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# The Use of Poison and Malevolent Magic in Criminal Practices among the Incas in Pre-Columbian Peru

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JAN G.R. ELFERINK

The Incas in ancient Peru were familiar with a large number of substances with medicinal or toxic properties, which they used primarily to treat a wide range of diseases. The Spanish chroniclers who accompanied or followed the soldiers were impressed by the effectiveness of the medicinal plants used in Inca medicine. Though they were often denigrating with regard to a number of Inca achievements, they praised the thorough knowledge of the Inca herbalists. From the chroniclers' descriptions it appears that pharmacologically active products were not only employed for the treatment of diseases but were also used in criminal practices to cause harm or death, or to obtain someone's affection in a love affair. In many instances magic was also used for these purposes: the pre-Columbian Indians were convinced that another person's fate could be influenced in a positive or negative way by means of magic. In many cases it is difficult to indicate where reality ended and magic began since, as this article will show, both poisonous plants and malevolent magic were often used simultaneously to obtain a certain effect.

The work of the Spanish chroniclers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shows that these practices included killing, causing harm to others, or modifying someone's mood or inclinations in order to take advantage of them. Based on these chroniclers, it would appear that the use of poison to cause harm was widespread in ancient Peru. Although they seldom give details, many reports indicate that poison was used to kill enemies or people who had to be eliminated; some of them report explicitly or in covert terms that these practices were widespread and that a large number of people were involved in these kinds of poisonings.<sup>1</sup> The Spaniards always referred to these

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<sup>1</sup> The following chroniclers give direct indications that the use of poison in criminal practices was widespread: Lucila Castro de Trelles, *Relación de la religión y ritos del Perú hecha por los padres agustinos* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del



people as *hechicero*, or sorcerers, which would seem to imply that magic was involved. This, however, is not necessarily true because the Spaniards also used this term when they considered something evil, bad, or having to do with indigenous religion, regardless of whether supernatural forces were invoked or not. It is with remarkable frequency that the Inca ruler himself or members of his family are mentioned as a target for poisoning. On a few occasions, a special offering was made to protect the Inca ruler against poisoning, and there are also some reports regarding specific cases.<sup>2</sup> It was said, for example, that one of the first Inca rulers, Capac Yupanqui, was killed by his sister who murdered him by adding poisonous herbs to his food.<sup>3</sup> There are also some rather vague rumors that the third Inca ruler, Lloque Yupanqui, had other children in addition to the son who succeeded him and that they were poisoned.<sup>4</sup> According to Sarmiento de Gamboa and Martín de Murua, Chiqui Occlo, one of the secondary wives of the Inca ruler Topa Inca, was accused of killing her husband with poison—an act for which she was executed.<sup>5</sup> It is ques-

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Perú, Fondo Editorial, 1992), 37-38; Antonio de Calancha, *Corónica moralizada del orden de San Agustín en el Perú*, ed. Ignacio Prado Pastor (Lima: Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 1974), 141; El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*, trans. Harold V. Livermore (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 39; Juan de Polo de Ondegardo, *Información acerca de la religión y gobierno de los incas*, ed. Horacio H. Urteaga (Lima: Sanmartí y Cía., 1916-1917), 200; Bernabé Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, ed. P. Francisco Mateos (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1956), 2:228; Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, ed. John V. Murra, Rolena Adorno, and Jorge Urioste (Mexico City.: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980), 247, 251; José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. Francisco Mateos (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1954), 269; Martín de Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, ed. Manuel Ballesteros Gaibrois (Madrid: Historia 16, 1986), 433; and Don Marcos Jiménez de la Espada, *Relaciones geográficas de Indias: Perú*, ed. Ministerio de Fomento, Spain (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1965), 2:150.

<sup>2</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:203; and Martín de Morua, *Los orígenes de los Incas*, Serie 1 (Lima: Los Pequeños Grandes Libros de Historia Americana, 1946), 11:171 (on some manuscripts, the spelling "Morua" is used instead of "Murua"). It must be noted that when recording the history of the Incas the chroniclers focused primarily on the elite and not on the common man. This may give a distorted idea of the frequency of poisoning.

<sup>3</sup> Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, *Historia de los Incas*, ed. Angel Rosenblat (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1943), 237; and Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 102.



tionable whether the accusation was true. Chiqui Occlo was one of the Inca ruler's favorite wives, and her son stood a good chance of becoming an Inca ruler, but this did not occur. Instead, Huayna Capac, the principle wife's son, became the last Inca ruler before the arrival of the Spaniards.

In other instances, some of the Inca rulers surreptitiously laced their competitors' alcoholic beverages with poison, even though they may have been members of the same family. This custom was still in practice when the Spaniards took over. Pedro Pizarro, for example, reported that one of the Inca ruler Atahualpa's half-brothers died several months after the intake of poison.<sup>6</sup> The Inca rulers themselves took many precautions to ensure that they were not poisoned. A striking illustration of such a precaution was provided by Murua, who reported that the Incas did not drink from gold or silver vessels but from wooden ones called *queros*. These were made from a type of wood which acted as an antidote:

...*queros*, made from wood that was a medicine against the poison...because poison can be easily added to a drink. This is still practiced among the Indians today, for every day some of them can be seen to die from these poisons....<sup>7</sup>

The use of wooden *queros* may be related to the use of the wood *guallicaya* as an antidote. The Indians considered this wood a protection against sorcery, which is one reason why Indians made crosses out of it in colonial times.<sup>8</sup> They also made spoons from it, which

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<sup>6</sup> Anónimo, *Relación francesa de la conquista del Perú*, facsimile edition (Lima: Editores Técnicos Asociados, 1968), 181; and Pedro Pizarro, *Relación del descubrimiento y conquista de los reinos del Perú*, ed. Guillermo Lohmann Villena and Pierre Duviols (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 1978), 71.

