

Indigenous American Ritual Bone Treatment

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Indigenous American cosmovisions are based on embodied mental thoughts in relation to bodily sensory experience. This chapter focuses on the ancient to contemporary Indigenous American practice of exhuming skeletons for use in reciprocal based rituals. Ancient funerary actions, and the complexity of their different stages, are not directly visible to us; however, there are indicators of their interrelated behaviors in the archaeological record as pertaining to subjects and objects. Burial rituals can be researched through investigating how the dead are placed and positioned in the ground and, if pertinent, their later exhumation and bundling. Contextual materials are those of interred objects and contextual actions can include multiple interments and whether ritual bone treatment, such as scraping, lumping, and or burning, is present. The more pertinent burial practice indices, in relation to this volume, concern the human cognitive relationship between mind and matter as related to veneration or manipulative inter-relationships between the living and the dead. Protracted burial practices include those of exhumed skeletons kept as communicating bundles used by the living to alleviate day-to-day concerns. The veneration and manipulation of skeletal bundles has continued up to the present in the Maya area, for example, as well as other parts of Indigenous North to South America. While some of my Maya consultants venerate their ancestors, they also sometimes damage their bones as a means to manipulate them. At least three vital essences were/are present within living Mesoamerican human bodies. The ritual and ceremonial actions analyzed here are associated with osteological remnants, as containers of vital essences, and are meant to sway non-corporeal beings into actions being petitioned by their living descendants. A brief comparison of Eurasian material, as a manner of understanding similar Asian to Indigenous American cross-cultural practices, is included at the conclusion in order to place the material in a broader context.

Las visiones indígenas americanas sobre el cosmos se basan en pensamientos incorporados en relación con la experiencia sensorial corporal. Este capítulo se centra en la práctica indígena norteamericana desde la antigüedad hasta la época contemporánea de exhumar esqueletos para su uso en rituales basados en reciprocidad. Los actos funerarios antiguos y la complejidad de sus diferentes etapas no las podemos conocer directamente; sin embargo, hay indicadores de sus comportamientos interrelacionados con el registro arqueológico pertenecientes a sujetos y objetos. Los rituales de entierro se pueden conocer investigando cómo se posicionan y colocan a los muertos en el suelo y en algunos casos, su posterior exhumación y la colocación en fardos. Los materiales contextuales están constituidos por los objetos

enterrados y las acciones contextuales pueden incluir entierros múltiples y si está presente el tratamiento ritual de los huesos, como raspaduras, agrupación o incineración. Los índices de prácticas funerarias más relevantes, en relación con este volumen, se refieren a la relación cognitiva humana entre la mente y la materia en relación con la veneración o las interrelaciones que se pueden manipular entre los vivos y los muertos. Las prácticas de entierro prolongadas incluyen las de los esqueletos exhumados que se mantienen como medios de comunicación en fardos, utilizados por los vivos para aliviar las preocupaciones del día a día. La veneración y manipulación de los fardos con esqueletos ha continuado hasta el presente, por ejemplo en el área Maya, así como en otras partes del norte indígena de Sudamérica. Si bien algunos de mis consultores Mayas veneran a sus antepasados, a veces también dañan sus huesos como un medio para manipularlos. Al menos tres esencias vitales estaban / están presentes dentro de los cuerpos humanos vivientes de Mesoamérica. Los actos rituales y ceremoniales analizados aquí, están asociados con restos osteológicos, como contenedores de esencias vitales y están destinados a influir en los seres incorpóreos para realizar acciones solicitadas por sus descendientes vivos. En la conclusión se incluye una breve comparación del material euroasiático, como una forma de entender las prácticas transculturales similares de los asiáticos a los indígenas americanos, para ubicar el material en un contexto más amplio.

