

Introductory essay

The Culle language of the northern Peruvian Andes

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Language name: Culle

Language family: Isolated

Geographic location: Northern Peruvian Andes (La Libertad, Cajamarca, Ancash regions)

Estimated population: Culle is currently perceived as an extinct language.

1. Introduction

The case of Culle, an isolated indigenous language of the northern Peruvian Andes that has been subjected to minoritization not only by Spanish hegemony but also by Quechua dominance in pre-Columbian times, provides an opportunity to address the complexity of historical multilingualism in South America.

There is solid evidence attesting to the fact that before the Spanish invasion, the Culle language was in the process of being subsumed by Quechua, which had taken root in the region with Inca hegemony, and perhaps even earlier, with the Wari expansion (Adelaar 2012). That process was cut short by the European conquest enterprise (Cerrón-Palomino 1995: 177), yet centuries later, the ancient indigenous regional language was similarly overtaken by Spanish.

Quechua, a major language family currently spoken in various territories across South America, has been the focus of ample scholarly study and research. In contrast, Culle and its linguistic legacy—visible in different aspects of the Spanish spoken in the northern Andes of Peru—has received scant attention, and its features have at times even been conflated with those of Quechua, as we will see in section 3.

Studying Culle as a language repeatedly minoritized in different historical periods can be particularly illuminating. Despite the scarcity of documentary sources for its study, academic research has been able to expand our knowledge of Culle through the use of alternative sources, such as toponymy and the analysis of regional variants of Spanish. In what follows, we will provide a succinct history of the language, present some of its most distinctive features, and discuss some possible approaches to deepen our knowledge of Culle and the culture associated with it.

2. History

While currently perceived by scholars as extinct, Culle, quite surprisingly, was spoken at least until the first half of the 20th century. It is assumed to have been the vernacular language of a large multi-ethnic pre-Columbian population settled in a wide area of the northern Peruvian Andes, encompassing today's southern Cajamarca, the highlands of La Libertad, and northern Ancash (see Image 2). Colonial-era chronicles and administrative authorities described Culle as “the language of Huamachuco”. Huamachuco was a *curacazgo* or chiefdom in the northern Peruvian Andes, distinctive in its architecture, religion, and ancestor worship (Lau 2010; Topic & Topic 2000). Sources for the language include two lexical lists, scattered mentions throughout colonial documents, and a wide array of toponyms.

The oldest extant source for Culle is a document prepared around 1560 by an Augustinian missionary, a member of the first group of Christian evangelizers in the region. Friar Juan de San Pedro, probably seeking to convince a Spain-based superior in his religious order to send more preachers to the area (González 1992), emphasized the persistence of ancient myths and religious beliefs among the indigenous

population, and the fragile anchoring of Christianity. To that end, he described in some detail the characteristics and locations of sacred places in the region. Contemporary archeological explorations, in particular those directed by John Topic (Topic 1992; Topic et al. 2002), have been able to map that ancient network of sacred spaces thanks to the information provided by this document, known as the *Relación agustina*.

At the center of this sacred network was Catequil, a deity associated with thunder and lightning. The *Relación agustina* records the myth of Catequil's founding of old Huamachuco. Early Spanish witnesses understood Catequil to be among the principal indigenous deities, and the *Relación* describes him as "the most feared and honored idol in all of Peru, adored and revered from Quito to Cuzco" (San Pedro 1992 [1560]: 173-174). Catequil was believed to possess oracular powers; according to some traditions, this idol prophesized Atahualpa's defeat by Huascar, which prompted the decapitation of its effigy and the burning of its temple before the Spanish invasion (Gareis 1992).

The oldest mention of Culle as a distinct language, however, is found in another document connected to the repression of indigenous religions. It is a Church visit written in 1618, which prescribes a penalty of fifty lashes for anyone using the indigenous language (Andrade 2016, 2019). At that point in the process of Spanish colonization, "minor" indigenous languages (those not as extended as Quechua and Aymara) were seen by Church authorities as vehicles for the survival of ancient beliefs, and, as such, as obstacles for indigenous acceptance of Christian precepts.

The most significant lexical records of Culle are also due to Church actions. First, in the late eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment era, the Bishop of Trujillo, Baltazar Jaime Martínez Compañón, had a glossary made with a number of Spanish terms rendered in the indigenous languages spoken in his jurisdiction (see Figure 1). Despite the obvious cultural biases that prompted the inclusion of such words as "God", "soul", and "body" (Torero 2002: 208), the Culle column provides a total of 39 indigenous words, most of which can be assigned to this language while others are actually Quechua.

