Mountain motivations: the high Andes and other endeavours

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This paper follows a personal life-long interest in mountains, which materialised in climbs and walks on several mountain ranges but, particularly, in the Andes. It is written in this vein.

This brief paper has two parts. The first analyses the mountain environment of the Inca empire, mostly in the Atacama desert of Argentina. The second records some early motivations of climbers and explorers for exploring mountains world-wide from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

Specifically, it explores the life experiences of climbers and their resulting perceptions, which lead to particular meanings for them. These may be the product of intense emotions, derived from the sheer presence of mountains or from the cultural perspective of the observers, be they mystics, climbers or adventurers. The difference between ‘being’ and ‘doing’ in the mountains is telling and the paper analyses motivation as a central theme. Furthermore, the socially-constructed meaning of space (Lefebvre, 1996) will be briefly applied to the case of sixteenth-century Inca perceptions and use of space in the high Andes, in the Atacama Desert of Argentina, as well as in other cases.

Significant in this evaluation is the cultural interpretation of mountain spaces and their territorial and temporal continuity – and the impressions made upon climbers and mountain visitors. How are the inherent qualities of mountains best understood and apprehended, by which form of involvement and movement? The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to unfold mountains of meaning, by recognising their intrinsic value as icons and resources and so promoting ethical behaviour in users of mountain environments. Collective recognition, by like-minded mountain spirits, should strengthen progressive geopolitical policies for the use of upland resources and cultural visitation – the themes of the other two sections of this Conference.

A conceptual framework

An introductory framework may help the analysis of the different motivations for activities in mountain environments. Mountains can be variously seen as alluring magnets, as playgrounds for enterprise or as channels of communication. Religious or spiritual meanings have been attributed to prominent mountains for centuries, notable examples being Mt Fuji in Japan and Mt Kailash in Nepal. Such peaks engender on-going pilgrimages whether formal or informal, thereby consolidating meaning and safe-guarding cultural practices associated with the mountain. A different but no less powerful attraction, that of climbing to the summit has engendered a separate meaning, based on singular, topographical prominence, measured by comparative statistics whether on height, latitude or geophysical configuration. Examples are Everest, Aconcagua and Kosciuszko. However, the outcomes of such popularity have been at times devastating, as portrayed in Simpson’s records of the collective attempts to climb Everest during the 1990s. This affects meaning.

In contemporary times, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mountains have been seen by Westerners as the playgrounds of enterprise and competition, with motivations ranging from pioneering exploration to sport and recreation, scientific work and commercial exploitation. These have often combined in multi-purpose pursuits, such as frequent European initiatives to spearhead seemingly heroic ventures to other continents, driven by the combined aims of experimental science, the testing of physical endurance and geopolitics. Amongst local populations, such foreign enterprises have promoted either indifference or strong reaction; at times, adhering to the visitors’ aims, albeit in a less intense form, increasing over time. Examples abound, with competitive sporting aims prevailing in British and German groups attempting the ascent of high Andean peaks during the 1890s–1900s while, in more recent decades, the mountains of Borneo have become the scene of commercial exchange in which mountain resources are denuded and geographic conflicts exacerbated. In many such cases, events may have altered the original meaning of mountains and affected their image.

Finally, over centuries, mountains have been communication channels, acting as trade routes, transportation spines or more convenient territorial linkages between centres of activity. In this function they resemble other recognised cultural routes, such as the extensive Silk Route across Central Asia. Examples of mountain channels are routes over passes in Northern India and on to Tibet or those followed by smugglers across the Andes. Mountains, symbolised as ridges, plateaux or passes, often acquire precise meanings, ranging from routes of convenience, to viewing platforms or mystical journeys.

The Inca Empire’s mountain settlements

The Inca Empire, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, extended over a vast mountainous area, which on today’s geopolitical map extends over the Andes from Colombia to the north to Chile in the south, across some 3000 kilometres. From its high-altitude capital Cuzco, located at 3300 m, a strict socio-political and religious system dominated distant indigenous communities. Communications took place through a road system in which two broadly parallel main paths ran along mountainous valleys and ridges, one along the uplands, one near the coast. Their purpose was the enacting of ceremonies and rituals and the engagement in commercial exchanges with regional communities. A system of military posts, religious buildings, housing complexes and cattle enclosures dotted the semi-settled area, extending dominant practices into distant peripheral jurisdictions.

Ian Farrington, scholar of Inca archaeology, analyses the symbology of the Inca settlements:

A state such as the Inca, had the opportunity to impose at a broader scale its own perceptions of a ritual landscape
which justify and legitimate its own gods, history, social order and authority. It was empowered to transform that landscape by moving people around within it and, indeed, by moving around the land itself in the form of terraces, river and spring modifications, and rock carvings to create the required benign settings for legends to be told and rituals enacted, that the well-being of the empire might thus be preserved’ and ‘validation of Inca rule came about through acceptance and performance of commonly understood myths and ceremony’ (in Stehberg 2002).