*Each [human is]... 'an embodied [bundled] paradox,' ...
[Our] task is to unravel this bundle (Mithen, 1996, pp. 115)*

Indigenous American cognitive cosmovisions are based on embodied mental thoughts in relation to bodily experience. Ancient Indigenous American funerary actions, and the complexity of their different stages, are not directly visible to us; however, there are indicators of their interrelated behaviors as pertaining to subjects and objects. Burial rituals can be researched through investigating how the dead are placed and positioned in the ground and, if pertinent, their later exhumation and bundling. Contextual actions can include multiple interments and whether ritual bone treatment, such as scraping, lumping, and/or burning, is present. The pertinent burial practice indices to this chapter concern the human cognitive relationship between mind and matter as related to veneration or manipulative inter-relationships between the living and the dead.

This chapter focuses on the ancient to contemporary Indigenous American practice of exhuming bodies. The

indigenous actions analyzed here are associated with osteological remnants as containers of vital essences. López Austin (1980, pp. 361) indicates that at least three vital essences were/are present within living Mesoamerican human bodies (Figure 25.1). As a manner of understanding similar cross-cultural practices; a brief comparison of Eurasian material will be included at the conclusion in order to place the material in a broader context.

Ancestral Living Essences

Colonial European documents stating how Indigenous Americans treated their deceased indicate an ongoing relationship with their dead. For the North American Southeast (United States), for example, Mississippian leaders kept ancestral human bones as it was through these that they legitimated their authority (Hall, 1997, pp. 146). Their ancestors were so important that during battles each side strategized on how to take control of an enemy's ancestral remains. According to Milner (2004, pp. 165; also Kehoe, 2002, pp. 167-168), having gained "entry into an

Figure 25.1.

Laud Codex [44]: Human Vital Essences.



enemy's principal town, [warriors tried] to despoil the chief's charnel structure." Marring the shrine and its contents "struck at the core of a chief's power [since the] inability to protect the bones of one's ancestors [indicated] feeble leadership".

Similar practices are seen in Central Mexico where ancestral bones were kept and cared for (Iguaz, 1993, pp. 70; Headrick, 1999, 2007, pp. 51-58); for example, the Méxica-Aztec and the Mixtec would also direct their warriors toward seizing effigy containing an enemy's ancestral relics (Pohl, 2001, pp. 46). A primary goal of pre-Columbian warfare was not so much to kill but to capture in order to gain prestige (Hassig, 1988). The capture of enemy skeletal bundles was thought similar to that of capturing a live person. The keeping of patron warrior bundles, such as the Méxica's Huitzilopochtli power bundle (Figure 25.2), demonstrates that human bone relics were treated as if alive (López Austin, 1980, pp. 78; Knab and Sullivan, 1994, pp. 86, 241).

Ancient funerary rituals are not directly visible to us; however, there are indicators of interrelated actions in the material record (Marshall, 1989). Relative actions might

Figure 25.2.

Boturini Codex [20]:

Communicating Huitzilopochtli Bundle.

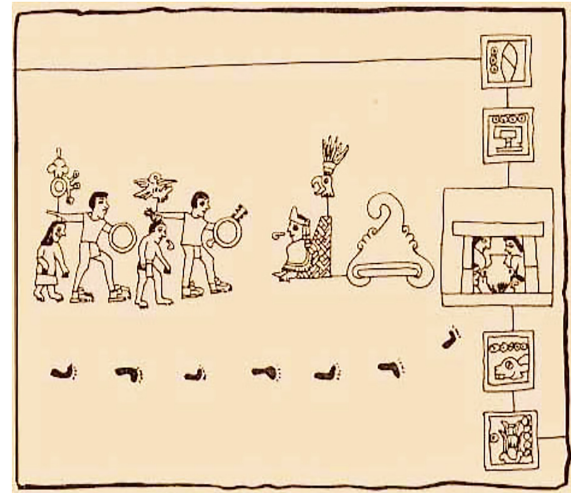


Figure 25.3.

Tikal Altar 5: Exhumed Skull and Long Bones.

