how people actually ate. Andean women learned the proper way to cook from their mothers and female relatives, unless, of course, they had been Chosen and were then trained by *Mommacona*. By whomever they were taught, the resultant dishes would have been both meaningful and delicious. To assume otherwise is a disservice.

There are no recipes from this period, but the ethnohistoric documents and archaeological investigations give hints to how the Andean dishes were prepared (Bray 2003b, Turner et al 2010). Maize was the major staple and while it could be eaten fresh, it was generally dried to increase storage and ease of transportation (Bray 2003b, Turner et al 2010, 531). Dried maize could be toasted and ground into flour (*cancha*) used to: thicken stews, make breads and tortillas, as well as special balls of dough that were roasted over coals (Bray 2003b:97). *Huminta* (*cancha* dumplings) were added to stews as special feast foods (Bray 2003b:97). *Muti* was a common maize preparation described by Cobo (1964) as boiled dried corn. That rather uninspired description does not do the dish service, and a potential comparison could be *congee* (or *juk*) the Chinese rice-based porridge. While the porridge sounds simple, the variations in styles of preparation, toppings, and the comforting effect of eating such a dish cannot be understated. *Muti* (or *mote*) appears to carry a similar range in variations and potentially in importance to the people.

Second only to maize are potatoes (Bray 2003a, 2003b). Andean potato farming in the nearly vertical terraced agricultural plots makes it one of the most labor-intensive forms of agriculture on the planet. If the many species of potatoes were not both culturally meaningful as well as delicious, it is unlikely that the practice would have continued. While there are many traditional ways to prepare potatoes, one form unique to the Andes is *chuño*. *Chuño* are dried potatoes created through the dehydrating effects of alternating exposures of frost and sun (Bray 2003a, 2003b). The uses of *chuño* range from being ground into a flour as a thickener and flavorful addition to stews and sauces, as well as being rehydrated in stews.

Quinoa is a traditional Andean seed crop that can be dried and toasted for long-term storage. It was used to make variations on pilaf-like grain dishes, as well as a stew called *pisqui* (Bray 2003b). Both quinoa and maize were also used in brewing *chicha*, the maize-based Andean beer. Andean farmers grew multiple types of beans and bean-like seeds that were prepared in a variety of fashions. Rounding out the foods of importance are red pepper (*aji*), salt and herbs (called *yuya*). While herbs and seasonings made up the smallest amount of their daily meals, their usage is one of the main distinguishing features between true cuisine and simply eating staple ingredients. It is through the deft use of these flavors that the nuances of regional dishes and overarching cuisines are based.

Chicha (*aqa* in Quechua) is the traditional maize-beer brewed by Andean women and *Aqllakuna*. This maize-based beer is a fermented, alcoholic cereal-grain beverage, and much of its production is based on mobilizing fermentable sugars that the yeast can then convert into alcohol. In order for fermentable sugars to be released from the maize and available for fermentation, the dried grains were soaked until soft and then chewed. The chewed corn was pushed to the roof of a woman's mouth, then removed as a lug that would be added to a fermentation vessel. Once the vessel contained the amount of chewed maize required, it would be filled with water and fermentation would begin. While it can sound curious, chewing the corn was integral to chicha production, as the maltase enzyme from the women's saliva is what mobilized the sugars required for alcohol production. It also enhanced the overall flavor of the *chicha* (Bray 2003b:98, Cobo 1964, Surrette 2009). Chicha was a daily staple from commoner to elite and was copiously required for feasts and rituals across the empire (Giovanetti 2021, Hayashida 2008, 2019,51, Jennings and Bowser 2009, Jennings et al., 2005, Morris 1975, Parker et al. 2015). The beverage itself was believed to be animate, not only enliven, a ritual (Hayashida 2019, 51). As such the chicha could be viewed as an active participant in the ritual itself.

The quantities of *chicha* required for Inka feast days was immense, with drinking to intoxication an important part of the festivities (Jennings and Bowser 2009). These feast

days were not everyday occurrences, and therefore the drinking to excess was not quotidian either. When required, however, drinking to drunkenness demonstrated the hospitality and largesse of the host, and thereby the extent to which the people were provisioned (Hayashida 2019:51, Murra 1980). The *chicha* itself, and by association the vessels used for serving and drinking, facilitated the feast, as well as the creation of reciprocity. Consuming *chicha* and feast foods were the literal consumption of hospitality and thereby created the relational bonds of reciprocity.