<sup>7</sup> The original wording is: "...queros, de madera que era medicina contra la pozoña, porque en la bebida más facilmente se dá cualquier bocado o veneno de los que entre estos indios se usa, pues vemos por nuestros ojos morir cada día de este mal..." Morua, *Los orígenes*, 78. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

<sup>8</sup> After the conquest, the Indians were "converted" to Catholicism, and although many aspects of their religion remained valid, a large number of customs, such as the veneration of the cross, were accepted.



turned black if the food was poisoned.<sup>9</sup> It is conceivable that the *queros* were made out of the *guallicaya* wood and that this specific type of wood provided protection by absorbing the poison.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the repressive measures taken by the Spaniards, the secret administration of poison and the application of magic to cause harm to others persisted long after the conquest. In the seventeenth century, for example, a number of trials were held in Chancay against people accused of superstitious practices. In a number of these trials healers or *curanderos* were accused of making a pact with the devil in order to fly during the night and perform sorcery, with which they took the lives of others.<sup>11</sup> Another incident, reported by El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, involved two local leaders, or *curacas*, who, in a dispute about their territorial boundaries, fought frequent battles during which many of their men were killed. The Spanish authorities sent a commissioner who established the boundaries and ordered the *curacas* to keep peace. To celebrate the peace, a meal was given, during which the two *curacas* raised two bowls of *chicha*, each to drink to his new friends' health. One of the *curacas*, however, was not content with the new situation and had laced his adversary's bowl with poison. The latter, apparently familiar with this type of practice, asked for the other bowl. In order not to show cowardice, the *curaca* gave his enemy the harmless bowl and drank the poisoned liquid himself. Within a few hours he died.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gregorio de Losa Avila y Palomares, *De los árboles, frutos, plantas, aves y de otras cosas medicinales—tiene este reyno*, ed. Gregorio Loza-Balsa (La Paz: Sociedad Geográfica de La Paz, 1983), 56.

<sup>10</sup> It seems unlikely that protection was based on magic. The Incas had a vast knowledge of the properties of medicinal plants and it is quite conceivable that some constituents in the wooden *quero* inactivated the poison, either by binding it or by reacting with it. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, the active principle of *guallicaya* has never been studied.

<sup>11</sup> Ana Sánchez, *Amancebados, hechiceros y rebeldes: Chancay, siglo XVII* Archivos de Historia Andina 11 (Cusco: Centro de Estudios Regionales Andinos "Bartolomé de Las Casas," 1991), 25, 27, 59, 77, 102. The data in this source refer to colonial times. The description about the pact with the devil and flying during the night resembles the behavior of European witches, and it is not known whether there is a European influence in the description. On the other hand, *Datura* plants were well known and widely used in ancient Peru. The alkaloids in this plant are the same as in the henbane, which were supposedly used by European witches. These alkaloids sometimes cause hallucinations during which the user has the impression of flying.

<sup>12</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 177.



In addition to specific incidents, there are a number of indirect indications that provide information about the use of poisoning and other malevolent practices among the Incas. A large number of words in Quechua refer to the use of sorcery, with or without the use of poisonous plants, to cause harm to others (see Table 1).<sup>13</sup> The fact that the indigenous population had a rich vocabulary for malevolent practices suggests that these practices were a frequent subject of conversation, and this in turn supports the view that these incidents occurred rather frequently. Apparently, causing or aggravating a disease was so important that specific expressions were used, which were recorded by the Spaniards. Moreover, the Spaniards mentioned that the Incas, who practiced a kind of confession even before the arrival of the Europeans, confessed a number of sins including "giving herbs or performing sorceries in order to cause harm."<sup>14</sup> Given the limited number of sins, this would seem to suggest that sins such as killing with poison were considered serious by the Incas.

The chroniclers also mention a few general reasons why people used poison to cause harm—reasons that are not specific to the Incas and have been present in many cultures throughout the centuries. Several chroniclers mentioned hate as a reason for killing or harming another.<sup>15</sup> Taking revenge on one's enemies is another reason given for the use of poisonous herbs.<sup>16</sup> According to some of the authors of the *Relaciones Geográficas*, minor causes were justification enough for killing someone with poisonous plants.<sup>17</sup> Others have stated that the inhabitants of the newly discovered countries had certain vices such as secretly administering herbs and "sorceries" to beverages in order to kill each other.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jesús Lara, *Diccionario qhëshwa-castellano, castellano-qhëshwa* (La Paz: Editorial "Los Amigos del Libro," 1971); and Diego González Holguín, *Vocabulario de la lengua general de todo el Perú llamada lengua quichua o del Inca*, facsimile edition by Ramiro Matos Mendieta (Lima: Instituto de Historia, 1952).

<sup>14</sup> The original wording is: "...dar yerbas o hechizos para hacer mal..." Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 141, 856; Acosta, *Historia natural*, 169, 269; and Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 413. Confession was rather important for the Incas, and a number of chroniclers have reported this custom. There were special priests called *ychuri* who were in charge of hearing these confessions.

<sup>15</sup> Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 141; Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 39; and Polo de Ondegardo, *Información*, 200.

<sup>16</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Jiménez de la Espada, *Relaciones*, 2:206.

<sup>18</sup> Jiménez de la Espada, *Relaciones*, 3:171.



