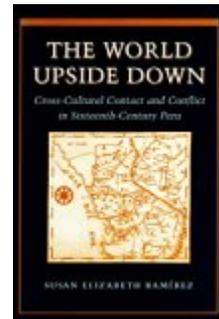


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Elizabeth Ramirez. *The World Turned Upside Down: Cross-Cultural Contact and Conflict in Sixteenth-Century Peru*. Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. Index. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2416-6.

Reviewed by Ignacio Gallup-Diaz (Department of History, Bryn Mawr College)  
Published on H-LatAm (September, 1997)



In this impressive and well-researched book, Susan E. Ramirez sets out “to penetrate the veneer of Spanish institutions and structures ... and explain how the imposed Spanish colonial system altered the organization and belief systems of the native inhabitants of northern Peru ...” (p. 2). The central actors in the book are the curacas, or native Andean lords, and the text is an examination of the manner in which the Spanish conquest transformed their leadership with respect to the following: the social basis of local power (Chapter Two); land tenure (Chapter Three); the tribute system (Chapter Four); and the religious realm (Chapter Five).

Ramirez has chosen to concentrate on northern Peru, an area which had only recently been integrated into the Inca state system at the time of the Spanish conquest. Northern curacas were in the process of negotiating their relationship to Inca power when the Spanish power arrived on the scene. In order to draw out the details of such a complex dynamic, Ramirez mentions in her preface that she intends to make use of “oral traditions as written down after the first contact with Europeans, the natural record as reported and interpreted by archaeologists, and early testimonies and writings of native peoples of northern Peru to reconstruct their history” (p. vii). Though this claim may sound on a first reading to be an excessively broad one, in practice, however, Ramirez uses her sources (in conjunction with the work of the pioneer ethno-historians John V. Murra and Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco) to provide a construction of the pre-contact system of rulership and labor which serves as the necessary counterpoint in her examination of the regime imposed by the Spanish after the conquest.

The status and powers of the curacas are central to

the *World Upside Down*. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the curacas or local lords controlled most aspects of the lives of their people. They administered justice, controlled agricultural production, and commanded the labor of commoners. It would be wrong, however, to equate this considerable power with that held by a European contemporary of similar status. A curaca’s power was judged by the number of commoners under his control, not by the extent of the lands he possessed. In the Andean world control was founded on, and supported by, reciprocal bonds between the ruler and the ruled. The curaca controlled the community’s agricultural surplus, but it was also his duty to redistribute what he did not use equitably. He held the power of life and death over his commoners, but he was also expected to provide them with an orderly community. He was expected to personally visit the people whose labor he required, and was to provide them with gifts. As Ramirez states, “[t]he better the curaca’s organization, the greater the productivity, the larger the surplus, the more abundant the feasts, the more frequent and richer the gifts, the higher the standard of living of the populace, and the larger the community” (p. 21).

This system was undermined in several ways by the intrusion of the Spanish. Most importantly, the demographic collapse which followed the conquest upset the human balance which underlay it all. In addition, the encomienda system, through which Spaniards directly controlled the allocation of Indian labor, attacked the centerpiece of the system through which curacas controlled the circulation and re-circulation of goods and labor. Spanish labor drafts, though arranged with the assistance of local indigenous leaders (some of whom transformed themselves into newly-minted curacas to pro-

vide services and people to the Spanish), did not always align themselves comfortably with the pre-conquest system. "Before 1532," as Ramirez points out, "most goods produced by tribute labor recirculated through redistribution ... By contrast, after the Spanish conquest more and more labor was directed to producing large quantities that were siphoned out of the indigenous economy to supply a growing market demand in the Spanish sector. As this process continued, the aura of the good and able native ruler diminished and with it the reason to respect, obey, remember, and praise him" (p. 34). The most telling evidence that the pre-contact system had been irrevocably shattered was in evidence by the end of the period under study. Andeans of northern Peru left their localities and their curacas to escape the increasingly onerous exactions of tribute and labor. A Spaniard could comment that "[t]he Indians wander from one town to another without settling in any one, especially not the town where they were born" (p. 35). Ramirez has shown that drastic and irrevocable change occurred in Northern Peru within the first fifty years of conquest, and also that a local re-organization of the tribute system predated the Toledan reforms.