The Empire had expert builders and craftsmen who used stone for their finest structures, while potters and metalworkers excelled in the creation of artworks, royal and domestic objects. The Incas established a sophisticated, hierarchical social system that worshipped mountains as the embodiment of their gods. Through an advanced service infrastructure, and with llamas as carriers of goods, they developed a support system that enabled priests to reach extraordinary altitudes on the highest peaks of the Andes. People, usually young children or adolescents were sacrificed there and buried in deep graves, which became sacred offerings to the mountain gods. Fine objects were ritually buried in the graves.

Inca sanctuaries in the Atacama desert

The Puna de Atacama plateau is a vast scree desert, located in the NW Argentine Andes, with a base altitude of some 3000 m and peaks rising well above 6000 m. During the sixteenth century it was part of the southern end of the Inca Empire and included the highest peaks of the continental Andes mountain range – Aconcagua, Ojos del Salado and Llullaillaco, with altitudes from 7000 to 6700 m. Since the last decade of the nineteenth century the region has attracted European expeditions, in which the ascent of peaks and scientific observations were the aims. From 1956 to 1965, the eminent Austrian mountaineer Mathias Reibitsch carried out four expeditions to the Atacama desert, to climb remote peaks and search for remains of Inca settlement at high altitude. I participated in three of these expeditions (Joan Domicelj participated in 1965), during which remains of settlement, wood and pots were found on several summits over 5000 m, including two silver statuettes on the summit of Cerro Galan, at 6000 m. We explored the ruins on a pass below the summit of Volcan Llullaillaco, at 6500 m, which are the highest ruins and ceremonial platforms in the world.

The existence of many high peaks and the distinct geomorphological configuration of the region of Atacama increasingly attracted scientists and climbers during the last decades of the twentieth century. In 1999, an archaeological expedition was carried out to Llullaillaco by the North-American anthropologist Johan Reinhard, assisted by the Argentine archaeologist Constanza Ceruti. After a thorough search, on the mountain summit at 6715 m, the group excavated a sacred burial complex in which three mummified bodies were buried. Besides these graves and the ruins below the summit, remains of walls, a cemetery and enclosures for llamas were found at the base and route towards the volcano. The surveys indicated a network of permanent and temporary settlements, staged and equipped for major movements of people, animals and goods, directed towards the mountain.

Inca and contemporary meanings

Following the earlier discovery of several other mummies on prominent mountains of Argentina and Chile, the above findings have confirmed the existence of an extended network of ritual sites and burial grounds, a veritable ‘sacred geography’ (Stehberg, 2002). Reibitsch, Reinhard and Ceruti, together with other Argentine and Chilean climbers and scientists, have pioneered the field of high-altitude archaeology, which has given new evidence on the religious practices of the Incas and of the central role of high mountains as the subject of veneration and the offering of life itself, the ultimate, meaningful ritual. Stehberg, while studying other Inca complexes has noted that ‘Andean men and women perceived that certain places were more important than others’, due to special morphological characteristics coupled with strategic functional factors. These were apparent in the case of Llullaillaco, in both the upper and lower mountain, in which settlements nested in mountain cavities but also climaxed in platforms with total summit exposure. Pertinent places in cosmological Inca space, each with a particular significance.

Lefebvre (1996) has observed that the production of space, and its transformation over time, requires (a) purpose, (b) process, (c) outcome and, (c) meaning. The seemingly natural and empty space of the Atacama desert, on the evidence available, follows these steps. Its purpose, of satisfying deep religious needs, has been met; the process of production, in using resources and skilled inputs, appears fulfilled; the outcome, measured by the nature and scale of usage is like-wise complete. Finally, the meaning is clear and powerful, from the recent discoveries but also from extensive prior studies of Inca culture and mountain life. The Atacama space, with its many conical volcanoes rising above the upland desert, many with evidence of human presence, has proved to be a ‘spiritual bowl’. The abstract form of its natural space has in a sense given way to a superimposed cultural reality, replete with meaning.

Religious meanings continue to this day, often mixed with Christian beliefs, yet still expressed in ritual ceremonies performed at high altitudes – although not summits. Intricate paths have become folkways of tradition along Andean uplands, also responding to the exigencies of modern life. As for the mountaineers of the Atacama ranges, Ceruti (2000) has noted that, in spite of having no formal archaeological training, they have proved to be respectful of the findings, through
spiritual beliefs and understanding. She emphasises the current development of a 'mystical archaeology' on mountains, reflecting, no doubt, the prior Inca belief system in a contemporary fashion. Though in modified form, spiritual interpretation of the meaning of mountains continues to evolve in the former territories of the Incas.