Table 1

## Inca Terms that Refer to Malevolent Practices

<i>Anchayachiy</i>	To cause the aggravation of the disease of a patient.
<i>Hampiyacuni</i>	To bewitch someone; to poison someone.
<i>Hampiyok mikuy</i>	Poison in the food.
<i>Kutichi</i>	Action to prevent the effect of sorcery.
<i>Laykkay</i>	Sorcery, to apply the actions of sorcery against people, animals or things.
<i>Llakichiy</i>	To cause suffering.
<i>Miupucuscam huañun</i>	To die as a consequence of poisoning.
<i>Miyuy</i>	To poison.
<i>Onkkochiy</i>	To cause a disease.
<i>Pusanka</i>	An herb with certain magical effects.
<i>Warmimunachi</i>	Certain herb or object which is used to obtain the love of a woman or a man.
<i>Waqanki</i>	Certain herb or object which is used to obtain the love of a woman or a man.
<i>Wat'isankay</i>	To torment, to cause suffering or anxiety.



A possible reason for the high incidence of poisoning in pre-Columbian cultures might be that murder and killing in any form were punished by death, and the use of poison provided an opportunity to eliminate an unwanted or detested person without being caught. Moreover, using poison that became active only after a certain period of time further diminished the chance of detection. However, those caught killing another with poison were punished harshly. A number of chroniclers mentioned that Inca laws demanded severe punishments for those who committed this crime, further supporting the view that this practice must have been common in ancient Peru.<sup>19</sup>

In pre-Columbian Peru, the medical profession was practiced by a wide variety of people. At one end of the scale were those who treated a disease exclusively with magic and prayers and were usually described by the Spaniards as sorcerers.<sup>20</sup> At the other end of the scale were the herbalists who tried to cure with medicinal plants and other medicinal products.<sup>21</sup> In reality, the situation was very complex because there were many intermediates between these two, and many physicians treated their patients with a variable mixture of prayers, magic, and medicinal plants. It appears that a number of these physicians also used their abilities to cause diseases, physical or mental disability, death, or to interfere in love affairs.<sup>22</sup> Midwives who procured abortions also fell into this category of criminal or malicious physicians.<sup>23</sup> The main reason for this was that they were paid for

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<sup>19</sup> See Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 163; Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:116; Morua, *Los orígenes*, 120; and Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apológica Historia*, ed. Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1958), 258. The chroniclers usually mentioned the punishments for the various types of offenses together. These lists were not very extensive, which could mean that each of the offenses included was rather important; the penalty was usually death.

<sup>20</sup> Pablo José de Arriaga, *Extirpación de la idolatría del Pirú*, ed. Francisco Esteve Barba (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1968), 213-14.

<sup>21</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 256, 266.

<sup>22</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 39; Jiménez de la Espada, *Relaciones*, 2:206; Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:228; and Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 247-48. Garcilaso stressed that both men and women acted as criminal physicians. Furthermore, he stated that in addition to poisons, magic incantations were employed to cause harm to someone and that these had the same effect as poison.

<sup>23</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 39; and Las Casas, *Apológica Historia*, 213. Pre-Columbian Indians considered abortion to be highly objectionable and was severely punished. The chroniclers' writings indicate, however, that it was



their services, and, for the most part, they acted on the orders of others.<sup>24</sup> Some of the malicious physicians used magic, others used poisonous plants, and most employed a combination of both, as demonstrated in the following description by Bernabé Cobo:

...many of these physicians or sorcerers were skilful in preparing beverages of herbs and poisonous things, with which they killed whom they wanted to kill. They had herbs which gave differing results, because some killed after a longer period of time and others after a short period of time, depending on the composition and preparation [of the beverage], and there is no doubt that as a result of these sorceries a large number of Indians were killed....<sup>25</sup>

Another chronicler of the Inca region, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, described several types of sorcerers, and his description is an illustration of the close relationship between the physician and sorcerer in the eyes of the indigenous population.<sup>26</sup> Those who used poison in order to kill were regarded as very evil sorcerers and were called sorcerer-*hanpicoc*. The Quechua word for physician is similar: *hanpicamayok* or *hanpikk*. These words are derived from *hanpi*, which means both "medicine" and "poison." As will be seen, the

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frequently practiced. While it can be considered a criminal practice, abortion will not be dealt with in this article because it occurred with the permission of the woman involved. See Cristóbal de Albornoz, *La instrucción para descubrir todas las guacas del Pirú y sus camayos y haziendas*, ed. Pierre Duviols (Paris: Musée de l'homme, 1967), 24; Blas Valera, *Las costumbres antiguas del Perú y la historia de los incas, siglo XVI*, ed. Henrique Urbano and Ana Sánchez, Los Pequeños Grandes Libros de Historia Americana Serie 1 (Lima: n.p., 1945), 8:57; and Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, ed. Francisco de Solano y Pérez-Lila (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1973), 83.

<sup>24</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 228; and Polo de Ondegardo, *Información*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> The original wording is: "...muchos destes médicos o hechiceros eran diestros en hacer confecciones de yerbas y cosas ponzoñosas con que mataban a quienes querían; y tenían yerbas que hacían en este caso diferentes operaciones; porque unas mataban en más y otras en menos tiempo, conforme la mezclaban y confeccionaban; y no hay duda sino que estos hechizos moría gran número de indios...." Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 228.

<sup>26</sup> Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 247-48.



Incas were well aware that a certain plant could act as both a medicine or a poison, depending on the dose.

Antonio de Calancha also described a particular type of criminal sorcerer whose indigenous title was the Quechuan equivalent for the Spanish word *chupador* meaning "he who sucks."<sup>27</sup> This sorcerer, accompanied by one or more disciples, entered a house where they sprinkled powders prepared from human bones and other (unknown) substances. The result was that all inhabitants of the house lost consciousness. Subsequently, the sorcerer went to the person whom he wanted dead, scratched his body with his nail, and sucked some blood out of the body. The victim died two or three days later.

