

***The Cord Keepers: Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village.* Frank Salomon. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 331 pp.¹**

Reviewed by John H. McDowell

Frank Salomon, professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, is among the most prominent of living Andeanists, having authored important historical and ethnographic studies and having prepared, in partnership with George Urioste, the definitive text of the famous Huarochirí manuscript, an early colonial-era compendium of localized mythic narrative. Indeed, Salomon's interest in the Huarochirí document caused him to travel the highland district that gave birth to it, and there, by "a fluke of ethnographic luck" (p. 3), he came across a contemporary usage of *khipus*, the record-keeping cords of knotted fiber that count as one of the great mysteries and great achievements of Andean societies. Salomon was lucky, as well, in the timing of this discovery, which coincided with a growing interest among villagers in "Inka" symbolism and the connection between the khipus and this revered ancestral past.

The present monograph is an attempt to further our understanding of the wide-spread khipu tradition by delving into local knowledge and practice in the village of Tupicocha, in the sierra that rises to the east of Lima, where patrimonial khipus are retained by *ayllus*, corporate descent groups, and utilized in ayllu ceremonial politics. What results is a brilliant piece of detective work that assembles a diverse range of cues and clues and weaves them into a plausible account of how khipus might have functioned as data-encoding systems during the several centuries they persisted as the primary means for recording and conserving information in a world region that famously remained without writing even as it developed a highly complex civilization.

In the absence of resources that reliably explicate how this "technology of knowledge" might have operated—the craft was suppressed after 1583 by the Spanish and the last competent local practitioners disappeared in the early decades of the 20th century—Salomon adduces evidence both ethnohistorical and ethnographic to mount an engaging argument that originates in the Huarochirí province and in the specific code properties of its khipus but carries us far beyond these points of origin into a sustained encounter with the semiotics of sign systems, with Andean ethnohistory, and with the essence of what it means to be Andean.

The cumulative effect of reading this book is to agree with the author that the question, Did the Inkas have writing?, should be scuttled in favor of adopting a mindset attuned to cultures organized around the manipulation of fiber, where life is lived like a khipu, where canal systems resemble giant khipus on the land, and where the cords of a khipu can map the terrain even as they inscribe the progress and completion of such procedures as assigning labor, keeping track of material resources, and coordinating the interaction of political entities. Basing his reasoning on the evidence he has uncovered, Salomon presents khipus as "operation devices" (p. 273) that mirror in their structure the structure of the social occasions that created them. He states that "khipu recording was not only *about* the community—a controlling simulacrum, and important

¹ Posted to the *Museum Anthropology* weblog on February 22, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.blogspot.com/2007/02/cord-keepers-khipus-and-cultural-life.html>. Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* February 27, 2007. © 2006 John H. McDowell.

as such—but was itself the means of *producing* the community performatively” (p. 269). Salomon proposes that khipus, at least in the Tupicochan setting, functioned at one time as encodings of planning sessions, where responsibilities were negotiated, and of accounting sessions, where reckonings of performance were made and collectively ratified. In contemporary Tupicocha, these khipus are used mostly for ceremonial purposes, as emblems of local identity on official occasions, though they retain a curious half-life and afterlife, in Salomon’s terms, to which I will return below.

Let me briefly profile some of the significant areas of argumentation in this book. Regarding the interpretation of meaning in the khipu, Salomon offers a technical exposition with two primary threads: one, an inquiry into the type of signification operating in khipu art and the other, an exhaustive treatment of the elements of khipu signification and what kinds of data they most likely encode. Regarding the former, a key question is whether the khipu is predicated on spoken language—is it a *lexigraph*, a sign vehicle that corresponds to segments of speech? Salomon argues for a relation of complementarity between the khipu and speech, holding that information stored on khipus can be articulated in speech but does not depend on speech in the way that most familiar writing systems, for example, do. He views khipus as *semasiographs*, that is, signs that stand for the referents themselves, as in notational, pictographic, and token systems. He notes that semasiographs “are superior where different users have a substantial domain of culture in common, but little spoken language in common” (p. 27), a situation that obtained over the vast territory controlled by the Inka Empire.