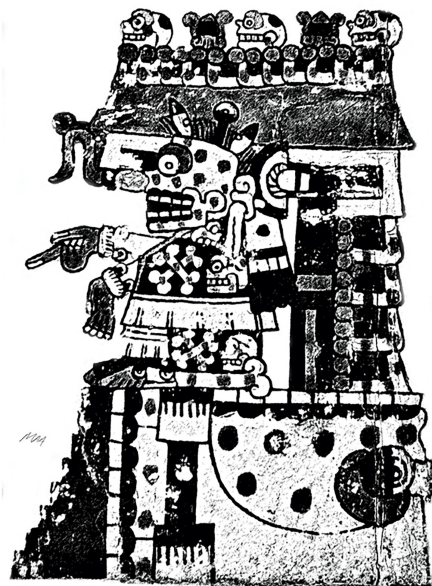


include multiple interments and whether bone scraping, lumping, and/or burning are present. Protracted burial practices can include exhumation rituals, per the skull and long bones being addressed as if still alive, as depicted on Tikal's Altar 5 (Figure 25.3). Further, the Zouche-Nuttall Codex (1995, pp. 44) depicts a skeletal bundle, of Mixtec "Lady Nine-Grass, also depicted as if alive (Figure 25.4).

Figure 25.4.

Zouche-Nuttall Codex [44]:

Lady Nine-Grass Skeletal Bundle.



Body exhumation has continued up to the present in the Maya area (Figure 25.5). What we perceive dead can, in my consultants' cosmivision, be agency ridden and still have volition. Deceased humans may no longer be alive-in-the-flesh; however, part of their no-longer-human essences are perceived to remain tethered to their bones or associated material objects in an other-than-human state (Astor-Aguilera, 2010).

McKeever Furst (1995, pp. 177-178) notes that the ancient Méxica-Aztec notion of "spirit powers" circulates about widely in the Indigenous American world. These powers are "held temporarily by individual entities, human or otherwise." These essences are similar to the "orenda of the Iroquois, wakan of the Sioux, or sila of the eastern Inuit...which, like the Mexica idea, are associated with a...cosmic breath that enters human bodies in varying quantities and lends [them] differing vital powers". These invisible essences are capable of metamorphosis. McKeever Furst elaborates, "American Indians understand natural phenomena—including man—in terms of immanent

powers of transformation... The different manifestations of the biosphere are capable of metamorphosis... [These] various phenomena are held equivalent and imbued with a life force" (1990 [1972], pp. 138).

Differences exist between Indigenous American populations; however, "the cosmologies of Mesoamerica emerged from a shared background" (Hall, 1997, pp. 162; also Kehoe, 2002, pp. 42-43, 48-53, 74-76, 80, 142-146; Young, 2000). Per Power (2004, pp. 66), though "the Southeast is referred to as a culture region," their imagery and social practices show links with other Indigenous Americans. Further, their "shared heritage explains how the Mississippian symbols, motifs, and themes were, with amazing fluidity, accepted repeated, and perhaps required across distant areas... The heritage shared throughout the Americas permitted communication between the Southeast and Meso and South America" (Power, 2004, pp. 158-159).

North to South American Shared Cosmovisions

A common postmortem manipulation found in the ancient Indigenous Americas was to conduct rituals focused on skeletal remains. For the Maya, skeletal bundles were highly important and their associated rituals and ceremonies demonstrated lineage legitimacy (Schele and Freidel, 1990, pp. 482, note 60). In Andean contexts, the care and use of skeletal remains was an ongoing activity (Forgey and Williams, 2005, pp. 263). Per Rakita and Buikstra (2005, pp. 100), "upon the death of an Inca elite, the corpse was embalmed and wrapped. These bundles were made to look as much as possible as the deceased looked in life... The bundled individuals were accorded the same treatment [as] in life. They were fed food and drink, accompanied by caretakers, and afforded respect and authority." Rakita and Buikstra elaborate, "for Andeans, death did not exist... Inca mummies were powerful social forces... The ancestors never [did] leave this world" (2005, pp. 105; also Conrad

and Demarest, 1984, pp. 113-116; Byers, 2005, pp. 128).

For the Maya, “the use of a corpse [also] had profound meaning” (Becker, 1993, pp. 47). As Schele and Freidel state, Tikal’s Burial 85 consisted of a bundled “headless, thighless corpse... Bones were missing. The Maya retained bones,...so the skull and thighbones may have [remained with its] descendants” (1990, pp. 133-135, figure 4.4). As Becker elaborates, an “important observation from the Maya is the lack of cemeteries which remove the dead from the world of the living” (1993, pp. 67-68). Becker further notes that, “the lack of distinct cemeteries among the Maya means that burials are generally recovered in random manner” (1993, pp. 46, 46 note 1).