These descriptions by Cobo and other chroniclers suggest that a sorcerer-herbalist had to be very experienced. Not only did he have to know about a plant's properties but also the specific effects that could occur as a consequence of how it was prepared and administered. The chroniclers also stress the sorcerer-herbalist's ability to cause death after a short or long period of time, depending on what had been specified in advance. In one case, Pizarro described the Inca general Chalcochima, who poisoned the younger brother of the ruler Atahualpa. This brother, Topa Hualpa, had become ruler after Atahualpa's execution. Pizarro remarked in this context that the Indians knew of herbs that killed after a period of months or years, depending on their needs. Other chroniclers made similar statements with regard to slow-working poisons.<sup>28</sup>

As has already been mentioned, killing someone by poisoning or sorcery was a severe crime in Inca society. While the death sentence was common for many offenses, there were special punishments for the most serious crimes such as treason or killing with poisons or sorcery. According to Murua, such criminals were thrown in subterranean cellars where wild and poisonous animals were kept.<sup>29</sup> Cobo

<sup>27</sup> "...i así llaman tambien a estos tales brujos en su lengua chupadores." Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 1421.

<sup>28</sup> Pizarro, *Relación del descubrimiento y conquista*, 71; Acosta, *Historia natural*, 269; Juan Suárez de Cepeda, *Relación de los indios colimas de la Nueva Granada: 1581* (México: Editorial Innovación, 1983), 12; and Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 433. Several of the chroniclers' reports dealing with slow poison indicate that the Inca herbalist-sorcerer-physician had a vast knowledge of medicinal and poisonous plants and also that he knew how to apply them. Whether a plant is medicinal or poisonous depends mostly on the dose and the application method employed.

<sup>29</sup> Losa, *De los árboles*, 120; and Morua, *Los orígenes*, 120.



reported a different punishment: they were executed in public, along with the rest of their family, who, it was assumed, must have been aware of the activities of the offender.<sup>30</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas wrote that those who killed with sorcery or caused sterility in women were killed cruelly.<sup>31</sup> Poma de Ayala also enumerated the laws of the Incas, one of which forbade the killing of people as well as the administration of poison or the application of sorcery with the purpose of killing others. Those who infringed upon these rules were punished with death (see Figure 1).<sup>32</sup> It would thus appear that the social status of those who carried out poisoning and malevolent magic was very low. This impression is reinforced by one of Cobo's observations:

...because hell is only for little-valued persons and people without character, such as thieves and poor people, for sorcerers who kill with herbs and other people of that kind....<sup>33</sup>

Though many chroniclers mentioned the use of poisonous plants, animals, and minerals to cause harm, they seldom provided detailed information about the nature of these products. Plants were mostly used, but only a few were actually identified by name. It is likely that the chroniclers knew that the practices mentioned above existed but details were not provided by the indigenous physicians. This is not surprising because it was not only the Incas who severely punished these practices but also the Spaniards. Those who had knowledge of these products probably saw little reason to be communicative, as illustrated by this description in *Apuntes para la historia de Manabí*:

...there are also poisonous herbs with which the Indians kill each other, but they are not known to everybody,

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<sup>30</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:116.

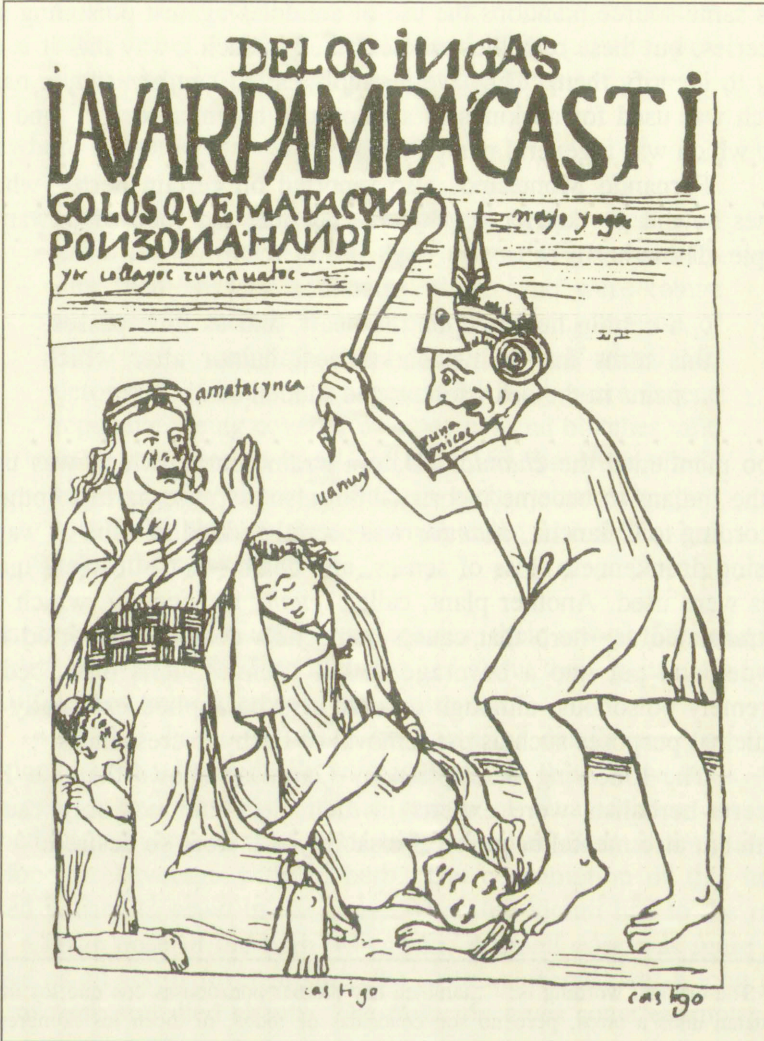
<sup>31</sup> Las Casas, *Apologética Historia*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> The original wording is: " porque el infierno solo era para los hombres bajos y sin calidad, como ladrones y gente pobre, para los hechiceros que mataban con yerbas y para otros deste genero...." Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:155. It is possible that with "hell" Cobo was referring to *supaypa huasi*, or "house of the devil," where, the Incas believed, some people went in the hereafter.



