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Memories of haunted places: An Andean village after the violence

In the small Andean village of Pomatambo, ruined adobe houses stand next to new brick ones. Decay and renewal dot the landscape just as people are struggling to balance painful memories of war and loss with new optimism for community unity. Landscape and place activate certain memories of the past and aspirations for the future in Pomatambo. Pomatambo, a village of about two hundred people, is nestled high in the Andes in the province of Vilcashuamán. The Vilcashuamán area was at the epicenter of a civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. During the violence, over a third of the villagers abandoned Pomatambo. Every family in Pomatambo lost at least a member during these years, and abandoned houses and memorials mark where people lost their lives.



Villagers and visitors celebrate the annual patron festival of Pomatambo by dancing through and around the borders of Pomatambo, August 2006. In the valley is the burnt ruin of the hacienda of Ayzarca, where Sendero Luminoso assassinated the administrator on Christmas Eve of 1980.

In Pomatambo, people are generally reluctant to talk about those painful years and for good reason. During the violence, not only were the villagers caught between the army and the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas, the conflict also entered their families, dividing loyalties and increasing mistrust in the community.

When they walk or dance over the landscape, however, the villagers open up about the past unprompted. A cave: filled in by the villagers so that no one would be “disappeared” into it. A ruined adobe house: the place where two children became orphans. A cross amongst the stones of a wall and thicket: where a local had lost his life while walking away from the army, not understanding he needed to stop. Through the stories that accompany such places, a fractured, but mending, social landscape is revealed.

How can we as archaeologists make sense of the material remains of memory and landscape? More specifically, how do we reconcile abstract distance, both temporal and spatial, with the ways people experience distance on the ground? And what social significance do such differing views of distance hold?



A small, subterranean cave atop "Aya Orqo" or the "Hill of the Dead." This cave was filled in by the villagers during the 1980s to prevent the Peruvian army from "disappearing" people into it.

In Pomatambo and elsewhere in the rural Andes, temporal depth and spatial distance are highly variable depending on how certain memories are practiced. The daily circuits going to the fields, maintaining the roads, herding, and visiting relatives activate non-chronological recounting of different histories. Hundreds of years may be compressed into the same story. For example, while atop Aya Orqo, or hill of the dead, someone may tell you that the cave on top of the hill was covered by the community in the 1980s to prevent soldiers from disappearing people into it. Then he may tell you that, before it was covered, his son explored it to discover it was like an ancient temple with stone figurines. Then he may point in the direction of a rocky feature that is said to cry blood. Someone else may chime in that Aya Orqo was the base of an Inka bridge that was kilometers long, and that the Inka had an iron staff with which to command the huge stones into place. Looking in the same general direction, he may notice the burned hacienda of Ayzarca and recount how the Shining Path had assassinated the hacendado as one of their earlier actions. Then looking in the opposite direction, he may point out the abandoned adobe house where the Shining Path had executed a couple for allegedly being informants to the state, leaving behind orphans who refuse to come back. Then turning to the right, he may point out the church that the community was currently building, emphasizing how everyone is working together again. All of the stories were unprompted. Though the details and chronological order of any history may change depending on location and the individual recounting, the process is similar: the long history of suffering and fracture is also a long history of constant renewal. History is a cycle situated in the present.



An abandoned adobe house facing the 'Hill of the Dead.' This house was where Sendero Luminoso had executed a couple for allegedly being informants for the state, leaving orphans who refuse to return to the village.

Something similar happens with spatial distance. I have been visiting the area since 2004, and no matter which village I am in, I always find myself exhausted getting to my next destination. When I ask, “How far is so and so?” The answer depends not on absolute distance, but on how familiar the person is with that location. Because most people in the area do not make a habit of using watches, they have a compressed sense of distance. You may be told half an hour, when in reality, it is two hours (or an hour and half for someone more athletic than I). If where you are trying to get to is on their daily circuit, then the time will be even more severely underestimated. During festivals, villagers will dance with their extended families around the limits and through the important landmarks of the community, further strengthening such familiarity with the geography. Therefore, from an abstract point of view, space and time around familiar or personally historically relevant places are compressed, making those places seem present. One can imagine a density map showing “hot spots” of such places. They are the nodes and pieces with which people make sense of their daily lives and social obligations.

While we generally interpret the invention of historical depth as a means to legitimize political claims, we could view the same phenomena not as the invention of historical depth but of historical nearness. Through daily circuits in the village, the villagers are reminded of their personal understandings of history, and through the seasonal and annual festivals, they are reminded of their cohesion and nearness.

How could we as archaeologists begin to infer the sense of nearness or farness in the archaeological record? Perhaps by understanding how well trodden certain places and paths were and any drastic changes to such movement, we could begin to cross-check this with other material changes, for example, the standardization of iconography. Such ruptures may mean changes in how people perceive historical nearness on the landscape and therefore imply drastic social change. Furthermore, such ruptures may point to different education regimes about the past. It was always the older generation who told such stories. As the young were taught in school about people like Simon Bolivar and Manco Capac, the legendary first Inka emperor, they forgot about the little places in the community and the haunted histories they hold.



Women sing the harawi to a community minka, or house-raising. The house is made of brick and financed by one of the sons of the community who left the village permanently during the violence.



The cross memorializes the place where a villager had lost his life as he was walking away from the army. Photo courtesy Adam Webb.

