On Wealth Finance: Inca and Aztec Empires Compared

by MICHAEL E. SMITH
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Loyola University of Chicago, 6525 N. Sheridan Rd., Chicago, Ill. 60626, U.S.A. 15 IV 85

D’Altroy and Earle (CA 26:187–206) are to be commended on their stimulating analysis of Inca political economy. As an archaeologist interested in comparative early states and empires, I am particularly pleased to see a study arguing that the Inca state responded to constraints of cost, distance, and efficiency in a manner comparable to that of the prehistoric states of Mesoamerica and elsewhere. Many Andeanists have tended to emphasize the unique features of Inca political economy (e.g., verticality, the labor tax system, the limited role of markets) to such an extent that it is difficult to make comparisons with other early states (e.g., Muir 1980, La Lone 1982). While these distinctive traits are certainly interesting and important, it is refreshing to a non-Andeanist to see an analysis which employs comparative data and takes a generalizing tone.

Because of D’Altroy and Earle’s use of Aztec comparative data and the lack of Mesoamericanist commentators on the article, I would like to explore briefly one point of comparison between Inca and Aztec wealth finance. The authors show convincingly how the Inca state distributed wealth items “to subordinate elites for political services and economic management” (p. 195). They conclude that “control of valuables was of course instrumental in establishing and maintaining vertical ties in the Inka state as it was in the Aztec” (p. 196), citing Brumfiel’s important paper (n.d.) on Aztec craft specialization. Like the Inca, the Mexica state employed wealth items (which included both imported raw and manufactured goods and elite craft items produced in the imperial capitals) for both political and economic ends. In their role as “political capital” (Brumfiel’s [n.d.] term), wealth items were used to promote solidarity and allegiance among core-area subordinate elites, while as economic factors they stimulated the staple economy in ways beneficial to the Mexica (Brumfiel 1983, n.d.; Blanton and Feinman 1984). These Aztec/Inca similarities pertain primarily to the Aztec core area in the Basin of Mexico. When attention is turned to more distant provinces, some important differences arise in the use of wealth items as political capital. In the Andean case, wealth items were a crucial component of statecraft in areas distant from Cuzco, and their royal distribu-
bolic value. Such continual travel of elites between the provinces and the capital was not feasible in the Inca case because of the huge distances involved.

In summary, wealth items were of great political and economic importance in the operation of both Mexico and Inca states. D’Altroy and Earle’s article highlights the Inca wealth finance system and its significance, while Brumfiel’s (n.d.) work performs a similar role for the Mexico core area in the Basin of Mexico. However the significance of wealth items in the administration of distant provinces was quite different in the Mesoamerican and Andean cases, and a consideration of these contrasts highlights some of the major features of Inca and Mexico imperial administration. While focused comparisons of these two imperial systems offer great promise for increasing our understanding of each system and of preindustrial political economy in general, very little has been accomplished in this area to date (in spite of several recent volumes including Collier, Rosaldo, and Wirth 1982 and Conrad and Demarest 1984). D’Altroy and Earle show some of the potential of this approach both in their use of Aztec material and in their discussion of Inca political economy in terms that promote further comparisons.

On Undernutrition among the Unacculturated

by Stanley M. Garn

Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan, 300 North Ingalls Building, Ann Arbor, Mich., 48109, U.S.A. 15 VI 85

In his article on health and acculturation (CA 26:303–15), Wirsing mistakes the meaning and the intent of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of the Food and Nutrition Board, National Academy of Sciences, and similar recommended “allowances” given by the World Health Organization and other governmental agencies. These caloric allowances are allowances, not requirements, and they are deliberately set high to accommodate active individuals and those with large body masses. In contrast, sedentary graduate students eat far less than the allowances and—indeed—often far less than the average for active adults in Third World countries.

Wirsing also has a problem with the definition of malnutrition. He writes, “The Bushmen, for instance, show no signs of clinical malnutrition. They are short and thin and have low weights for their ages” (p. 309). But these are exactly the signs of chronic caloric malnutrition! At low levels of fatness the adult (and especially the child) is apt to be thrown into negative nitrogen balance by even common “childhood” diseases, with the further development of protein-calorie malnutrition with all of its classical symptoms.

There may be clinically well-nourished “unacculturated” groups out there, still on “traditional” diets. However, the anthropometric and clinical indications, the low hemoglobins, hematoctrits, and albumins but high globulins, suggest undernutrition and concomitant infections for most of the ones we know of, scarcely confirmatory of the 19th-century notion of the healthy noble savage.

On Wife-beating and Intervention

by David Levinson

Human Relations Area Files, P.O. Box 2054, New Haven, Conn. 06520-2054, U.S.A. 16 IV 85

Erchak (CA 25:331–32) and Gibbons (CA 25:533) have recently reported on the relationship between the frequency and severity of wife-beating and intervention by kin and neighbors to halt beatings. On the basis of their independent field research among the Kpelle and Erchak’s subsequent work on Yap, both conclude that intervention by kin or neighbors or the threat of such intervention tends to make wife-beating less common and less severe. I shall present some additional cross-cultural data bearing on this issue. Although the notion that outside intervention will prevent wife-beating might seem self-evident, it should be noted that many researchers suggest that it is absence of such intervention that contributes to the high rates of wife-beating and family violence found in many societies around the world (Pizzey 1974, Spiegel 1981, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980, Whitehurst 1974, Whiting and Whiting 1976).

The data presented below pertain to a sample of 90 nonliterate and peasant societies representing all major geographical and cultural regions of the world. As part of a broader cultural study of family violence, data were collected from ethnocultural reports in the Human Relations Area Files on the three variables of interest here—frequency of wife-beating, severity of wife-beating, and immediacy of outside intervention in beating situations. Wife-beating is defined as the use of physical force by a husband against his wife. Frequency is measured on a four-point scale ranging from wife-beating absent to wife-beating present in all or nearly all marriages in a society. Severity is measured on a four-point scale ranging from no injuries to injuries serious enough to cause death. Immediacy of outside intervention on behalf of the wife is measured on a six-point scale: (1) kin, neighbors, or socially designated mediators immediately intervene; (2) the wife flees and obtains temporary shelter in the dwelling of kin or neigh-

References Cited


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