Figure 1



The chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala illustrated his work with simple but vivid pictures. This illustration depicts the Inca punishment of an individual who has killed others with poison. His family suffered the same treatment. Illustration reprinted with permission from the Royal Library of Copenhagen.



and the Indians do not divulge the names of these herbs....<sup>34</sup>

This same source mentions the use of antidotes against poisoning and sorceries, but these remedies are described in such a way that it is not easy to identify them. They were simply called *contrayerba*, a name which was used for all kinds of antidotes of botanical origin, and *bejuco* which was a general name for liana.

Fernando Montesinos also reported on certain herbs (whose names he did not know) which were put into the food of unwanted people. These herbs cause:

...a certain humor upon the heart, and as time passes, this turns into a hypochondriacal humor after which ...pains in the heart follow and sudden death....<sup>35</sup>

Cobo mentioned the *chamico* (*Datura stramonium*), which was used by the Indians to become inebriated but also to cause harm to others. According to Calancha, *chamico* was secretly added to wine or water, causing drunkenness, loss of senses, and death when sufficient quantities were used. Another plant, called *iguaña* or *higuaña*, which can be translated as "herb that causes someone's death," was dried into powder and put into a beverage to kill enemies. It is described as extremely poisonous, although it could also be applied externally for medicinal purposes such as the removal of fleshy excrescences.<sup>36</sup>

The following description by Garcilaso shows that the Inca sorcerer-herbalists were experts in their field and not only caused death but also mental or physical disability if it were so desired:

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<sup>34</sup> The original wording is: "...tambien hay hierbas ponzoñosas con que los indios se matan unos a otros, pero no son conocidas de todos, ni dicen los nombres de ellas...." Julio Estrada Ycaza, Olaf Holm, and Octavio Latorre, eds., *Apuntes para la historia de Manabí* (Guayaquil: Museo Antropológico, Banco Central del Ecuador, 1987), 23, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Fernando Montesinos, *Memorias antiguas historiales del Perú*, ed. and trans. Philip Ainsworth Means and Clements R. Markham (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1920), 88.

<sup>36</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1:193, 197; Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 141; and Losa, *De los árboles*, 69.



...there were also men and women who gave poison which killed either suddenly or by slow degrees, or stupefied whom they wished, or drove them out of their senses. They could also make their faces and bodies ugly, bring them out in black and white patches, produce white leprosy, and paralyze the limbs....<sup>37</sup>

Elsewhere the same chronicler reported:

...some of the Indians used poison against their enemies, not so much to kill them as to disfigure and injure them in face and body...those who were robust survived it, though at the expense of losing the use of their senses and limbs, and remaining half-witted and deformed in body and appearance. They were indeed repulsive, being covered with patches and blotches, and in short ruined in body and mind, so that their whole families grieved to see them in such a state. The poisoners delighted in their suffering more than if they had killed them outright....<sup>38</sup>

Given the properties of the *Datura* species, their availability, and the reported knowledge the Inca herbalist had about these plants, it seems likely that they were present in these mixtures.<sup>39</sup>

Another herb, of which no botanical details are given, is mentioned in the *Relación de los agustinos*. In this source book, the practices of evil herbalists in the region of Huamachuco are described. When someone had to be killed, the herbalists secretly laced the food or beverage with an herb. The consumption of this herb caused worms to grow in the body. When the victim had to die rapidly, a large dose of the herb was given. A small dose was more effective as an act of revenge since the victim suffered over a long period of time and died slowly. The *Relación* gives some examples of

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<sup>37</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 144-45.

<sup>39</sup> *Datura* species can be (and are) used in medicine; in these cases they are applied in low concentrations. Higher concentrations cause hallucinations and mental disturbances. The hallucinations are often highly unpleasant. The effects described by Garcilaso cannot be induced by pure *Datura* preparations. However, such results can be obtained by adding other products.



people who were killed in this way, among them the person who had informed the Spanish priests about the Indians' idols and secrets. Both the common people and local leaders were afraid to tell the Spanish priests about their indigenous religion since there was a good chance they would be poisoned by the indigenous sorcerers.<sup>40</sup>

Gregorio de Losa Avila y Palomares mentioned a peculiar and laborious way the Peruvian Indians used to kill their enemies. A condor was kept in captivity without eating for six or seven days. Then a "stinking animal" (probably a skunk) was given to the condor, and the dung that it subsequently produced was used to prepare a poison that killed people in two months. Losa also described a small worm, called *lungo-lungo*, which was used by the Inca rulers to kill their enemies.<sup>41</sup> Another animal used by the Incas was the *chuqui-chuqui*. Cobo described the animal as a small worm, living in waters in the province of Charcas. It only appeared in the rainy season. In Inca medicine, the worm was used externally against warts. They also used the *vinco-vinco*, a highly poisonous beetle used externally as a medicine against ulcers but also a favorite among the Inca rulers to get rid of their enemies. According to Losa, it was the only poison they used, thus emphasizing its effectiveness. Calancha confirmed that those who consumed food to which *vinco-vinco* had been added would die because there was no antidote for this poison.<sup>42</sup>

Certain minerals, whose names are not given, were also used to kill. One is described as a black rock and another as an ash-colored stone, found near Huancabanba. The first one was so poisonous that scraping some of the rock off with one's nail and secretly putting this small quantity into an enemy's drink was sufficient for causing death.<sup>43</sup>

Some plants, such as *bervena*, are described as a protection against sorcery, possibly because they worked as antidotes to certain poisons. Calancha described an important use for *contrayerba*: the

<sup>40</sup> Castro de Trelles, *Relación de la religión*, 37; and Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 447.

