

## Encoding Authority: Negotiating the Uses of Khipu in Colonial Peru

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Spaniard Fernando Montesinos wrote in his history of Peru of a pestilence: “[o]ne reply was that the cause of the pestilence had been the letters, and that no one ought to use them nor resuscitate them, for, from their employment, great harm would come. Therefore Tupac Cauri commanded by law that, under the pain of death, no one should traffic in quilcas, which were the parchments and leaves of trees on which they used to write, nor should use any sort of letters. They observed this oracular command with so much care that after this loss the Peruvians never used letters. And, because in later times a learned amauta invented some characters, they burnt him alive, and so, from this time forth, they used threads and quipos.”<sup>1</sup>

This story explains the lack of European-style writing in the Inca Empire on the arrival of the Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. It also equates the functionality of indigenous *khipu*, “knotted cord systems from the Andes region,” with the European concept of writing while simultaneously loudly proclaiming its separateness from the European mode.<sup>2</sup> During the period when Europeans were attempting to establish hegemony in Peru, native elites used khipu or Europeans’ writing systems in conscious attempts to maintain authority and status. At the same time, all whom the Spanish classified as *indio* began to use khipu in new ways in response to Spanish policies.

This paper seeks to synthesize the insights from the wide variety of scholarship while fleshing out the complex story of the roles that khipu played in the encounter of native and Spanish cultures. The chronicle record provides key insights into both how the Spaniards perceived the Inca and their khipu and how those with native claims of authority presented Inca civilization and its cultural trappings, including their system of knots. Augmenting the context of the chronicle record are additional sources from the colonial period. Two important arenas of encounter between indigenous and Spaniard were the church and court. Evidence from these forums of unequal power illustrates the nuanced presentation and perception of the khipu within the larger context of the navigation of Spanish hegemony. Taken together, these sources provide a glimpse into how the khipu itself was transformed by its use by natives in a colonial context.

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Montesinos, *Memorias Antiguas Historiales del Peru*, trans. and ed. Philip Ainsworth Means, M.A. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1920), 63-64.

[http://www.archive.org/stream/no48works02hakluoft/no48works02hakluoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/no48works02hakluoft/no48works02hakluoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>2</sup> Terms in foreign languages that require definition will appear in italics at first mention, followed immediately by a short definition. Later occurrences will occur in the text with no special font or notation. There is much spelling and word variation in discussions of this body of textile record keeping devices of the Andes. The two main terms are *chinu*, which is the word used in the Aymara language, and *khipu*, which is the word in the Quechua language. Hispanicized spellings of *khipu* include *quipu* and *quipo*. This paper will use *khipu*, which is both singular and plural usage for the textiles, and also denotes the system itself, with the exception of keeping original spelling in quoted text.



## Introducing the Khipu

Andean knotted cord systems first caught the attention of the Spaniard Pedro de Cieza de Leon as he accompanied Francisco Pizarro on the earliest European expeditions into Tawantinsuyu, the empire of the Inca lords. When Cieza de Leon wrote of the use of these khipu in his chronicle, the first part of which appeared in 1553<sup>4</sup>, the fascination with these knotted strings spread to a wider European audience. Khipu are a system of recordkeeping and possibly communication, encoding information through the use of a series of knots on string, and were used throughout the Inca Empire, which ranged at its height from modern-day Ecuador to southern Chile.

The basic structure of a khipu consists of a primary cord that unifies the information in the khipu, much as a title and table of contents organize a book. Pendant cords hang from the primary cord and contain information. In some cases pendant cords have their own subsidiary cords, which indicates information related to the information on a pendant cord.

Scholars debate the ability of knots in string to encode complex ideas necessary for narrative. A basic system of accountancy has been deciphered.<sup>5</sup> The use of the khipu for bookkeeping is well documented in early sources, but the system of encoding was lost during the colonial period. The method used for keeping numeric records has been reconstructed by anthropologists Marcia and Robert Ascher. The counting system is a decimal system based on powers of ten, with each position referencing a place value and each type of knot indicating the number for that value. As a much simplified example, a certain type of knot would indicate “three,” while its position in the “hundreds” placement would indicate three hundred.

Current research headed by anthropologist Gary Urton theorizes layers of meaning much beyond the obvious knots. This construct relies on binary information, with different values for a

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Urton: *UR004 Centro Mallqui, Leymebamba, Peru*. Photograph, from *The Khipu Database Project*, accessed November 21, 2013, [http://khipukamayuc.fas.harvard.edu/images/KhipuGallery/Chachapoyas/washedAlbum/images/5\\_%20UR004\\_jpg.jpg](http://khipukamayuc.fas.harvard.edu/images/KhipuGallery/Chachapoyas/washedAlbum/images/5_%20UR004_jpg.jpg); The Khipu Database project is a website maintained by Dr. Gary Urton, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University and represents a single location where much of the current scholarship on khipu has been listed. In addition, photographs, such as this one, are included of the extant samples located in museums across the globe. <http://khipukamayuc.fas.harvard.edu/>

<sup>4</sup> Thank you to Professor Iván Reyna, University of Missouri Columbia for pointing out the error regarding the date of original publication in the translation used for this project.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough overview of their respective systems, see Marcia and Robert Ascher, *Mathematics of the Incas: Code of the Quipu* (Mineola: Dover, 1997); Gary Urton, *Signs of the Inka Khipu: Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

variety of information included in the khipu from the earliest stages of construction. The color of fiber chosen conveys meaning, as does the directionality of the spinning of the fiber into yarn.

This work to decipher the code encrypted in the khipu's knots has overshadowed other scholarship into this textile. Anthropologists are leading this investigation from multiple angles. Frank Solomon, among others, focuses study on small representative groups of natives in present-day Peru and specifically how the khipu is used among the indigenous communities. The most prominent group of anthropologists studying the khipu are examining the small collection of around six hundred specimens spread across the world's museums. Forthcoming work from Sabine Hyland's examination of khipu boards recently found in the Andes is much anticipated by scholars of the Inca. These boards were constructed by Mercederian missionaries and feature khipu knots paired with corresponding writing in European languages. While the existence of these boards was known, no specimens had been examined until this recent discovery.