Indigenous Americans tended to enshrine bundles of select ancestors while permanently burying certain others. It is the living after all who put forth the effort to keep their dead as ancestors and maintain relationships with their non-corporeal beings (Gillespie, 2001, pp. 92). Even those entombed, however, often had their tombs visited by the living. Tomb visitation was apparently conducted to perform activities, either in positive or negative terms, toward the targeted skeletal material.

Tossing the Bones Around

Byers (2005, pp. 125) notes that if a human is perceived “as possessing multiple spirits embodied in different components of the body,... [then] a complex range of postmortem manipulation and variable burial treatments is expected.” Violent behavior toward human bones can then be logical. Some of my Maya consultants, for example, will sometimes burn bones as a means to manipulate their essences (Figure 25.6).

During the conquest of the Americas, Europeans noted their native allies seeking to take as “trophy,” and/or toss around, trample, and destroy an enemy’s skeletal relics (Anderson, 1994, pp. 80, 1999; Brain and Phillips, 1996,

Figure 25.5.

Quintana Roo Maya Human Bone Exhumation.

Photograph by the Author.



Figure 25.6.

Maya Burned Skeleton Bundle.

Photograph by the Author.



pp. 174-175; Dye, 1990, pp. 219; Dye, 1994, pp. 47; King, 2001, pp. 8; La Vega, 1980 [1605], pp. 292-293, 438). The Spanish, while colonizing the Andes, would sometimes have to meet and negotiate with the natives’ ancestors—sheltered and fed as if still alive—through their medium-like caretakers (Pizarro, 1921 [1571], pp. 205). Buikstra and Nystrom note that “an active partnership between the ancestors and the living interpenetrated” Andean life and this “underscored the widespread significance of mummies” (2003, pp. 36, 240). In similar manner, the

Wixárika-Huichol of Northwest Mexico, for example, also shelter and communicate with their deceased leaders (Weigand and Weigand, 1991, pp. 56-66). This practice is also demonstrated in Coixtlahuaca, Mexico (Figure 25.7), in Panama, Central America (Helms, 1979, pp. 9, 17), the North American Northwest (Drucker, 1955, pp. 175-176), for the Northeast Huron (Heidenreich, 1978, pp. 374-375), and Virginia to Florida in the now United States (Swanton, 1946, pp. 722-726).

We do not “fully understand the variety of interment employed by the ancient Maya” (Gonlin, 2007, pp. 95); however, Miller and Taube stress the importance of “idealized ancestors” (1993, pp. 90). Vital essences remain significant due to their on-going relationships with the living (Becker, 1993, pp. 52; López Austin, 1980, pp. 482). For the Maya, veneration of the dead indicates honored remembrance as an ancestor (Duncan, 2005, pp. 207, 223). As Iguaz notes for the Méxica-Aztec, death was “an integral part of [being alive and just another] stage in the

Figure 25.7.

Coixtlahuaca, Mexico, Bundle.

Photograph by the Author.



continuation of life” (1993, pp. 63). Per Duncan, however, discerning what actions are veneration, as opposed to violation, is a problem within Mesoamerican funerary studies as the “processes of violation and veneration may involve similar acts” producing matching deposits (2005, pp. 207-208).

MacNeish (1962) has found Mesoamerican burned human bones dated to 4,000 BCE and Arkush (2006, pp. 286) states, for the Andes, that this indicates a “complexity, contingency, and unpredictability of warring societies.” Cucina and Tiesler suggest, for the Maya, that the context for burned human bones “was probably associated with ritual nonfunerary treatments rather than with the ancestral cult” (2006, pp. 122). Rakita and Buikstra (2005, pp. 104) add that corpses were not burned for transformational purposes but to remove them.