<sup>41</sup> Losa, *De los árboles*, 36, 51. Losa does not describe how these worms were used to kill.

<sup>42</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1:346; Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 1170; and Losa, *De los árboles*, 127.

<sup>43</sup> Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 1060-61; and Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1:135. Calancha's description is rather cryptic with regard to the nature of the ash-colored stone.



elimination of the toxic effect of poisons given to cause harm. Besides *contrayerba*, another source mentions the herb *bejuco* to counteract poisons used in malevolent practices and also recommends *contrayerba* as a means against sorcery.<sup>44</sup> In the *Relación de los Agustinos* two plants known as *contrayerba* are described as being used against "sorceries." These were taken when the Indians believed they had been bewitched. *Contrayerba* was used as part of a magical ritual during which an incantation was spoken. It was believed that by following this procedure the individual would escape death by sorcery. However, because in the same section of this work the herbalists are described as those who killed (mainly important people) with herbs, it seems conceivable that the "sorcery" consisted, at least partially, of the administration of poisons.<sup>45</sup>

The chroniclers reported only a few examples where malevolent practices are due exclusively to magic or where at least the application of poison was not mentioned. Cobo described one such example:

...when they wanted to harm or to kill someone whom they despised, they prepared a statue in the name of that person and dressed it with his clothes. The statue was hung up, and then cursed and spat upon. In the same way they made small statues of wax, clay or dough, then they put them into fire, so that the wax melted and the clay or dough hardened, or so as to produce other effects according to their wants. They believed that in this way they could take revenge upon and cause harm to their enemies....<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Estrada Ycaza, Holm, and Latorre, *Apuntes para la historia de Manabí*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolás Monardes, *Primera y segunda y tercera partes de la historia medicinal: de las cosas que se traen de nuestras Indias occidentales que sirven en medicina* (Sevilla: Fernando Díaz, 1580), 88; Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 141; Suárez de Cepeda, *Relación de los indios colimas*, 12; and Castro de Trelles, *Relación de la religión*, 37-38. The name *contrayerba* is not the name of one specific plant. As the Spanish name indicates, all plants that were used as antidotes could be called *contrayerba*.

<sup>46</sup> The original wording is: "...para que viniese mal o muriese el que aborrecían, vestían con su ropa o vestidos alguna statua que hacían el nombre de aquella persona, y la maldecían colgándola de alto y espupiéndola; y asimismo hacían estatuas pequeñas de cera o de barro o de masa, y las ponían en el fuego, para que allí se derriti-



Murua gave the same description and also mentioned that the Indians created thousands of ceremonies in order to cause harm to those they disliked.

Somewhat less clear is the role of magic versus poison in a ritual where, according to Poma de Ayala, the sorcerers spoke with the devil.<sup>47</sup> During this ritual, they performed a number of magical actions with a toad and a poisonous snake. Eventually the toad—tormented but still alive—was situated in a place where the enemy would pass by.<sup>48</sup> It was believed that the enemy would thus suffer and die. This procedure seems to have been practiced rather frequently because the sorcerer kept a number of toads and snakes in captivity and fed them until they were needed. This procedure would appear to rely solely on magic but, given the fact that certain toads contain a poison which can easily penetrate the skin, some uncertainty remains.

Malevolent magic also played a role in affecting sexual behavior on two levels. First, magic and products of natural origin were employed to gain someone's love or affection. Because this occurred against the free will of the person concerned, these actions can be considered malevolent practices. Second, plants and animals were used in order to interfere with male potency, either to cause the overstimulation of sexual desires or to cause impotency. Magic was also employed for the same ends. In Peru both men and women consulted a special class of sorcerer when they wanted to gain the affection of a certain woman or man.<sup>49</sup> The Inca rulers seem to have tolerated this type of sorcerer, at least to a certain degree, because their effect on society was minimal. For the most part, magic was used in order to

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ese la cera, o se endureciese el barro y masa o hiciese otros efectos que ellos pretendían, creyendo que por este modo quedaban vengados y hacían mal a sus enemigos...." Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:234. Magic procedures as such would not have had very much effect, but if a victim was aware that something was going to happen to him, mere suggestion alone may have done a lot of harm. Unfortunately, the chroniclers do not answer the question of whether the victim knew about these rituals ahead of time.

<sup>47</sup> The word "devil" is the translation of the word *diablo* used by the Spanish chroniclers and by Poma, who was a converted Catholic. The Inca word *supay* is often translated as "devil," but it had more than one meaning; it could refer to either a good or a bad demon.

<sup>48</sup> Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 441; and Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 248.

<sup>49</sup> Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica*, 247-48; and Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:231.



gain success. The sorcerer provided important magical tools which consisted of certain objects called *huacanqui*. The individual who had requested the magic would carry the objects around because it was believed they would attract women or men, according to one's wishes.<sup>50</sup> The *huacanquis* and other magical objects included quite a variety of items. They could be made of bird's feathers, herbs, shells, and other materials, and then placed in the desired person's bed or clothes. It appears, however, that not all *huacanquis* were made of these materials. While Cobo provided the same description as above, he also described the *huacanqui* as an insect used to obtain someone else's affection.