Through the exploration of ancient Andean foodstuffs, we find not only evidence of everyday meals for the people, but also the *haute cuisine* of the Inka elite (Bray 2003a, 2003b). While the majority of the populace prepared and shared meals based on vegetables, tubers, herbs and spices with little meat and maize, the same was not true for the Inka elite. The *Inka Sapa* (King) is reported to have dined on specially prepared dishes of: maize, early potatoes, *llama*, *chiche* (small fish), *cuy* (*guinea pig*), duck, fruit, and "very smooth *chicha*" aged for months before serving. The *Inka Coya's* (Queen's) repast was said to include *locros anca* (seagull/hawk? stew with maize), *muti* (maize stew described above), as well as a "delicate" *chicha* (Bray 2003a, 2003b). For the imperial elite, the focus therefore was on plentiful maize and meat, as well as an assortment of prepared dishes (Bray 2003a:8).

How do We See Aqllakuna and Feasting?

While the dishes are important, our interests here lie in the cooks and brewers of the imperial feasts, the *Aqllakuna* themselves. While the ethnohistoric documents have glaring omissions regarding the *Aqllakuna* and the activities of Andean women in general, other lines of archaeological evidence can be used to demonstrate their presence, such as pottery. Inka pottery has long been critiqued for its excessive uniformity. However, this uniformity also suggests specific functions tied to specific forms, which therefore allow archaeologists to identify the food and drink served by specific vessels based on their shape and decoration (Bray 2003a, 2003b, 2004, Rice 2015, Skibo 2015, 1992). For example, across *Tawantinsuyu* there is evidence of specific vessel types indicating Inka colonial presence (Bray 2003a). The basic Inka culinary equipment include: serving bowls, shallow plates (*pucu*), cups (*kero*), narrow-necked bulbous jars (*aríbalo*), and footed cooking vessels (Bray 2003a, Quave 2017). While each shape has a story to tell about Inka feasting practices, the two vessel types highlighted here are the *aríbalo* and *pucu* for their linkage to chicha, food and *Aqllakuna*. The aríbalo are synonymous with serving and drinking *chicha* (Bray 2003a, Davenport 2020, 2, Hayashida 2019), while the *pucu* are individual serving plates for feast foods.

Figure 2. The aríbalo shape is ubiquitous with the serving of chicha, and therefore the labour of women under Inka control like the Acllakuna. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 3: The small, shallow plates of standard Inka culinary equipment could have held dry or lightly sauced foods, though nothing with too much liquid. Photo courtesy of the St. Louis Museum of Art.

Delving into the shapes further, the *aríbalo* is a tall-necked, squat-bodied, liquid-serving vessel with a restricted neck and mouth to reduce spillage and evaporation (See Figure 2). The shape is also has a conical base, making setting it down without support impossible. Attributes of the *aríbalo* were linked to the physical form with a pronounced shoulder, a nose-like shape on the neck, and sometimes ears with actual jewelry. *Aríbalos* comprise close to half of all recovered Inka pottery (Bray 2000: 171). After *aríbalos* the shallow *pucu* plates are the second most numerous ceramic shape (Bray 2003:16) (See Figure 3). With an average depth of 2.6cm and diameter of 10–20cm (Bray 2003:16, Meyers 1975:13), these handheld plates

suggest the eating of foods that are either dry or somewhat saucy, based on their shallow depth. A unique feature are their short handles shaped like bird-heads (See Figure 3). On the opposite side of the *pucu* are two small protrusions (called nubbins) that balance the decoration. In use, the plates would have been handheld with the handle fitting just under the thumb and base of the plate supported by the hand and four fingers (Kremer and Hopwood in prep). The zoomorphic bird-shaped handles bear a striking are symbolically linked to the importance of bird guano, a substance with greater value than gold for the Inka, for the agricultural success of the empire (Kremer and Hopwood in prep, Rodriques and Micael 2021). The presence of these vessel types indicate an Inkan presence, as well as that of *chicha*, feasting, and therefore of *Aqllakuna* (Bray 2000:172, 2003a, Ceruti 2015, 7, Hayashida 2019, Jennings and Bowser 2009).

Inka culinary equipment is found in nearly every village across *Tawantinsuyu*, pointing to the widespread distribution of Inka influence and of the women who used those forms. When these vessel types are found in cooking, brewing or feasting contexts they represent the women who prepared, brewed and served the food and drink. Forms such as the *aríbalo* and *pucu* have been used in the identification of *Aqllakuna* in *capacocha* sacrificial contexts, as well as in determining ritual centres and other areas of feasting (Bray et al 2005, 91). Under ancient Andean understandings, the vessels may do more than simply represent the power of reciprocity.