In addition to anthropologists, art historians have a long relationship with study of the khipu. These studies focus on the physical construction, composition, and visual appeal of the textiles. Ethnographers have also examined the khipu largely as a portion of their investigation of Inca storytelling practices. Traditional historians have only recently begun examining the khipu more deeply. Initially, historical conversations focused on the chronicle evidence and debated the accuracy of the depiction of pre-conquest society in the Andes. The attempt to decode the riddle of the knots remains elusive despite the Aschers' work to illuminate the accounting system of khipu. Recent scholarship has moved to looking at khipu in a colonial context. Regina Harrison investigated their use by religious groups to connect with the indigenous population and encourage complete conversion. Additionally, Tristan Platt examined a specific court case as a case study into the navigation of Spanish and native identities and the exercise of agency by indigenous groups within the Spanish court systems. Integral to indigenous evidence were the use of khipu and the corresponding testimony of *kipucamayocs*, "specialists who could read khipu." Each of these studies considers khipu as a complete and existing system which transitioned from a tool in Inca society to a symbol within the indigenous community in contemporary South America.<sup>6</sup>

### **Khipu in the Colonial Context**

Prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, khipu were used throughout indigenous society, but the complexity of the khipu and the level of information contained within them varied greatly between the diverse groups within the empire. Anthropologists such as the Aschers and Frank Solomon note continued use of knotted strings today by herders to keep track of individuals within their flocks.<sup>7</sup> While using the same basic method of khipu, these present-day records encode a fraction of the complexity necessary for the recording of tribute for an entire village or province. Additionally, much more complex, narrative information was stored in other types of khipu, referred to as royal khipu.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Since much of our records of khipu are from the early Colonial period, contemporary ethnographic evidence is very informative in regard to the perception and use of khipu by non-elite natives.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Salomon. *The Cord Keepers: Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Numerical and royal khipu are discussed briefly by Gary Urton, "Recording Signs in Narrative-Accounting Khipu," in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 227. For an insightful discussion of Andean modes of thought and

For the Spaniards, the differences between these levels and types of khipu were less obvious. Khipu, and those who could decipher their knots, the khipucamayocs, were thus of the utmost importance in understanding the newly conquered territory. Primarily concerned with the resources available in their new colonies, the Spaniards found that the khipu provided a centralized source of information for all resources available in Tawantinsuyu, as the Inca called their empire. Equating this system with their own quite distinct alphabetic method for recording information, the Spaniards encouraged the use of khipu in various colonial enterprises, from recording tribute, as in Inca society, to keeping track of sins for use in the confessional.

When Spaniards instituted the use of khipu for an enterprise, it applied to all *indios*. This paper uses this term, which was a legal category created by the Spaniards to indicate those to be considered native, and it included both the elite and non-elite of Inca society. In contrast, the chronicles agree that prior to the arrival of the conquerors, the Inca maintained elite control over the most complex of khipu systems, as the name “royal khipu” suggests.<sup>9</sup> The expansion of the use of khipu by the Spaniards to include the non-elite Indians contributes to the problem of maintenance of status for the indigenous elite within the Spanish hegemonic system.

Inca society employed multiple demarcations of status, with various forms of textiles being of the utmost importance for the display of affiliation and status. Patterns on garments showed rank and cultural context at a glance. Certain patterns were allowed to only the highest ranks of Inca society. Art historian Tom Cummins discusses how Inca elites continued this declaration of status into the colonial era.<sup>10</sup> The Spanish crown awarded coats of arms to certain Inca elites who petitioned for them. In Spanish contexts, these coats of arms were awarded to an individual for merit and were then used by descendants to show association with a favored ancestor. When used by Incas, these coats of arms frequently incorporated patterns from textiles showing rank in pre-conquest society. This use of ancient symbolism subverted the use of the coat of arms as the bequest of rank from the monarch, instead proclaiming continuity between the former and current regimes.

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representation, see Galen Brokaw “The Poetics of Khipu Historiography: Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s ‘Nueva corónica’ and the ‘Relación de los quipucamayos.’” *Latin American Research Review* 38 [2000]: 111-147.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete discussion of khipu use prior to and immediately following the arrival of the Spanish, see Galen Brokaw, *A History of the Khipu*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. This work interprets khipu as media, continuing the conception of khipu as other than writing. For a review of the linguistics discussion, see Gary Urton, *Signs of the Inka Khipu: Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 112-113.



Fig. 10 Inka "military" Unku with black and white checkered design, ca. 1500. Private collection.

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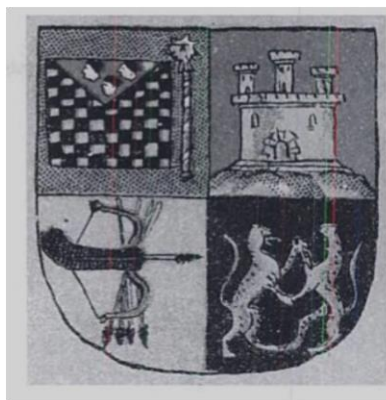


Fig. 12 Coat of arms conceded in 1563 by Philip II to Felipe Guacarpucar, kuraka of Xauxa (after Paz y Méria 1892: fig. IV.)

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Similar to the use of specific textile patterns to denote status, khipu was a system reserved for elites. Khipucamayocs trained for years to master the intricacies of the multilayered code and were supported by their villages free of other responsibilities. Restrictions on who could interpret the khipu and its use in managing the empire suggest that the khipu functioned in a very different way than writing in early modern Spain. The system of khipu, beyond simplistic counting, was esoteric knowledge.