In the final substantive chapter of the book, Ramirez turns her attention toward questions of religion. The chapter focuses on the looting of a tomb called *Yamayoguan* in Chan Chan (near Trujillo), the ancient capital of the Chimu people. Central to the chapter is Alonzo Zarco, a poor Spanish outcast who occupied his time seeking out sites which could yield buried treasure. He was ridiculed and reviled by the Spanish community until he lay claim to a site which contained real riches in the summer of 1558. In short order, a counter-claim to Zarco's site was lodged by a consortium of other Spaniards, who used their wealth and influence to have the corregidor validate their case. Zarco's opposition to this jumping of his claim proved predictably ineffective.

So far the story appears to be a familiar one: an Indian site is despoiled, a poor Spaniard is strong-armed out of the proceeds by his wealthier, and better organized countrymen. The court documents Ramirez has studied (1,700 pages by her own count), however, provide an important additional facet to the event, which makes it especially relevant.

In this case, the local curaca, Don Antonio Chayguaca, (alias Chimu or Cheno), after first attempting and failing to claim the site as his own, threw in his lot with the consortium of Spanish claim-jumpers, and was granted half of the booty excavated from the "mine."

Rather than interpret the curaca's actions as a malodorous case of collective back-stabbing, and leave it at that, Ramirez instead digs deeper into the story, and attempts to provide the Chimian side of the events. She presents evidence that the Indians, when they became aware that Zarco was digging at a site that had true meaning to them, informed the curaca, who attempted to impede the Spaniard's progress. When it became clear that Zarco would not be frightened by the threat of violence, the Indians, under the leadership of Don Antonio, tried to pre-empt his efforts and remove the riches he was after. In this they failed.

After the value of the "mine" became common knowledge in the town and had been claimed by the consortium, Don Antonio initiated a court action in which he in turn claimed the contents of the site as his personal property. (Not a ridiculous argument, since, after all, the bones of his ancestors were part of the bounty so sought after by the Spanish.) It was only after losing this case that Don Antonio made his pact with the consortium. Ramirez argues that by negotiating for personal control of half of the contents of the "mine," the curaca therefore ensured that a portion of its riches could be redistributed within the Chimian community. Admirably, Ramirez's careful reading of the record provides us with a more complicated picture of the motivations and actions of Don Antonio Chimayguaca. An account written with less care, or by a historian less anthropologically informed, would have simplistically depicted the curaca as a "sell out" solely interested in profiting from the distasteful looting of his parents' graves and his people's treasures. Under Ramirez's interpretation, Don Antonio appears as an active local leader making use of the courts (and negotiation with Spanish elites) in order to preserve as much as he could of his people's collective property. By cannily using the tools at hand, the curaca was able to make what appeared to be a very bad situation work in his dependents' favor.

While Ramirez's argument and use of evidence in the chapter convince me that there is more than one way to interpret Don Antonio's actions, her account lacks the kind of detailed information regarding local religious practice in northern Peru which could have made her account entirely convincing. For example, we are not told whether the *Yamayoguan* site was in active use by the (only nominally) Christian Chimian people in the time leading to the desecration. A description of the Chimu, led by Don Antonio, engaged in acts of ancestor veneration at the site would have clinched the matter. The case, however, brings other questions related to the reli-

gious conquest of America to the fore. Were there other near-by ritual sites at which Andean religion was practiced? Why did the Indians not clear the site while they had the opportunity to do so? When did missions begin in the region, and was it considered a success, or an ongoing endeavor? Was Don Antonio a party to this program as well?

These are questions which perhaps cannot be answered due to the nature of Ramirez's sources, and they by no means detract from the value of the work. *The World Turned Upside Down* provides an excellent discussion of the manner in which a local indigenous socio-

economic system was radically transformed by conquest. The book's argument forcefully reminds us that even though the terms "curaca," "mita," and "huaca"—worship survived the conquest, the meanings of the familiar terms were forever changed by the distinct and new colonial figures and processes which they served to describe after 1532.

Copyright (c)1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Ignacio Gallup-Diaz. Review of Ramirez, Susan Elizabeth, *The World Turned Upside Down: Cross-Cultural Contact and Conflict in Sixteenth-Century Peru*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1346>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).