Polo de Ondegardo also described many other superstitious actions that involved either plants or other objects which the Indians believed might affect either one's procreative abilities or cause sterility. They used several plants and animals as aphrodisiacs and also used some of these products malevolently. In Peru, the animal *yanta-yanta* was considered to be a highly effective sexual stimulant but was also quite dangerous. For this reason it was secretly given to people that were detested who, as a consequence, died slowly.<sup>51</sup>

Las Casas also mentioned rituals for causing sterility in women or impotency in men. He suggested that this was achieved by sorcery, but because he also stated that sorcery was used to kill people, it seems likely that plants or other products were also involved. Murua also mentioned the use of plants and certain brews to cause sterility or fecundity, depending on one's wishes. This type of "sorcery" was punished very severely because it interfered with the Inca desire to have many children, which enhanced their status (Las Casas stated that these sorcerers were cruelly killed).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 2:231; Polo de Ondegardo, *Información*, 196; and Burr C. Brundage, *Lords of Cuzco: A History and Description of the Inca People in Their Final Days* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967). Brundage describes the *huacanqui* as a "huaca of desire and mating," thus, as an object with supernatural powers. Judging from the chroniclers' reports, the *huacanqui* was frequently used in ancient Peru.

<sup>51</sup> Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1:336; Polo de Ondegardo, *Información*, 196; and Calancha, *Corónica moralizada*, 144. Calancha's complex description of the *yanta-yanta* makes it difficult to identify this animal.

<sup>52</sup> Las Casas, *Apologética Historia*, 258; Bartolomé de las Casas, *Las antiguas gentes del Perú*, ed. Horacio H. Urteaga (Lima: Colección de Libros y Documentos



The use of malevolent practices has persisted throughout the centuries until the present time. According to several sources, these practices are still widespread in Andean countries during this century.<sup>53</sup> The reasons for their prevalence are probably the same as in the past: envy, rivalry in love affairs, hatred, and animosity. Just as in pre-Colombian times, people in the twentieth century who want to harm others still enlist the services of specialists sometimes called *laykkas*. These specialists are regarded as a kind of sorcerer.<sup>54</sup> There are a number of names for people dealing in malevolent practices, some of which are specific to a certain region. One type of sorcerer is called the *cchamacani*. The travelling herb sellers of the Andes, the *callawayas*, are also sometimes involved in sorcery.<sup>55</sup> The *enguayan-chadores* are employed to gain a reluctant person's love.<sup>56</sup>

Harm or disease which has been invoked by malevolent magic and other practices is referred to as *daño*, the Spanish word for "damage." *Daño* can be effected mainly in two ways: through the administration of substances to food or beverages, or by inserting needles into a specific body part of a doll that contains the victim's hairs or other elements. Needles, for example, are placed in the head in order to cause headaches or mental diseases, into the extremities for paralysis, or into the genitals for impotency. This type of magic is very common in Peru; Hermilio Valdizán and Angel Maldonado have dealt extensively with this type of sorcery in their work concerning folk medicine in early-twentieth-century Peru.<sup>57</sup>

The Peruvian Indians believe that malevolent practices may have been the cause of many diseases. One of the best known diseases is called *khara*, a skin disease characterized by hyper-pigmentation or

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referentes a la Historia del Perú, 1939), 11:147; and Murua, *Historia general del Perú*, 435.

<sup>53</sup> See Hermilio Valdizán and Angel Maldonado, *La medicina popular peruana* (Lima: Imprenta Torres Aguirre, 1922), especially Vol. 1; and David Frisnacho Pineda, *Medicina indígena y popular* (Lima: Librería-Editorial Juan Mejía Baca, 1973), 30-32.

<sup>54</sup> Frisnacho Pineda, *Medicina indígena y popular*, 30-31.

<sup>55</sup> José María Alvarado, "Supersticiones y mitos indígenas de la psiquiatría en Bolivia," in *Anales del III Congreso Latinoamericano de Psiquiatría*, ed. Carlos Alberto Seguin and Rubén Ríos Carrasco (Lima: Asociación Psiquiátrica de América Latina, 1964), 63.

<sup>56</sup> Valdizán and Maldonado, *La medicina*, 1:151.

<sup>57</sup> Valdizán and Maldonado, *La medicina*, 1:151.



loss of all pigmentation in the face and other parts of the body. To induce this disease, several types of toads are fed in captivity in a piece of ceramic, partly filled with flour, for thirty days in the dark. The flour, soaked with the animals' urine and feces, is subsequently dried and pulverized, and given in a meal or drink to the victim. The powder is often kept under the nails and then secretly added to an adversary's food or beverage.<sup>58</sup>

Little is known about the plants that were used to prepare the poisons the Incas employed to cause harm, which is understandable because anyone possessing detailed knowledge about these kinds of products would have raised suspicion, and both the Incas and the Spaniards severely punished those who committed malevolent practices. In contemporary folk medicine, several plant species are suitable for poisoning and malevolent practices, the most important group of which is the *Datura* species. This species can be divided into two sub-groups: the *chamico* (*Datura stramonium*) and the *floripondios*, or tree *Daturas* (several *Datura* species, presently mostly designated as *Brugmansia*). All these plants can—and are—used as either a medicine or a poison, depending on the dose. They can cause irreversible mental damage and hallucinations. While these hallucinations can be agreeable, most are terrifying, depending on the individual and the circumstances under which the drug is ingested. The exact nature of *Datura* poisoning as it occurred among the Incas cannot be reproduced. Not only does the alkaloid composition and thus the effect of the *Datura* vary according to the type of subspecies and growing conditions, but, even more importantly, *Daturas* were (and still are) never given as a single plant but are always mixed with other plants. Although *Datura* is the main constituent, it is always part of a mixture, where its effect is modified by the addition of other plants to the brew.