Destruction of traditional systems and continued use of khipu in a colonial context fundamentally changed its usage. Native accommodation to the Spanish hegemonic system, including Spanish rule and Spanish perceptions of the khipu, resulted in novel uses of the textile appearing in colonial Peru. Most natives used khipu in new ways in response to Spanish policies while retaining previous uses such as accounting. However, native elites often used European writing systems in conscious attempts to maintain authority and status. Spanish policies were based on a Spanish understanding of writing and an expectation of literacy which did not match the reality in Inca society. While the colonial usage of khipu cannot be compared to the pre-colonial process because of the limited and biased information available, different genres of colonial documentation indicate changes in the roles attributed to the khipu. Examination of the chronicles, records regarding their use as a tool for confession, and documentation of their admittance as evidence in court reveals the changing and malleable nature of khipu in a fluid colonial context.

The written evidence preserved in chronicles such as those by Spaniards Pedro de Cieza de Leon and Martín de Murúa and Hispanicized native nobleman Guaman Poma de Ayala discusses the history of the Inca Empire and describes the newly acquired Spanish territory for a Spanish audience. As such, the chronicle record imparts Spanish perceptions and the response of native elites to those perceptions. Spaniards focused on the useful and the foreign. The useful included available foodstuffs and precious metals. The foreign included any small oddity in the culture that distinguished natives from Europeans and pointed to their need for the cultured influences of the Spanish conquerors. In this presentation, the Inca fared better than many of the other indigenous groups in the New World. The Inca culture was favorably compared with Roman

<sup>11</sup>Tom Cummins in *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 112.

<http://www.doaks.org/resources/publications/doaks-online-publications/pre-columbian-studies/native/trad06.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

civilization.<sup>13</sup> The efficient Inca system of tribute and recordkeeping was admired by the conquerors. Central to this system was the superiority of khipu as an accounting tool.

Spanish chroniclers' praise for the khipu as an efficient inventory system provided an important foundation from which the native elites could build respect in their quest for status and authority in the new hegemonic system. For the khipu to contribute to the enhancement of status for the native elite in a colonial reality, the elite realized that the khipu must both be exhibited as an advanced recording and communication system and used as a tool to advance the culture of the Inca through the information in the khipu's knots. Examination of the utilization and presentation of khipu in the chronicle record preserved by both Spanish and native writers illuminates this calculated presentation of the khipu.

### **Khipu in the Colonial Record**

The chronicle record consists of works on the history and conquest of Peru and is usually limited to those written approximately in the century following the arrival of Spaniards in the region. These works are generally divided into Spanish- and native-authored. The issue of audience is central to any account of Inca civilization. There is also the question of how representative of native culture was a person whose cultural trappings were Spanish, since many of the native chroniclers were the products of Spanish rearing. These related issues of cultural mixing and writing in a Spanish context for a Spanish audience has led to the categorization of these sources as "native-like" instead of simply native.<sup>14</sup>

This separation of native chroniclers from the indigenous community is supported by the chroniclers themselves. In addition, there is evidence that the indios actively managed information passed to the Spaniards. Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, the most celebrated of the native-like authors, in his *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1616) illustrates both this hesitancy on the part of the indios and the separation between the natives and the native-like biographers recording indigenous culture. Specifically, Guaman Poma speaks of the celebrations still occurring among the natives after Spanish colonization. When discussing the five-day and -night vigil and celebration which occurred after the birth of twins, a child with a cleft nose (*waca sinca*), or a breech birth, the natives respond, "*camiwanchicmi ricuwanchic*" – they will reproach us if they catch us. Guaman Poma then laments, "This is why the people who do these things do not wish me well."<sup>15</sup>

The chronicle record was how native cultures were transmitted to a Spanish audience. As such, none can be considered works produced by the indigenous culture and must be seen as a product of a colonial reality. These were instruments of propaganda as much as narratives of historical record. Spaniards writing of travels in the New World, while often interested in and fascinated by the lands they encountered, also needed the support of their Spanish audience, especially the monarch, to acquire and maintain power and wealth in the new Spanish territories. Chronicles considered by the Spaniards to be from the indigenous community were actually works produced by those with ties to both native and Spanish communities. As such, these

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<sup>13</sup> Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *Primer Nueva Coronica I Buen Gobierno*, trans. David Frye (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 86.

<sup>14</sup> This question has been widely discussed. A good overview is found in Gonzalo Lamana, *Domination without Dominance: Inca-Spanish Encounters in Early Colonial Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *Primer Nueva Coronica I Buen Gobierno*, trans. David Frye (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 86.

depictions of Inca society had an interest in portraying the elevated status of the pre-conquest culture. Portraying the Inca as an advanced culture prior to arrival of the Spanish legitimizes the Incas as rulers and strengthens claims, made to a European audience, for colonial power and authority for their descendants.

Spanish respect for the Inca is noted as early as the work of Pedro de Cieza de Leon. In *The Seventeen Years Travels* (1553), he portrays the Inca as a civilizing influence on smaller nations that they conquered and that are characterized as devil-worshipping and incestuous. In contrast, the Inca were great civilizers, ordering other tribes to clothe themselves and introducing religion centered on the immortality of the soul.<sup>16</sup> Cieza de Leon indirectly references the khipu in this section, writing that the Inca “were very sprightly witted, and kept their Records, without the help of Letters, of which no Knowledge was found throughout the West Indies.”<sup>17</sup> Despite being great civilizers, Inca civilization nonetheless paled in comparison with Spanish society. In particular, Cieza de Leon reaffirms the Inca as infidels, specifically noting their delusion by the devil and worship of sticks and stones.<sup>18</sup>

The Spanish perception of the Inca as civilizing agents in the region is due in part to the sources of information available to the Spanish. Khipucamayocs provided key information to the Spaniards entering new territory. Chronicles both Spanish and native-like refer to khipucamayocs relaying information to Spaniards. Fernando Montesinos goes so far as to list the sources of his chronicle, divided between indigenous and Spanish. The indigenous sources are dominated by khipu. Notably, these sources are listed as “*quipos of*,” with the place of provenance, as opposed to listing a khipucamayoc.<sup>19</sup>

Some native sources reference khipu but are more likely to do so as part of the story being told. Juan de Betanzos, Guaman Poma de Ayala, and Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca all depict the use of khipu in their chronicles. These illustrations of Inca life are not merely representations but must be considered a type of propaganda that argues for the equality of the Inca civilization with European cultures.