An historical review of motivation towards mountains

The Inca beliefs in the sacred nature of mountains need to be canvassed within a referential framework of diverse motivations, including the spiritual and practical factors. The purposes of action and contemplation differ, leading either to precise acts or to a more indefinite, experiential presence in the mountains. Popular accounts exalt the 'attack' or 'assault' on mountains or, their 'ascent', thus ranging from militarism to spirituality. Emphasis may be laid on the 'mountain', or just on the 'peak', the first comprehensive, the second singular.

A recent review of the collection of Himalayan journals at the India International Centre in Delhi gave me the opportunity to study its rare book collection, which covers the history of contemporary mountaineering, starting in the early nineteenth century. The 545 items in the collection have an understandable Western bias, not without a dose of British Alpine Club enterprise. Motivations for accessing mountains have varied widely over time and with changing cultural circumstances. The seven selected references provide an insight into their diversity over some 100 years, from 1829 to 1935. The authors are Swiss, British and Austrian and they record climbs and explorations in their own countries, in Argentina and widely across Europe.

Motivations in the mid-nineteenth century: social enterprise

Two publications, from Switzerland and Britain respectively, portray quite different perspectives on how mountain environments were affecting the national identity: inclusive and preoccupied with class considerations - the former (Latrobe, 1829) outward-looking, and exploration-seeking the latter (Kennedy, 1862). Latrobe, in a telling title of 'Swiss Scenery and Manners' shows concern over the effects travellers have 'upon the morals of the peasantry', describes the isolated life of young herdsmen and hunters in the valleys, partly as a backdrop for the mountain journeys of 'pedestrian travellers'. There is, however, a common feature in the alpenstock, the 'long-iron spiked pole', viewed 'not as an unfitting symbol of the pursuits of travellers'. Swiss mountains thus influence the social configuration of the national society.

Kennedy, considers the configuration of mountains themselves in his book entitled 'Peaks, Passes and Glaciers' and reviews excursions by members of the British Alpine Club in various European countries. His keen interest lies in detailed description of routes and of instruments for measuring heights and distances and he encourages the geographical explorations of areas beyond Britain. There was then already a preoccupation with the features of mountainous terrains and the technological means to be deployed in overcoming difficulties. In addition, there was early interest in the variety of mountain environments, from Scandinavia to the Pyrenees, in which mountains appear as the structuring element in the geography of exploration.

Motivations around 1900: global enterprise

Two references at the turn of the twentieth century portray the adventurous nature of British mountain enterprises. Two prominent British mountaineers, Fitzgerald and Conway, became keen recorders of their climbing adventures in the central Andes of Argentina, as leaders of two separate expeditions. Fitzgerald in his book, The Highest Andes records the first ascent of Aconcagua and his own climb. His aim was scientific and his expedition gathered rocks and fossils. A further account details the visits to the area, decades earlier, of noted scientists Charles Darwin and the German Paul Gessfeldt, the latter also an expert mountaineer. He analyses the effects of the local 'puna', or mountain sickness, and the difficulties of the ascent to the summit. Conway's book (1902) records extended climbing, travel and exploration on Aconcagua and in Tierra del Fuego. He also records the first climb of Aconcagua and his own ascent, in great detail, describing the logistical and physical difficulties.

There are commonalities between the two accounts. Both Fitzgerald and Conway were expert climbers on European terrains, but found the high Andes to be a completely different environment. Higher, more isolated and with support of a different cultural nature, these early climbs of Aconcagua became painful exercises in rarefied air. (Having climbed to the summit of Aconcagua myself in 1952, I felt sympathy for these early explorers, equipped in different terms). Organisationally, the British party had Swiss guides and Italian porters, complemented by local guides who best knew the area. These were grand enterprises to foreign mountains, facing new challenges. Though their aims were comprehensive, to reach the summit of the highest mountain in the Americas was clearly of priority and the competitive spirit was high. It was also an early international test for British mountaineering. In this context, the popular meaning of mountains, as in the case of international Himalayan expeditions over subsequent decades, became both exalted and blurred.

Motivations in 1935: romance and mechanisation

Two further references, during the early decades of the twentieth century, review both the spiritual depth and the technology of mountaineering and its powerful evolution. Irving's book of 1935 is a magnificent history of its evolution, both in philosophical and operational terms. The Romance of Mountaineering is the 'story of the great heritage of adventure and enjoyment', open to all climbers. He gives the word romance two interpretations, as the story of adventure and 'of the relationship of man to men', to be experienced in freedom and without mountain guides, in the world-wide playground. He denounced the 'obsession with new routes', the 'mechanisation' of mountaineering and the pursuit of 'danger as a cult'. He also questioned the use of oxygen, which he felt was experiential isolation.