Thinking through and with things

An important discussion about Andean ways of knowing relates how they interacted with and conceptualized things or matter (Hayashida 2019, Sillar 2016, 2009). As archaeologists interpret objects and their impact on the living, ideas about the social lives of things have emerged (Appadurai 1988, Kopytoff 1988). Kopytoff (1988) and others have explored how objects have their own biographies, shifting meanings, and stand for specific, knowable concepts, people or powers. In the Andean conceptual landscape this can take an even stronger ideological turn with things not only standing for or representing an idea or a power, but actually being that power (Bray 2009, 358). Bray explores the Andean concept of *camay* as the energizing, enlivening of existing matter. This way of thinking through things demonstrates a distinct understanding of the nature of being. For the ancient Andeans this implies that certain things (i.e. objects or aspects of the landscape) also had a life force of their own, not simply *referencing* meaning but *being* it (Bray 2009).

The food and drink created by *Aqllakuna* for Inka labour-patron feasts and rituals can therefore be seen as "power-full" experiences creating reciprocal relationships (Bray 2009, 362). By co-opting the labor of women from around the empire and conspicuously using it in reciprocal relationships, the Inka transformed labour tribute into societal bonds that structured power relationships. Items used in ritual are not simply tools that allow ritual to happen, they may in fact be the power enacted. The use of power-full objects, or the consumption of power-full food and drink, become the enactment of the ritual's outcome. As the hands of the *Aqllakuna* served the *chicha* and feast foods, the act of accepting and consuming these foods bound their guests with reciprocal obligations. Those obligations did not link back to the woman's natal ayllu, however, but instead to the Inka elite who controlled their labour as tribute.

Conclusion

Crafting a clear picture of the lives of Andean women and the *Aqllakuna* is challenging due to the destruction of Conquest and the scant historical record, but that does not mean it is unobtainable. As the Spanish colonizers came to *Tawantinsuyu* and encountered the Andean peoples they brought with them not only instruments of colonization, but also all of their cultural understandings. Spanish intentions and culture shaped the Conquest itself as well as the resultant records for decades. A defining factor in how we "see" Andean women and the *Aqllakuna* was the understanding of what women's roles were and their distinctive lack of power in Spanish society. This has led to a gross underrepresentation of the number of *Aqllakuna* chosen, as well as the scope of their influence in Inka society (Gose 2000).

Rather than the *Aqllakuna* representing a small subset of women, it is possible that all girls cycled through a tiered system of *Aqllakuna* (Gose 2000, 87, Pizzaro 1978, Murua 1987). First serving as novitiates, some chosen as sacrifice, some choosing to remain in service and earn *Mommakona* seniority, and then later a majority being released from service and re-joining society as brides of conquered subjects across *Tawantinsuyu*. If all girls of a specific age were separated from their natal units and trained as *Aqllakuna*, the imperial reach of this training becomes exponentially vast. The ability of the Inka elite to hold rituals and feasts of power across *Tawantinsuyu* therefore also becomes more apparent as archaeologists uncover evidence of *Aqllawasi* in nearly every settlement across the empire. Thus even as *Aqllakuna*, a woman may not travel far from her home, being trained in the village *Aqllawasi*, or she might find herself in a distant part of *Tawantinsuyu* for the rest of her life. How the girls were distributed across this vast space is less clear, but the implications of the status of *Aqllakuna* as an age grade system is important (Gose 2000). For those women who did not choose to enter permanent service as *Aqllakuna*, but returned to the accepted gender roles for women as practiced across the empire, it is compelling to wonder where the power of their actions now lay.

There is evidence that some women may have been returned to their own *ayllu*, but many were not. What

status did the released *Aqllakuna* find themselves occupying? They had been trained in traditional women's roles, but through the Inka culture rather than their own. Now having been released for service as an *Aqllakuna* they took those culture-bound skills with them, and would pass them along to the next generation. As the women were given as wives, either near their home *ayllus* or quite distant, the practices of feasting and provisioning through labour would still be indelibly affected by the Inka training. As stated by Gose (2000) the *Aqllawasi* were located in nearly every village, and therefore even when released from service the women would still be surrounded by the presence of *Aqllakuna* and their practices. The women's lives would still be structured by the *mit'a* tribute system with their own labor and that of their husbands dictated by the annual reallocation of lands. They would likely live to see their own daughters sent to the *Aqllawasi* for service, with the uncertainty of where their daughters would eventually be resettled (near or far) or if they might be chosen for sacrifice.

There is little question that the labor of the Andean women was a power-full tool for imperial Inka power, as well as the fact of its significance before the rise of the Inka (Bray 2018). We can track these practices through lines of archaeological evidence, exploring the extreme levels of movement of women and their culinary, provisioning labour across *Tawantinsuyu*. The distinctive *aríbalo* and *pucu* become both "ubiquitous and unambiguous" evidence of feasting behavior and therefore of the *Aqllakuna* as well (Hayashida 2019,51). It is not only the act of feasting that becomes visible in these situations, but also the power-full actions of women's roles in creating reciprocal relationships that shaped, structured and maintained power under the Inka empire. Yet this power may not have been theirs to wield.

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