Among the substances which were used to cause harm, Valdizán and Maldonado cite *chamico* (*Datura stramonium*), *floripondio* (*Datura* spp.), *marco* (*Ambrosia peruviana*), tobacco (*Nicotiana* sp.), and *adormidera* (*Papaver somniferum*; introduced after the Conquest).<sup>59</sup> Hallucinogenic plants were used relatively often, espe-

<sup>58</sup> Frisancho Pineda, *Medicina indígena*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Valdizán and Maldonado, *La medicina*, 1:144. The tobacco used in malevolent practices was probably a species (or sub-species) other than the *Nicotiana tabacum* one used by the modern tobacco industry.



cially the *Datura* species. The tobacco used was possibly *Nicotiana glauca*, for which the Quechuan name is *supai-ccarcco*, meaning "he who throws himself to the devil." The *achuma* or San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus Pachanoi*), a hallucinogenic South-American cactus whose active principle is mescaline, was mainly used for medicinal purposes but also for malevolent practices. A few medicine men took advantage of the mental alterations induced by this plant in order to influence or deceive those who solicited their services. In some cases *floripondio* or *chamico* are added to the *achuma* preparation. This preparation, however, and the *ayahuasca* (*Banisteriopsis Caapi*) were also used in a magic-empirical treatment of *daño*. Besides hallucinogens, a number of non-hallucinogenic plants, animals, and minerals are used in contemporary witchcraft practices. An overview of these products (which are usually badly documented) can be found in the work of Angel Avendaño.<sup>60</sup>

The treatment for someone who has been harmed as a consequence of malevolent practices consists of both magic and the application of medicinal products. The close relationship in folk medicine between sorcery and the use of products of natural origin is illustrated by the fact that remedies against sorcery are the same as those used against poisoning.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which many of these products are really antidotes or are used only for magical purposes remains to be determined.

The Spanish conquerors who invaded Peru were astonished by the low crime rate in the Inca society. Theft and murder seldom occurred, and a comparable situation was encountered among the Aztecs of Mexico. Some investigators ascribed the low crime rate to the severe punishments that were meted out for theft and murder. There was, however, another important factor in the lack of overt

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<sup>60</sup> Carlos Gutiérrez-Noriega, "Area de mescalismo en el Perú," *América Indígena* 10 (1950):215-20; Douglas Sharon, "The San Pedro Cactus in Peruvian Folk Healing," in *Flesh of the Gods*, ed. Peter T. Furst (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 120; Oscar Valdivia Ponce, *Hampicamayoc: medicina folklórica y su substrato aborigen en el Perú* (Lima: Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 1975), 98; and Angel Avendaño, *La rebelión de los mallkis: medicina popular quechua* (Lima: Antawara, 1988), 383-485.

<sup>61</sup> Jorge A. Lira, *Medicina andina: farmacopea y rituales* (Cusco: Centro de Estudios Rurales Andinos "Bartolomé de las Casas," 1985), 24.



crimes: strong social control. The Inca (as well as the Aztec<sup>62</sup>) society was divided into small communities, where most activities were performed in a communal manner. In such a situation murder or theft could be readily detected, and someone who committed such a crime knew beforehand that he or she had little chance of escaping the death penalty. Hatred and revulsion, however, were just as prevalent in Inca society as in other societies. The use of poison created the possibility of eliminating people without being expelled from the community oneself, and the chroniclers' reports show that killing others by poisoning was rather common in ancient Peru. Based on the number of incidents described, it would appear that this fate especially struck those in an important position. However, because reports about the common people are scarce, it is difficult to say whether or not the same number of poisonings was encountered in other layers of Inca society.

Murder was punished severely in ancient Peru: those who killed another were killed themselves. Even though the punishments for poisoning were extremely severe, the administration of poison was a relatively safe method of disposing of someone, or of causing mental or physical damage in order to take revenge. Furthermore, the use of poisons that caused prolonged suffering and a slow death could have been advantageous for those who hated someone else intensely. Such practices were facilitated by herbalists who were familiar with all types of poisons, including those that had a delayed reaction.

As this article has shown, the Spanish chroniclers described all types of malevolent practices, irrespective of whether it was the administration of poisons or pure magic, as sorcery. This is not surprising, because magic played a fundamental role in all types of important acts, including the administration of medicines or poisons. Magic played an even larger role in Inca society than in Europe. The Incas believed that the application of magic could influence life positively and negatively, and this could have been an important psychological factor in both medicine and malevolent practices. However, most Inca herbalists-sorcerers were also aware that the administration of properly acting medicines or poisons could either help cure disease or inflict harm on a person. Based on the chroniclers' descriptions of

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<sup>62</sup> Jan G.R. Elferink, José Antonio Flores, and Charly D. Kaplan, "The Use of Plants and Other Natural Products for Malevolent Practices among the Aztecs and Their Successors," *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* 24 (1994):27-47.



the sorcerers' backgrounds and knowledge, it appears that in most cases where a victim was harmed poisonous products were involved. There are only a few instances where the descriptions refer to magic alone. It is hard to say how effective this malevolent magic was, but the Incas' belief in these magic practices might have been strong enough to cause harm via the power of suggestion, and sometimes that is all one needs.