Juan de Betanzos tells of the establishment of the Inca Empire, the bureaucracy of which is managed through use of the khipu. He describes the imposition of Inca administration after their victory over another nation: “Then the caciques sent for the *quipos*, records that they keep, and also for paintings of what they had and of the type of land and province of each one of them.”<sup>20</sup> This passage shows that the use of khipu in the region was separate from and pre-dated the conquest of these societies by the Inca. The conquerors are shown what the subject group can give in tribute using khipu records. “Having seen this, the Inca called the important lords of the city whom he had designated to keep track of what those lords and caciques brought in as tribute. And being there he ordered many woolen cords in a variety of colors. Bringing each cacique before him in the presence of those lords of Cuzco and making knots in those cords, he made a record for each one of them of what he was to bring in tribute to the Inca and to the city of

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<sup>16</sup> John Stevens, “The Seventeen Years Travels of Peter of Cieza through the Mighty Kingdom of Peru and the Large Provinces of Cartagena and Popayan in South America,” *www.archive.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct 2012. <http://www.archive.org/stream/seventeenyearstr00ciez#page/n5/mode/2up>. Chapter XXXVIII, 102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Fernando Montesinos, *Memorias Antiguas Historiales del Peru*, trans. and ed. Philip Ainsworth Means, M.A. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1920).

[http://www.archive.org/stream/no48works02hakluoft/no48works02hakluoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/no48works02hakluoft/no48works02hakluoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>20</sup> Juan De Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, trans. and ed. Roland Hamilton and Dana Buchanan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 90.

Cuzco. The Inca ordered two of each one of these *quipos* and records to be made, one for the cacique to take and another to remain in the possession of these lords.”<sup>21</sup>

Betanzos makes clear that the Inca established themselves as natural lords of their conquered territories and governed directly by placing representatives in these newly acquired provinces. These representatives were referred to as *orejón* lords of the city of Cuzco, who lived among the conquered peoples as administrative overlords. He specifically mentions these lords recording events, grievances, yearly land distribution and a census of young unmarried boys and girls so the Inca could “provide lords to join the youth in marriage.”<sup>22</sup> Their link remained with Cuzco, since these lords sent tribute to the capital every four months.

Spanish policy at the time of Betanzos’ writing must be considered when reviewing the presentation of Inca establishment of empire. For a period after the conquest, the Spanish crown advocated the ruling of colonial lands by the “natural lords” of those lands. The many reasons for this policy have been well explored in other literature.<sup>23</sup> However, to overlook the implication of a history of pre-conquest Peru that presents the Inca as the natural lords on the arrival of the Spanish is to miss an important political claim cloaked under a veil of historicity.

Another chronicler with political interest is Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca. The son of a Spaniard married to a woman from the indigenous elite, Garcilaso represented the new elite who claimed Inca roots for legitimacy but operated fully in a Spanish context and strove to emulate the Spanish aristocracy in their leadership of Peru. In relation to this dual source of authority, Garcilaso refers to both *kipu* and Spanish chronicles for readers to confirm the accuracy and veracity of his account of the downfall of Atahualpa.

Garcilaso mentions that natives given in *encomienda*, “grant of indigenous labor and tribute given to a Spaniard,” to his father would bring cord records when he was making Spanish records for annual taxes.<sup>24</sup> Salomon maintains that this repeated reading of Spanish records was to ensure against falsification of *the cord records*.<sup>25</sup> Garcilaso’s original text is very clear that the relationship of trust was the other way around. The natives wanted Garcilaso to read them the information recorded in Spanish repeatedly because they did not trust *the Spaniards*.<sup>26</sup>

Working against the goal of the elites to present the *kipu* as a sophisticated cultural tool was the spread of the use of *kipu* from a select few who were well trained in the elaborate system to any categorized by the Spanish as *indio*. This is an issue of degrees, as the use of basic counting

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>23</sup> For a further discussion of the theory behind the “natural lords” policy, see José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez and Gaetano Sabatini, “Monarchy as Conquest: Violence, Social Opportunity, and Political Stability in the Establishment of the Hispanic Monarchy” *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009): 501-536. For the political considerations occurring in the former Inca Empire which influenced these policies, such as multiple revolts, see George Kubler, “The Neo-Inca State (1537-1572)” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 27 (1947): 189-203.

<sup>24</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Incas: The Royal Commentaries of the Inca*, trans. Maria Jolas and Alain Gheerbrant (New York: The Orion Press, 1961), 160.

<sup>25</sup> Frank Salomon, *The Cord Keepers: Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> The passage concerned appears in Spanish as follows: “Yo trate los Quipus y ñudos con los Yndios de mi padre, y con otros Curacas quando por fan luan y Nauidad, venian a la Ciudad, a pagar fus tribatos. Los curacas agenos rogauan a mi madre, que me mandaffe les cotejaf. Fe fus cuentas por que, como gente fofpochofa, no le hauan de los Efpañoles, que les trataffen verdad in aquel particular, hasta que yo les certificana della, leyendoles los traflados, que de fus tributos me trayan, y cotejandolos con fus ñudos, y defta manera fupe dellos tanto como los Yndios.” Garcilaso de la Vega, *Primera Parte de los Commentarios Reales*. (Lisbon: En la Oficina de Pedro Crabebeck, 1609), 138. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucm.532378468x>



systems using strings by the lowest members of the indigenous population has been noted from earliest contact to the present day. This use of khipu of a very basic form by natives led to the assumption that all Indians were versed in its encoding. Multiple segments of the Spanish population encouraged the use of khipu in new contexts. The use of khipu by a wider public led to its simplification and adaptation.