Monaghan (1995, pp. 98, note 2) mentions that, “the only objects that Nuyooteco-[Mixtecs] classify as truly dead were rocks cracked by fire”. The Mixtec think that to get rid of a person’s essences completely, its entity must be entirely burned or, if the goal is simply to punish/torture said person, then one sporadically, burns and reburns it. For the Maya, Mock (1998a, 1998b, pp. 119) suggests that some interment rituals were violence related and done with the aim of erasing “personhood through flaying/mutilation of the face and head, [for] not only humiliation but [the] destruction of individual identity.” As Duncan adds, bone “violation for the Maya created an enduring objects’ weakness... [Thus,] finding a cache of mandibles removed from the skull of various individuals and buried under a shrine would suggest...an attempt to appropriate the individuals’ power essence. An individual’s mandible with cut marks, crushed or having teeth extracted, would be congruent with an attempt to deface the individual by destroying [its] source of power” (Duncan, 2005, pp. 221-222).

Nelson and colleagues (1992, pp. 308) state that “the ethnohistoric and ethnographic accounts provide an invaluable background against which to frame hypotheses...[since the differences] seem minor in comparison to the similarity in underlying structure.” Ethnographic data concerning not only the keeping but the display of human remains, of both ancestors and enemies, is known not only for the Americas, as in the Andes (Harner, 1972), but in various parts of Oceania (see Bateson, 1932, 1958; Haddon 1901; Holmes, 1924; Landtman and Haddon, 1927; Saville, 1926; Seligmann, 1910; Trompf, 1991).

Vital Essences and Structure Burning

Personhood within Indigenous American ontologies is not just relegated to humans (Astor-Aguilera, 2010). Mock points to this scenario in the cutting and burning of monumental mask imagery at Cerros, Belize (1998b). As Sugiyama mentions for Teotihuacán, a primary objective during raids of this city was the burning of structures—per the destruction by fire mentioned by Cowgill (1992, pp. 109, personal communication 2007); further, the “looting of the inner [structure] burials [through a] tunnel was committed because the looters knew the burials were there” (Sugiyama, 1998, pp. 157-159).

The looters being from opposed factions within the city and their ascendance thus emphasized vandalizing existing polity features, monuments, and ritual objects (Sugiyama, 1998, pp. 161). Bundles and their shrines were, therefore, looting and burning targets when Teotihuacán experienced political upheavals (Headrick, 1999). Per Sugiyama (1998, pp. 159), the vandalism was not “sporadic actions for procurement of objects, as the [English] word looting suggests... The looters [also] disturbed skeletons and took bones of buried people... [and this, thereby,] had sociopolitical significance.”

Lockett and Hargrave mention that Ancient Puebloans would remove post-interment skulls and long bones from their dead, in order to protect the bones from being attacked, as burned human bones have been found in nearby caves (1953; also Guernsey and Kidder, 1921; Gumerman and Dean, 1989, pp. 113). Torture-like actions toward human remains were probably done to manipulate agency laden essences found within the bone matter. Hall (1997, pp. 32) notes, for example, that a typical result after being taken prisoner by Indigenous Americans was being “subjected to prolonged and agonizing torture” that often “involved burning coals.”

San José Mogote, Oaxaca, Mexico, for example, exhibits torture tactics. Monument 3 depicts a noble that was apparently taken captive, stripped, tortured, and killed (Redmond and Spencer, 2006, pp. 381-382; also Peebles and Kus, 1977, pp. 439; Redmond, 1994, pp. 116). The so-called “Danzantes” of Monte Albán, Oaxaca, display not only knife cuts but apparently fire torture. The burn symptoms seem exhibited by the individuals’ oddly hanging appendages as those seen when whole body burn victims have their ligaments exposed to intense heat (Figure 25.8). Other evidence for the burning of human bodies at San José Mogote’s is exhibited at Feature 47 (Flannery and Marcus, 2005, pp. 60, 228; Redmond and Spencer, 2006, pp. 386 note 6).

