
Religion and the Revised Circumscription Theory

Fred Spier

University of Amsterdam

For a long time I have been most impressed by Robert Carneiro's seminal article of 1970 *A Theory of the Origin of the State*. Now I am even more impressed by the revisions to his theory that Carneiro suggests in this current issue of *Social Evolution & History*. Especially the emphasis on the effects of resource concentration on concentrating people makes perfect sense to me, with the inevitable results of conflicts, jostling and emerging hierarchies.

However, his equally strong emphasis on rejecting religion as an important aspect of early state formation surprises me a little, most notably because most, if not all early states appear to have had very pronounced religions. Why would these people have fostered such forms of worship, on which they must have expended considerable resources? Was this completely unrelated to early state formation, or did religious worship perhaps play some role in shaping these societies?

The following argument is based on research that I performed on religion and politics in Peru over a period of ten years, which included the rise of early states in that region. My argument is explained in more detail in Chapter 1 of my book *Religious Regimes in Peru* (Spier 1994). The social dynamics of these early religious regimes may not be that different from what can be observed today in current Peruvian pilgrimage centers.

In the Cusco region, there are two such major pilgrimage places. One of them, situated near the hamlet of Huanca in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, is dedicated to the Señor de Huanca, Lord of Huanca. His feast day falls on September 14, and marks the beginning of the agricultural season. The second pilgrimage site is

the Señor de Qoyllur Rit'i (Lord of the Snow Star), located in the more elevated Sinakara valley close to Mount Qollqepunku (Mount Silver Door). This festival is celebrated during the second week after Pentecost, which signals the end of the agricultural season (Sallnow 1987 and <http://www.senordehuanca.net>).

In both cases, a large regional network consisting of a great many local groups is involved in preparing the celebrations, paying the costs, and gaining in prestige by participating in the festivities, which are seen as providing supernatural healing powers with the aid of water, either emanating from a spring (Huanca) or in the form of ice on the glacier (Qoyllur Rit'i). In both cases Roman Catholic priests take care of some of the ceremonies. In Huanca, which has both a large Spanish-speaking mestizo and a Quechua farmer attendance, Andean priests do not play an open role. In Qoyllur Rit'i, by contrast, which is mostly attended by Quechua-speaking farmers, the Andean priests' presence and activities are much more pronounced, while the Catholic clergy plays a secondary role.

Regardless of all these differences as well as the great many diverse, emotional, and often very colorful aspects to which I cannot do any justice in this very short contribution, both pilgrimages share the fact that most people attend these festivities because they feel uncertain about important aspects of life, most notably health problems and attaining wealth, for which the sacred site is seen as offering a religiously-inspired solution. This is their major attraction, while the local organizations all compete during the celebrations in vying for prestige.

All of this produces a social dynamic in which the use of force does not play any role other than maintaining order during the festivities. Furthermore, such a religious regime exerts its influence over long distances: pilgrims to Huanca, for instance, come from as far as Arequipa, situated hundreds of kilometers away. As a result, a shared culture including shared cultural objects has been diffused regionally, while they have been produced locally for centuries. These two pilgrimage events are not isolated examples. In the Andean world, from Ecuador all the way down to North Chile, many similar large pilgrimage gatherings take place every year. In fact, these aspects are certainly not at all unique characteristics of only Andean pilgrimages. To the contrary, this combination appears to be very common for a great many pilgrimages around the world.

One may argue that all of this is only possible within the current relatively-pacified Latin American states, whose monopoly on the use of legitimate violence creates the social conditions that make these peaceful religious gatherings possible. But that argument does not convince me. There are a great many examples in human history of similar long-distance pilgrimages that crossed national boundaries, even during wartime. The pilgrims who made these arduous trips usually felt protected by the signs showing their pilgrim status that they openly wore, which were often (but probably not always) respected by the people whose lands they crossed.

It seems to me that during the transition from independent agrarian villages to early agrarian states, the successful manipulation with the aid of religion of people's uncertainties for which they did not have other solutions may well have led to religious power constellations that transcended autonomous villages. It is in this way that precursors to early states such as Chavín de Huantar (from 1200 BCE), and perhaps also a great many similar early Peruvian states along the Pacific coast, may be understood. Their influence may have been particularly powerful if they were regarded as being able to successfully predict the future. Such oracles have existed in many different areas, and were often able to amass considerable wealth without using any form of violent coercion. And although the Inca state was not an early state in the sense that it emerged in a region where no states had existed before, it also started its career as a temple.

I suggest, therefore, that during the transition from autonomous villages via chiefdoms to early states, the successful manipulation of uncertainties with the aid of religion may well have played an important role in consolidating the power of early elites. However, such oracular regimes would never have been able to transform into early states without recourse to organized violence on scale that had not been seen before. In this process, resource concentration and ecological circumscription would have played the major role.

This scenario would explain why the elites of early states attached such great importance to promoting their religions. It was simply another power resource that allowed control over people by controlling their orientation. This may simply have been cheaper than doing so solely on the basis of organized violence.

This is not a new point of view. Quite a few scholars have argued along these lines, although not always in theoretically very sophisticated ways. The best sociological analyses of this process that I know were offered by the late German sociologist Norbert Elias, and in his footsteps, the Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom (Elias 1992; Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennel 1996).

So, in sum, I argue that we should not discard the importance of religious worship during the process of early state formation, because it may provide a better understanding of both the dynamics of the process as well as why religion was so important in early states.

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