### **Colonial Innovations in Khipu Use**

#### **Khipu in the Confessional**

This interpretation of the adaptation of the khipu is indirectly supported in Regina Harrison's discussion of the colonial use of khipu in confession. Spanish clergy in the Andes encountered a common problem in that the native populations did not seem to be confessing all of their sins. Therefore, they encouraged natives to use khipu to record their sins to bring to the confessional.

The *Tercero Catecismo*, which came out of a provincial council held in Lima in 1583, was an instruction manual for clergy directly in contact with and responsible for saving the souls of natives through conversion. It included detailed guidelines for instructing the laity in religious matters. The directives in this catechism offer clues to the cultural conflicts occurring between Spanish Catholics and natives. The clergy's goal was to provide indios with the tools to examine their own consciences and relate their sins to priests.

The question of communication became central to the task of conversion. The translation of the Bible into a wide variety of vernacular languages across Europe had been part of the impetus for the Catholic-Protestant schism. The Council of Trent enacted reforms for the Catholic Church which addressed some of the criticisms of the Protestant movements but firmly opposed others. This decisive council did not ban the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. The religious divide in Europe extended to new European colonies worldwide. Therefore, it is common to encounter questions regarding the use of native languages in the Americas when dealing with native groups. This began simply enough as an issue of communication, a tool in the spread of the divine word to lost souls.

These questions were not limited to clergy in Spanish territories. As shown by a letter from the Viceroy Fernando de Torres y Portugal, Conde del Villar to King Philip II of Spain, religion occupied a central place in Spanish policy as well. Concerned with the conversion of the indios as well as with their subordination to the Spanish will, the Conde del Villar encourages administrators and priests to be fluent in native languages:

And that he also be examined in the language, by the person named for this purpose, in the manner that is done in Spain with the salaried chaplaincies, from which it would result that the Indians would have suitable [knowledge of] doctrine, [making them] more subordinate and more respectful of your majesty and your viceroys and governors, which would be of great benefit and pacification for this kingdom because among them there is first [a lack of] understanding of it and the prelates are very remiss in punishment, though

they are given orders, and with the above-referred, it would be curbed. I humbly beg that Your Majesty order it be addressed, considered, and provided, in that which best serves.<sup>27</sup>

This view of utilizing native languages as a tool to salvation and subordination extended to other cultural elements. There is an interesting paradox in the Spanish view of the *kipu* in this context. On one hand, the Spanish viewed *kipu* as equal to Spanish writing for native record-keeping purposes. The clergy in Peru saw *kipu* as available to all *indios*, and decided to utilize this tool. In the *Tercero Catecismo*, to transmit the ideology of acknowledgement of sin and the true penance necessary for forgiveness according to Catholic doctrine, natives were instructed: “The first thing, my son, is that you must think well on your sins and make a *kipu* of them, as you make a *kipu* when you are a *tambocamayoc*, of that which you give, and that which is owed to you. Make the *kipu* in this way, of what you have done against God and against your neighbor, and how many times, and whether a lot or a little. And do not only tell of your deeds, but also of your evil thoughts.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, for a period, all *indios* going to confession were encouraged by priests to record their sins in *kipu*. Those who disobeyed were in danger of being seen as not sufficiently compliant to Spanish conversion initiatives.

The paradox enters when this pronouncement is considered in comparison to other directives of the Catholic Church. During this period the church held that the confessional was no place for the written word. According to Catholic belief, the act of penance that took place in the confessional was a spiritual event between the penitent, priest, and Holy Spirit. The use of notes was seen as an impediment to the spiritual transformation that was to occur. If the penitent approached the confession with the appropriate contrition, any sins omitted in confession by oversight, as opposed to those purposely withheld by the penitent, would be forgiven because of the penitent’s intent. This view was included in the decrees of the Council of Trent: “It is known that in the Church nothing else is required of penitents than that each one, after he has diligently examined himself and searched all the folds and corners of his conscience, confess those sins by

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<sup>27</sup> Count of Villar to Sovereign Majesty, April 25, 1588, Pastells Collection, (78,9) 9:537-552, Saint Louis University Vatican Film Library, St. Louis, MO. Microfilm. The original Spanish transcription is as follows: “y que tambien le examine en la lengua el que para ello fuere nom-brado de la manera que en hespaña se haze en las capellaníea patronadas de lo qual resultaria que los indios tubiesen la doctrina que conuiene mas subordinados y con mas respecto a vuestra magestad y a sus virreyes y gouernadores que seria de mucho bien y quietud para este Reyno porque con ellos ay principalmente en que entender en el y en el castigo de sus excessos ay mucha remission en sus preladados aunque se les den incitatiuas y con lo que esta referido se enfrenarian su-plico humilmente a vuestra magestad lo mande veer y considerer y probeher en ello lo que fuere seruido.”

<sup>28</sup> “Lo primero, hijo mio, has de pensar bien de tus pecados, y hacer quipo de ellos: como haces quipo, quando eres tambo camayo, de lo que das, y de lo que te deben: asi haz quipo de lo que has hecho contra Dios, y contra tu pròximo, y quantas veces: si muchas ò si pocas. Y no solo has de decir tu obras, siuo tambien tus pensamientos malos. Tercero Catecismo y Exposicion de la Doctrina Christiana por Sermones, Paraque los Curas, y Otros Ministros Prediquen, y Enseñen a los Indios, y a las Demas Personas: Conforme a lo que se Proveyo en el Santo Concilio Provincial de Lima el Año Pasado de 1583,” (San Jacinto: Concilio Provincial del Año 1773), 147. <http://archive.org/stream/tercerocatecismo00cath#page/n7/mode/2up>; *Tambocamayoc* is an interesting native phrase included in the catechism. *Camayoc* is used in multiple contexts in Quechua to mark someone who works with or in a particular context. The most prevalent example for the present inquiry is a *kipucamayoc*, “maker and reader of *kipu*.” *Tambo*, “inn,” carried over from the Quechua word *tampu* for the stations along the famous Inca roads. However, in a Spanish colonial context there were many more connotations to this word. An excerpt from Garcilaso de la Vega El Inca provides insight into the cultural space these inns occupied in the dance of native and Spanish cultures. Garcilaso describes *wacanqui*, “amulets,” “worn by haughty Indian women, the *chinaconas*, “serving girls,” of the Spaniards, who are whores, tavern girls, and tambo girls.” Garcilaso De la Vega, *The Incas: The Royal Commentaries of the Inca*, trans. Maria Jolas and Alain Gheerbrant (New York: The Orion Press, 1961), 86.