A problem remains, however, regarding the burning of human bones, as to whether a differentiation is made in Indigenous American cosmovisions concerning smoking, singing, extreme burning, or complete cremation. Landa says, for example, that the 16th century Maya would cremate some of their deceased, place their ashes within images, and venerate these burnt remains (in Tozzer, 1941, pp. 130-131). In several Mixtec codices, bundles of deceased nobles are depicted about to be cremated (Figure 25.9) (Laud Codex, 1994, pp. 41; Zouche-Nuttall Codex,

1995, pp. 82, 84). Duncan and colleagues, however, note that the “violation of enemies’ mummy bundles...could involve burning the body of the deceased in different ways” (2008, pp. 5315-5317); as seems to apply for the multitude of “miscellaneous human skeletal material” at Piedras Negras, Guatemala (Coe, 1959, pp. 121).

Figure 25.8.

Monte Albán “Danzante”.

Photograph by the Author.



Figure 25.9.

Zouche-Nuttall Codex [82]: Cremation Ritual.



Miscellaneous Maya human remains are often found, as at Tikal, Guatemala, as “an enormous number of human bone fragments scattered at random throughout the site. An occurrence duplicated in any [Maya] archaeological context where soil conditions foster bone preservation and where burials commonly were made within the habitation area” (Becker, 1993, pp. 50-51). The problem, however, as to whether human remains are enemy bones or revered ancestors is not clear. Bauer and Bauer, for example, note that their uncovering of an ancient Peruvian cache was composed of ten skulls with no bodies and no artifacts (1987; also Arkush, 2006, pp. 321 note 4; McEwan, 1991, pp. 109); making it difficult to discern if the remains pertain to ancestors or enemies. As mentioned by Cieza de León, during the conquest of Peru, native captors communicated with their slain foes in equivalent manner with which they communicated with their ancestors (1883 [1553], pp. 96, 195).

Ritually Charged Caches

In Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Caso noted a skull alongside vertebrae (1938, 1939). At Uaxactun, Guatemala, similar data was reported of skulls with vertebrae (Smith, 1950, pp. 93). At Tikal, Guatemala, human heads were placed between ceramic vessels (Becker, 1993, pp. 59, 59-60 note 12). From Baking Pot, Belize (Ricketson, 1929, pp. 5), to Chichén Itzá, Mexico (Ruppert, 1935, pp. 85-86), human skull fragments, rather than whole pieces, were placed in caches. Similar Maya bone caches were also found at Nebaj, Guatemala (Becker, 1986; Smith and Kidder, 1951, pp. 29-31); Tayasal, Guatemala (Cowgill, 1963, pp. 436-437, personal communication 2009); Mayapán, Mexico (Smith, 1962); Topoxté, Guatemala (Jones et al., 1981, pp. 543); and Copán, Honduras (Becker, 1993, pp. 59-60 note 12). Landa (in Tozzer, 1941, pp. 111-130) says skulls were ritually used by the 16th century Maya but did not know to

whom the individual craniums belonged.

Ancient Mayan inscriptions and imagery suggests the ritual execution of captives by decapitation (Sharer, 1994, pp. 92, 105, 396-397, 516, 522-525, 543). Skulls in caches are not always placed face-side-up. Cucina and Tiesler suggest that face-down meant “disrespect [toward] the individual” and that the manner in which human remains are disposed of is “related to their [ritual] function” (2006, pp. 122). Nelson and colleagues, referencing La Quemada, Mexico, state that Mesoamerican burial practices exhibit a wide-range of practices representing differential relationships between the living and the dead (1992, pp. 298); that is, differential “burial patterns may indicate...a friendly vs. hostile relationship to the living people who conducted the ritual” (1992, pp. 310). Per Seeman (1988), for the Hopewell, cranium cache burials do not indicate reverence but hostility. As witnessed by Cavalier de La Salle, the Iroquois would dig up their enemies’ graves and burn the disinterred corpses (La Salle, 1901 [1682], pp. 223-225; also Hall, 1997, pp. 16; Parkman, 1925, pp. 230-234).