Furthermore, Irving strongly stated that 'mountaineering is not public entertainment', and that the 'responsibility for encouraging the highest climbing is an honourable burden'. While remarking from a British stance on the inclusiveness of honourable mountain pursuits, he acknowledged the contributions to mountaineering of climbers of other nationalities, such as the Germans and Austrians for their
precise development of mountain gear and the Italians for their climbing skills. This perspective also affords multicultural interpretations on how driven, emotional or otherwise cool the various groups of climbers were and what value they gave to particular climbs, Irving discusses the ‘intellectual construct’ of mountains, sustained at the time by leading British academics who were also climbers. He added that ‘mountaineering is a mean to an end’, thus emphasizing the ethical and moral dimension that leads to the character building and honour that true mountaineers should have. Irving thus made a classic contribution to the responsible interpretation of the value of mountains.

A second exponent in this category is Kugy, an Austrian lawyer from Trieste, who wrote his mountain memoirs under the title of Alpine Pilgrimage (1934). He loved the Julian Alps, the ‘sovereign Alps with the sea beneath them’. Thinking of the Triglav, highest peak of the range, he stated ‘once I had climbed a peak, its spell enveloped me and I haunted its neighbourhood, as if in search of something lost or forgotten’; he was compelled to ‘learn every side and every feature of the mountain’. He did however on occasions use a guide, the formidable Joseph Croux, his servant but also his master on dangerous climbs. Kugy had a truly romantic feeling for nature, and for mountains and their beauty in particular. It was a matter of unencumbered romanticism: mountains give so much that one loves them in return.

Motivations in 1935: the distinguished travellers

A final reference focuses upon the needs of travellers when mountaineering had become more popular in Europe and new measuring instruments were being made available. These were aimed, as Reeves (1935) put it, ‘for distinguished travellers’, those imbued with the honourable determination to explore. His publication discusses the requirements of surveys and field astronomy and had the support of professional geographers. It is a comprehensive guide for the practical needs of walkers and campers, the early home preparations, health care, coping with disease and injury. It is also a compendium on meteorology, geology, natural history, anthropology and antiquities. No doubt, a precursor of the plethora of current travel guides, but with a clear bias towards coming to appreciate new wild space – a prime need for climbers, with an opportunity to extend their field skills.

Conclusions

The Inca experience, with its daring incursions to the summits of the Atacama mountains, offers valuable lessons in how wild nature may become appropriated domain and, ultimately, sacred geography. The routes to the summits were strategically staged through obstacles, boundaries and horizons, and were woven into a progression of constructed spaces leading to summits and other destinations. The strong symbolism of the journey was no doubt coupled with the satisfaction of human needs in the harsh environment. Over thousands of kilometres, the Inca roads maintained their function and symbolism through known sequences of mountain spaces, dotted with stations for human occupation which ‘marked’ the land and, no doubt, the minds of settlers and passers-by. There is evidence to say that the strength of mountain scenery transcends cultures and centuries and can be transferred across different mountain environments to engender empathy and respect.

The above-mentioned framework for analysing motivations towards mountains categorised as magnets, playgrounds and channels of communication. There is evidence that, since the 1970s, an awareness of the significance and attraction of mountains has spread more widely, with culturally-based constituencies developing new meanings, sometimes at last based on respect for indigenous beliefs. This has engendered a broader-based usage of mountain spaces, with some benefits but also with the potential risk of disruption and the blurring of meaning. Policy encouragement could well be directed towards those cultural interpretations which acknowledge and respect the integrity and dignity of mountain environments and their custodians, whether residents or visitors (the latter, a much better term than tourists).

Such meanings should be culturally sustained, with implications for the environmental protection of mountains, underpinned by the identification of cultural, ecological and spatial thresholds. Spaces related to mountains are naturally ‘apprehended’ by people and, with the right attitude, may then be ‘appropriated’. This requires a comprehensive approach, a common empathy and co-operation amongst those mountain constituencies, which already share this outlook. Recent studies by the NSW NPWS on the cultural interpretations of open space by Macedonian and Vietnamese communities offers promise for the development of such an approach. The cultural ‘construction of (mountain) spaces’, following Lefebvre, offers an opportunity and a challenge for mountain environments to be better identified, understood and ultimately respected. Appropriately, this spatial approach also calls for a revival in the interpretation of time-cycles, known to indigenous communities but now all but forgotten.

As Kugy said, love mountains and they’ll offer more.

References

Kennedy, E.S. Peaks, Passes and Glaciers, London: Longman 1862.