which he remembers to have mortally offended his Lord and God; while the other sins of which he has after diligent thought no recollection, are understood to be in a general way included in the same confession; for which sins we confidently say with the Prophet: From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord.”<sup>29</sup> By encouraging the indios to use khipu for a purpose for which the use of writing was banned, the Catholic Church made a statement regarding the separateness and inferiority of khipu from writing in the European sense.<sup>30</sup>

The result of this use of the khipu to record sins was not what the priests had anticipated. In the Andes, confession was part of indigenous religion. Harrison cites an *instruccion* “directive,” written by Spanish bureaucrat and chronicler Polo de Ondegardo in 1561-71 that warned Spanish priests that natives traditionally confessed to male and female shamans.<sup>31</sup> This practice continued, as is evidenced by the work of Franciscan priest and Quechua specialist Juan Pérez Bocanegra. In 1622 he penned a confessional manual. *Ritual Formulario*. It admonished against the use of khipu, citing a practice in which the natives first visited local indigenous shamans for confession under the native belief system before going to the Catholic priest.<sup>32</sup> These shamans instructed the Indians on how to confess using khipu. The penitents were provided a pre-made khipu and a list of sins that corresponded to the encoded knots.

These ready-made khipus were then shared amongst the community, regardless of age or gender, resulting in inappropriate confessions, such as children confessing to fornication. Significantly for the discussion of khipu as uncommon knowledge, the average Indian using a khipu for confession is noted as being unfamiliar with the contents and becoming “tangled in lies” when attempting to convey the information in the knots.<sup>33</sup>

These inconsistencies led to different responses by the Spanish clergy. Bocanegra was not alone in arguing for the prohibition of their use for religious purposes. Others sought to understand the khipu further and adapt its use to a Spanish context, on par with writing for a Spanish peasant. In the letter quoted above, the Viceroy Conde del Villar went so far as to directly compare the indios to Spanish peasants. In addition, members of the Mercedarian order made what are known today as khipu boards. These place specific knots alongside writing as a decipherment tool for the monks presented with khipu. Sabine Hyland is currently working on using these boards to further understand the system of khipu knots.

The use of khipu remained popular. The Jesuit order was known for its attempts to bridge the native cultures it was charged with converting. The Jesuits’ supremacy in the region led to the

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<sup>29</sup> The Council of Trent. *Documents of the Council of Trent Session XIV*. Chapter V: Confession. 1551. <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trent14.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Beyond the scope of this study is how this accommodation to the natives molded European institutions. Further examination of practices regarding use of khipu in the confessional could provide important insight to the evolution of Catholic practice in this region. Modern Catholicism encourages note-taking as part of a thorough examination of conscience, and allows written notes in the confessional.

<sup>31</sup> Regina Harrison, “Pérez Bocanegra’s *Ritual formulario*: Khipu Knots and Confession” in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 269. This article is also available in a Spanish translation: Regina Harrison, “Quipus y confesión en el *Ritual formulario* de Juan Pérez Bocanegra” in *El Quipu Colonial: Estudios y Materiales*, ed. Marco Curatola Petrocchi y José Carlos de la Puente Luna (Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2013), 145-166.

<sup>32</sup> Natives were also involved in the conversion process on the side of the Spanish clergy. For more information on this interaction, which is beyond the scope of this paper, see John Charles, *Allies at Odds: The Andean Church and Its Indigenous Agents, 1583-1671* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-278.

removal of Bocanegra as parish priest and general examiner of Quechua and Aymara from 1628 until 1636. During this time the use of khipu was encouraged for all indios.<sup>34</sup>

Considered together, the presentation of khipu in pre-conquest society by chroniclers and the Spanish policy of having all indios use khipu to record information reveal a gulf between the roles of khipu under the Incas and its roles under the Spaniards. This imposition of the Spanish concept of writing and its functions onto the native tradition of using knotted strings to encode information led to the adaptation of the system of knots and the eventual loss of the formula used under Inca rule.

The chroniclers uniformly depict a limited literacy in khipu on the arrival of the Spaniards by describing the extensive training required of the khipucamayoc. The expansion of the use of khipu to indios who were not initiated into this system created issues both for the pre-conquest elites and non-elites. Formerly a mark of status, with widespread usage, the khipu was no longer an indication of superiority or special training. Furthermore, since the laity did not understand the system, common usage was riddled with errors and misinterpretations. Often non-elites required the services of a native intermediary to use the khipu. In this sense, the use of khipu in confessionals encouraged natives to consult with their traditional religious figures in an effort to outwardly pacify Catholic priests.