Bundles and Indigenous Cosmovisions

Indigenous Americans tend to ritually break and/or throwaway items when no longer needed (Astor-Aguilera, 2010, pp. 222; Harrington, 1914, pp. 126). The Sioux kept spirit-essences, “wakan,” ceremonially attached to certain items and ritually released them when they were no longer required (Black Elk, 1953, pp. 29-30; Densmore, 1918, pp. 77). The wakan of the Oglala is similar to the manitou of the Algonquians and the orenda of the Iroquois. These terms refer to invisible person-like essences that have skills, powers, and volition. These essences are potentially present in trees, stones, animals, bodies of water, etc, and human bones (McKeever Furst, 1995, pp. 177). For this reason, for example, the Southeast Mississippian dead remained

powerful forces (Power, 2004, pp. 143).

Indigenous American invisible forces were present irrelevant of whether associated with a dead friend or foe. Duncan states that these essences could be “appropriated from an enemy” (2005, pp. 226). La Salle, for example, witnessed the Iroquois raid a Miami village and the killing of Ouabicolcata their chief. Ouabicolcata’s dead body, as if a live captive, was then taken to the Iroquois camp and kept hostage (1901 [1682], pp. 287-289). The previous reminds of Betanzos’ (1996 [1551-1557], pp. 94-95) and Gamboa’s (1988 [1572], pp. 105) account of a Cuzco structure, the llasahuasi, where the Inka kept the decapitated heads of their Titicacan enemies. Brown thus sees a connection between the caretaking of an ancestor’s head with that of taking an enemy’s head (1995). Per Hall, “the gaining of those parts...is tantamount to keeping the individual” (1997, pp. 156). Underhill (1979, pp. 46-47) reported similar for the Tohono O’odham in that they sheltered and fed the scalps of their killed enemies in order to harness their powers.

Regenerative Power

For Andean cosmovisions, Tello (1918) concluded that enemy decapitated heads held regenerative power. Per Proulx, human bones were linked by Andeans to fertility and regeneration (1989; also Silverman, 1993, pp. 218-226; Carmichael 1995). As Proulx elaborates, heads held regenerative properties and “the Nasca people placed great importance on the human head as a source of power... Trophy heads in [burial] caches resulted in the concentration of power... [Associated] motifs display sprouting beans in the form of a trophy head or an ear of corn with the face of a trophy head. This suggests a metaphor [linked to] various agricultural plants” (1999, pp. 9).

Human skulls with botanical features are also often

depicted in Mesoamerican imagery. Maya cache vessels and cache-like burials, according to Becker (1993, pp. 48), share indigenous cognitive meanings as related to botanical regenerative cycles and this pertains to not only the skull but the whole human body. Densmore, for the Sioux, says that bundled hair taken from dead relatives were addressed as if the individual were still present (1918, pp. 78). Per Hall, the Menominee and Dakota dead remained around their personal items and the bundle containing their objects was held by their descendants' as if it were the person itself (1997, pp. 27-29; also Harrington, 1914, pp. 127-128).

Contemporary Bone Keeping and Reciprocal Actions

Hall (1997, pp. 31) mentions that the Lakota continue bundling practices, "spirit keeping," in subtle and modified form. The contemporary Maya of Quintana Roo, Mexico,

Figure 25.10.

Piled-Up Maya Femurs and Skulls.

Photograph by the Author.



also continue this practice, however, in not so subtle or modified form (Astor-Aguilera, 2010). Maya bundles, sometimes along with associated personal items, are sheltered and fed food and drink (Astor-Aguilera, 2010, pp. 161). Maya bone bundles are often scooted aside and the long bones then piled on top of one another. The skulls likewise. Sometimes these bones are removed or never placed within the bundles and taken elsewhere (Figure 25.10).

Kehoe (2002, pp. 202-203) mentions that the Iroquois-Huron also exhumed their dead and reburied skeletons together in mixed manner. Nelson and colleagues observed similarly archaeologically at La Quemada, Mexico, where bundled "bones were disarticulated [and] grouped in like elements" (1992, pp. 304). Furthermore, "the bone concentrations were dominated by the upper and lower limbs, skull fragments, mandibles, scapulae, ribs, and hip bones, [while] the vertebral column, hands, and feet were consistently missing" (Nelson et al., 1992, pp. 302). Similarly, for the Southeast, Hall says that the leg and arm bones and skull were "tied into a bundle" while "the ribs, axial skeleton, foot and hand bones were not saved" (1997, pp. 25). Nelson and colleagues conclude that some bones are "intentionally set aside during bundling... This matched distribution [of bone] may be [a] conscious choice [with some] elements perhaps being discarded" (1992, pp. 305).