In Salomon’s view, the semiotics of khipus are pragmatic rather than grammatical, and “the record-keeping art takes shape around the social problems it solves” (p. 28). He notes that, “the khipu’s surface regularities are likely to bear the stamp of schemata repeatedly employed to effect the social ends of gatherings where they were present” (p. 38). Sorting out these regularities and the schemata they might represent is the most technical component of this ambitious study, and if one is willing to follow the argument, a viable portrait of khipu signification emerges. Figure 26, the Key Figure (150-151), is a sketch of a composite Tupicochan khipu that captures most of the structural features presumably implicated in khipu signification. There are a great many variables capable of fashioning a difference in meaning: the color of threads, their size, the placement of knots, the kinds of knots used, the attachment of pendants, the grouping of cords into like-color bands, the use of specific colors as run-through elements—these and other dimensions of khipu art lend themselves to signification. As Salomon’s exegesis of khipu construction proceeds, it becomes clear that corded fiber is a remarkably potent medium for encoding bits of information.

Salomon draws on two related technologies of knowledge practiced in villages like Tupicocha to suggest the means and functions of khipu signification. One of these is the visual codes carved into staffs of office in Tupicocha. These designs carry information about the hierarchy of local offices and are distributed through a process of collective negotiation in a ceremonial forum. Much like the khipus, in Salomon’s view, the visual designs encode a process of social collaboration, but in this case within a much more limited semiotic medium. Also of consequence to the argument are practices associated with *ayllu* books that have been used for some time now in communities like Tupicocha to record duties to be performed and resources communally held. These books are updated annually and are employed to plan and then certify

performance of communal labor. The occasion for updating the books, as is true for the carving of the staffs, is a ceremonial one, with ritual drinking, dancing, and the performance of music. Salomon proposes that practices observed in these media are congruent with practices associated with the making and remaking of khipus during the period when they were the medium of choice for recording these kinds of information.

Although apparently no living person commands the language of the khipu, there is a local lore that conserves a good many details of khipu art and signification. Salomon gathers and surveys this fount of information to good effect, and at this stage the various branches of his argument begin to cohere into an account with considerable credibility. An interesting episode revolves around the reconstructions of Nery Javier Rojas, who as a young fellow spent a good deal of time with his grandfather, one of the last khipu masters, and committed to memory much of what he learned from this elder relative. Salomon refers to the store of information preserved in contemporary commentary as the half-life of the khipu medium, and he takes note as well of what he calls its afterlife, invented traditions centering on the khipus that may nonetheless reveal or confirm an authentic approach or concept. He coins the term “khipumancy” to refer to a well-entrenched practice centered on the “fall” of khipu cords in divinatory sessions.

Salomon has produced a challenging and rewarding study that takes us deep within the core of highland cultures in the Andes. His work here builds upon a strong tradition of khipu research and extends previous understandings by bringing into the picture a well-documented case study of khipu practices in a specific locale. Salomon integrates his findings into this literature by proposing Tupicocha as a regional variant, a vernacular or grassroots off-shoot, sharing many common features with the inventory of Inka khipus held in museums around the world but adapted to the purposes of local rather than imperial authority. Of necessity, his conclusions are speculative, but they are grounded on a firm foundation of evidence and exposition, and as a consequence they approach and enter into the realm of the believable.

This study is surely not the final word on khipu art and signification; as Salomon notes in closing, a new database (in progress) of khipus in museums, and the encounter of new khipus in undisturbed archaeological sites, are likely to produce conditions for evaluating the arguments he advances in this book and pushing towards that breakthrough that would allow a definitive reading of these Andean artifacts, characterized by Salomon as “perhaps the most complex and versatile of data writings” (p. 281) in the world’s diversified repertoire of information-encoding systems.

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