The conceptual conundrum arising from this meeting of religions is the notion of sin itself. Quechua, the language of the Inca, had two words that Spaniards translated as sin: *hucha* and *cama*. When translating into Quechua, Europeans used *hucha* to describe the sins that must be confessed. There were also actions that Catholic doctrine considered sinful but the native religion did not. The native clergy navigated these differences for the lay indios, most of whom practiced both religions simultaneously.<sup>35</sup>

The native laity's attempt to use a system in which they were not versed does not seem to have expanded literacy. Priests noted that when a native was asked, even without a khipu, how often he or she committed a particular sin, the answer was always ten. The use of the khipu did not alter the answer or render it in a form which the Spanish were inclined to see as accurate. Two examples of natives using khipu as a tool to demonstrate their religious transformation for a Spanish audience are so alike that they may reflect the same event or indicate a widespread practice in the native community. These instances of exceptional devotion and penance, as shown by the size of the khipu and length of time spent praying, are very dramatic proclamations by indios to Spaniards. By performing public penance on Spanish terms, the indios are proclaiming not only a spiritual conversion but also a change of identity in the form of a purposeful entrance into Spanish society. Harrison references a letter by Jesuit José de Acosta that describes one of the scenes, in which weeping elderly men show Acosta khipu which contain the Christian doctrine they are learning. Harrison also mentions a Jesuit letter, dated 1602, from the region of Cuzco in which the Jesuit relates a story of a man bringing a khipu to confession. The eighteen-foot-long primary cord also contained objects to represent sins. Using this tool, the native confessed for four days while weeping.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>35</sup> Harrison notes a text from Acas near Cajatambo Hernando Hacaspoma. In a recorded statement a native man explains the process by which native non-elites would confess to shamans that which were sins to shamans, who then told them other things that shamans did not consider sins but which Spanish did consider sins. These things were confessed to the Spanish, with the exception of idolatry. Therefore, it would seem that the conception of "sin" was based on indigenous ideas and not those of the Spaniards. Ibid, 273-274

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 277.

Notably, there is a tradition in some parts of the Andes today of tying objects into the knots of the khipu to represent larger ideas.<sup>37</sup> This practice is agreed to be of relatively late provenance and definitely something which occurred after the Spanish conquest. The inclusion of outside objects within the knots, much as the inclusion of pictures in a book of writing, indicates that the system of recording failed to convey a level of meaning necessary to its intended audience. In these representations, the audience is the indio, who, to present authentic regret for sins, must be able to interpret, and likely to encode, information in the khipu regarding the sins to be confessed. The size of the khipu and the weeping demonstrated to the Spanish clergy that the penitent had thoroughly examined his or her conscience and had the appropriate spiritual transformation. A small portion of this process required that the indio demonstrate his literacy in the khipu to be seen as legitimately and sufficiently penitent for the audience of the Spanish clergy.

This necessity of literacy in a population which did not have this skill led to simplification of the khipu. Spanish preconceptions of literacy and the need for compliance on the part of native elites if they were to retain their status ensured that the expectation would endure, leaving the laity to adjust as best it could. Spanish insistence on the use of khipu in recording sins demonstrates the paradoxical status that khipu held in the Spanish system. It was specifically not writing, because writing in confessionals was outlawed. Yet it was very specifically valid and provided authority to those confessing their sins.

### Khipu in the Courts

The authority provided by written records during the early modern period in Europe is well documented. In the Viceroyalty of Peru, the definition of records was being expanded as various parties looked to substantiate their claims in the Spanish courts. One set of courts was for subjects of European descent, and the other was for local natives.

This policy was meant to provide a fair process for indigenous groups. The two systems reinforced the separateness of those who were to use the courts for the indios. The former Inca elite, to maintain their agency in the new colonial context, had frequently married their daughters to the conquistadors representing the Spaniards in the colonies. The children of these unions, such as Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, claimed authority from both cultures. However, they were usually brought up according to Spanish practice, the better to succeed in a culture in which Spaniards wielded power.

These individuals, who identified as Spaniards, were sometimes marked as other and separate by being forced to defend rights to dominance in a particular region or to ownership of a particular encomienda in the indio courts instead of the Spanish courts. This separateness from Spanish culture was demarcated by the use of Quechua in the proceedings. The court included an official interpreter whose translation of the proceedings into Spanish was the only record accepted as evidence.

One of the most complete discussions of a court case involving khipu comes from an article by Tristan Platt detailing the trial that occurred in the Audiencia of Charcas between the people of the Sakaka and the owner of the encomienda, the Montemayor family. This trial was brought by the people of Sakaka requesting restitution for excessive tribute, in the form of produce,

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<sup>37</sup> Frank Salomon, *The Cord Keepers: Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

between 1548 and 1551 by Don Alonso de Montemayor.<sup>38</sup> The deciding evidence in the trial was the presentation of khipu records by two aged khipucamayocs. The ability of these record keepers to testify using traditional methods and the fact that the testimony was so binding as to decide the case are a testament to the authority the khipu maintained since the first descriptions of their use for accounting by Pedro de Cieza de Leon.

The use of khipu in a court setting offers insight into the elevated status of khipu advocated by the indigenous elite in support of their traditional authority. The context of a court also provides information on methods used by the elites to imbue the khipu with authority. The performance element of the reading of the khipu, coupled with the prestige associated with the records themselves, augmented the authoritativeness of the khipu to the extent that the veracity of the testimony of the khipucamayocs was uncontested.

The process of a trial is a performance under the vast majority of circumstances. The testimony of the khipucamayocs likewise had an obvious performance element, which is discussed marginally by both Urton and Platt. In addition to the khipu, which held static information such as a price per unit, the khipucamayoc also used a device called a *taptana*, or “grid based calculating device.” The *taptana* was used to perform complex mathematical computations. It frequently took the form of a board with holes but could also be contrived almost anywhere using stones on the ground. Platt argues that the extent to which the khipucamayoc used the *taptana* in this court proceeding was an issue of performance, since they used the tool to compute figures which could easily be computed mentally.<sup>39</sup>

This performance added to the mystique of these men who could consult knots of strings and stones on the ground to determine accounts to the smallest of details. This ability had been made famous through the chronicles and stories of the conquistadors, who were amazed by this bureaucratic success. This amazement is at least partially due to the foreignness of the system, as the Spaniards were hardly amazed when their own clerks knew totals and figures after consulting written records. The Spaniards’ respect for the khipucamayocs’ accounting system led to its continued use for tribute records in the colonial era.<sup>40</sup>