Final Thoughts: Out of Eurasia

Wrapped skeletal remains are agency laden power bundles to many Indigenous Americans from North to South. Bundled remains can be political players in the social life of those who help shelter and take care of them. Many Indigenous Americans see no polar dichotomy between life and death (Astor-Aguilera, 2010). Per Paul, a Tz'utujil-Maya once came upon "a very shiny bone." He picked it up, treated it "with respect, and placed it in a box."

He then heard the bone talking. “He took it out, wrapped it in cloth, [and then] the bone told him to guard it well” (Paul, 1976, pp. 78-79).

The Maya can ritually use bones to cause good or harm as one can beseech and/or threaten the ancestors, whether verbally and/or physically, to do the bidding of whomever has access to them (Astor-Aguilera, 2010, pp. 179). The Maya can deny food and drink to their bundled objects. Bones can be set aside and forgotten and/or they can be tossed into the forest to rot and/or be gnawed at by animals. Rather than codified doctrine that restricts adaptive behavior; Indigenous American actions follow cognitive intersubjective patterns and conventions that exhibit fluidity in the shaping of ideas and relations and, like live people, funerary bundled remains were/are treated as sentient persons.

The human cognitive field patterns cosmological conventions onto the material world. Almost identical to Mesoamerica, Oldstone-Moore (2015, pp. 152) points out that Chinese human essences “are not systematic as there is no agreed upon number per person... While a person is alive, these are joined together and provide him/her with animate consciousness and rational capacity. At death they separate, the *hun* rising and the *po* settling into the earth.” The Chinese to Mesoamerica similarities are not coincidences. From about the first-millennium CE to about “two thousand years ago, a circum-pacific art style spread coastwise... [and] survives in New Guinea and Melanesia, in the Ainu of Japan, and the Northwest American Coast” (Kehoe, 2002, pp. 106).

Per Kehoe, the “Ainu of Japan, accustomed from ancient times to using boats, [are] ‘generalized Eurasian’—relatively light-skinned, dark hair, brown eyes, neither very tall nor very short, a range from which descend the Indo-Chinese, Polynesians, Siberians, and American Indians” (2002, pp. 10, 15-16; also Graves, 1995, pp. 34-36 and

Mithen, 2003, pp. 227). Shared ideas are their engaging “spirits’ to help them heal, divine, or retrieve wandering” human essences (Kehoe, 2002, pp. 106; also Graves, 1995, pp. 6-8, 13-14). The Out of Eurasia connections to the Indigenous Americas, regarding human essences being present in skeletal remains and other objects, are strongly exhibited within the Jōmon, the Ainu, and the Okinawa cultures of Japan which, per Susumu, are the “animistic foundation of Japan” (2006, pp. 227; also Matsumoto, 2018, pp. 3-5 and Mithen, 2003, pp. 380).

In rural Japan, Shintō retains the ancient tribal cult of the ancestors where at death a person’s essences become “kami” (Bowen, 1998, pp. 58; Kitagawa, 1988, pp. 229, 232). Like their Indigenous American counterparts, kami are venerated as linked to fertility in relation to “wind, thunder, lightning, rain, the sun, mountains, rivers, trees, rocks, [and] certain animals” (Picken, 1980, pp. 41; also Jinja Honcho, 2011, pp. 3). Also similar to Indigenous America is that kami essences are not always beneficent. Per Havens, “kami have an ‘unpredictable nature’ (Satō, 2000, pp. 20)... As Itō (2002, pp. 4) states, ancient associations of kami with epidemics, floods, and drought indicate that venerating ‘kami was for no other reason than for placating’ them” (2006, pp. 19). Indigenous American and Eurasian embodied cultural experiential values and meanings, as with all other humans, are created, recreated, and transmitted in and through the human mind. Human mental perceptual cognition includes embodied relational experiences with people, animals and plants, landscape features, meteorological phenomena, and man-made material culture.

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