By the time of the Montemayor trial, the khipucamayocs had begun to adjust to Spanish culture. Platt cites Martín de Murúa indicating that the Spanish practice of barter influenced the information provided by the khipucamayocs so the result would more closely match the records. The Spaniards had not yet realized that the indigenous parties had adjusted their tactics to reach a fair conclusion. Under a system of barter, both parties must begin with extreme numbers, then meet in the middle. When the khipucamayocs began with the figures in their khipu, the indigenous negotiators were at a disadvantage. Therefore, the tactics changed and

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<sup>38</sup> Tristan Platt, “‘Without Deceit or Lies’: Variable *Chinu* Readings during a Sixteenth-Century Tribute-Restitution Trial,” in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu* edited by Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 235-237. Three manuscripts concerning the Montemayor trial have been reproduced in “La Cuenta y Quipo de los Tributos y Tasa Que Pagaua el Repartimiento de Sacaca a Don Alonso de Montemayor” in *Textos Andinos: Corpus de textos khipu incaicos y coloniales*, edited by Martti Pärssinen and Jukka Kiviharju (Madrid: Instituto Iberoamericano de Finlandia, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> Gary Urton argues for a possible simplification of the khipu system due to the change in the type of tribute demanded from the Spaniards as distinguished from the Inca overlords. Urton argues that the change in tribute to mostly tangible objects instead of service rendered verbs useless, reducing khipu to simply an accounting function. This discussion needs further consideration of the infamous *mita*, which was a labor service requirement in Colonial Peru, focused mainly on service in the silver mines. For further discussion see: Gary Urton, “Knots to Narratives: Reconstructing the Art of Historical Record Keeping in the Andes from Spanish Transcriptions of Inka Khipus” *Ethnohistory* 45 (1998): 421-424.

kipucamayocs began to exaggerate records so that the actual number would be reached after barter.

Platt makes an astounding yet convincing argument when he proves that Montemayor was not granted the *encomienda* for all of the period for which the natives were requesting restitution from his heirs. Despite this, the kipucamayoc testimony showed specific coca leaf records, interpreted by their recorder, showing that more coca was provided than was required under the agreement with Montemayor. This testimony led to restitution to the people of Sakaka being upheld in Madrid on August 9, 1581.<sup>41</sup>

Platt argues that the Montemayor family did not respond to this unjust ruling solely due to the trustworthiness of the *kipu* as presented by the kipucamayocs. The situation is much more complex, and Karen Spalding's work provides key insight. In her review of the European context of policies enacted in Spanish territories, including the former Inca Empire, she highlights that the real issue being contested is a Spanish one. Spalding notes a major transition in Spanish politics leading to the appointment of Francisco de Toledo as Viceroy in 1568.<sup>42</sup> This appointment marks a clear change in relations between native lords and the Spaniards. Toledo's actions in Xauxa in 1575 are now infamous. He gathered all *kurakas*, instructing them to bring all their documents and *kipus* that demonstrated their rights to their estates. Then he burned them all. The case of the people of Sakaka versus the Montemayor heirs occurred simultaneously with this infamous event, beginning in 1572, with a final decision reached in 1578 in La Plata.<sup>43</sup> Despite this timing, Spalding includes this court case when discussing the earlier tradition, since the years being disputed in the case are earlier than dates of the trial and before Toledo's time.

## Conclusion

As the classification of the Montemayor trial illustrates, the issue of chronology creates a new set of questions in the study of Spanish colonies in the Americas. While time is the medium in which historians practice their craft, a neat linear pattern is not forthcoming when studying the meeting and mixing of two disparate cultures. An inherently fluid process, the convergence of native and Spaniard occurred over time and through the navigation of individuals and groups in the structure of Spanish hegemony.

The *kipu* was, above all else, an indigenous tool. Firmly associated with the former empire of the Inca, *kipu* marked an individual as an *indio* and therefore separate from the Spaniards in Peru. From the Spanish perspective, this system should have been available to all natives of the former empire of Tawantinsuyu. This assumption was due in part to the use of string to record a wide variety of information, from simple to complex, coupled with the foreignness of the system to the Spaniards as well as Spanish conceptions of writing and recordkeeping. Policies enacted based on this perspective forced indigenous non-elites to interact with *kipu* in new ways, altering the perception and understanding of the device in rendering it usable for those

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<sup>41</sup> Tristan Platt, "Without Deceit or Lies': Variable *Chinu* Readings during a Sixteenth-Century Tribute-Restitution Trial," in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 235-237.

<sup>42</sup> Karen Spalding, "Justice and the Formation of the Andean Colonial State." University of Connecticut, 2008. <http://sarr.emory.edu/documents/Andes/Spalding.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Tristan Platt, "Without Deceit or Lies': Variable *Chinu* Readings during a Sixteenth-Century Tribute-Restitution Trial," in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 235-237.

uninitiated to the Inca system. For former native elites, the khipu was a respected sign of an advanced civilization and therefore a possible tool in maintaining a portion of pre-conquest prestige and authority. For those most interested in forging a new Spanish colonial identity, namely the elites claiming descent from both Inca and Spanish families, the khipu presented an obstacle to full integration into the new regime's elite.<sup>44</sup>

These groups used khipu or Spanish alphabetic writing as a response to Spanish policy in the New World. These methods used in response to Spanish interaction with khipu changed the textile itself. By examining how the information stored in khipu was presented to Spanish courts as evidence, how Spaniards expected natives to record information in knots, and references in the chronicle record, the nuances of this complex process of change and negotiation begin to materialize.

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<sup>44</sup> Of course, the effects of the introduction of Spanish alphabetic writing into the Viceroyalty of Peru must be considered for a complete study of how the khipu changed in the colonial era. This large topic is beyond the scope of this paper.