The second Culle word list was compiled in 1915 by the parish priest of Cabana, in the southern part of the region. We know these words to be Culle because of the list's coincidences with the late-eighteenth century document. Along with some twenty words, this record includes a sentence and a conjugated verb. At the time the list was collected, Culle was still in use, but confined to the southern portions of its former territory (see Map 1).

The language is assumed to have remained in use at the southernmost end of this region at least through mid-twentieth century. In the 1980s, linguist Willem Adelaar (1990) carried out fieldwork intended to identify possible speakers, but was unsuccessful. In his publications, however, he was able to identify areas of interest for further investigation. Alfredo Torero (2002: 234, 240) describes his own unsuccessful attempts. Researchers who have continued working on the subject have so far been equally unable to achieve positive results.

The possible existence of a Culle catechism has been hypothesized (Castro de Trelles 1992: XL), but archival research has so far failed to uncover it. What is clear from this brief account, at any rate, is the ambiguous role played by the Catholic Church with regards to Culle: in the seventeenth century, some of its agents suppressed the use of this language in order to better implant the religion of the conquerors; others, however, compiled whatever limited evidence we have of Culle words. It is thanks to the latter—along with other valuable sources, such as toponymy—that we are able to deduce a few characteristic features of the language, which will be presented in the section that follows.

3. Linguistic features

Given the scarcity of sources, the syntactic, morphological and phonetical-phonemic features of Culle are difficult to study in a systematic way. The lexical items collected in the historical sources mentioned above have been key for some useful generalizations regarding its linguistic features. The Spanish spoken in Culle's vernacular area also incorporates a number of indigenous characteristics, both in the lexicon and in some emotion-driven suffixes like augmentatives and diminutives. Likewise, scholarly research has been able to map out a hypothetical Culle area based on the consistency and frequency of its toponymic segments (Adelaar 1990; Torero 2002). In this section, we will address these three areas of research.

The two-word lists yield some 50 words, four noun phrases with core and modifier, and two descriptive statements; one of the latter, “qui amberto gauallpe” (‘I want to eat a hen’), contains the possible first-person pronoun “qui”, *ki*. The noun phrases indicate that Culle word order was modifier-core, like Quechua, Aymara, and English, and unlike Spanish. Thus, we have “ahhi ogoll” ‘male child’ and “usu ogoll” ‘female child’, where “ogoll” ‘child’ is the core of the phrase. Culle toponyms also follow this order. For example, *Conchucos* (*con-* meaning ‘water and *-chuco*, ‘land’) is interpreted as “wet land, marshy land” (Adelaar 1990: 91) and *Ushunday* (*ushun-* meaning ‘bumblebee and *-day* ‘hill’) is understood as ‘bumblebee hill’. In the eighteenth century list, verbs are marked with a final segment <u>, which suggests an infinitive marker (/u/ or /w/; Adelaar and Muysken, 2004, p. 402). However, based on a comparison with other languages in the list, Torero (2002: 210) asserts that it could be a different verbal marker, like the first-person one.

Culle toponymy also reveals a number of phonetical-phonemic features of the ancient language. For example, it provides evidence of the frequency of a voiceless palatal fricative (/j/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet) in geographic names like *Shiracmaca*, *Shorey* and *Pashash*. It also brings forth the possibility of phoneme combinations at the syllable boundary that are unknown in other Andean languages: for example, *shg*, as in *Ipashgón*; *rb*, as in *Querquerball*; and *kd*, as in *Ichocda* (Adelaar 1990: 92). Another notable feature is the possibility of having the phonemes *ll* and *ñ* in absolute final position, as in *Quisuarball* and *Querquerball*, for the former, and *Acogonñ*,

for the latter (Adelaar 1990: 92). Adelaar (1990) notes that this feature is dialectally restricted to the southern area of the Culle region.

The latter characteristic is also observed in the lexicon of this indigenous language, both in historical sources (“ogoll” for ‘child’) and in the indigenous loan words that persist in the local Spanish dialect to this day. For example, *maichill* is the name of the seeds that are strung together and tied to the calves of traditional dancers, which produce a unique sound; another instance is *cushall*, which means both ‘light broth’ and ‘breakfast’.

The region’s Spanish is also influenced by Culle in its morpheme inventory, particularly in regards to evaluative suffixes like augmentatives and diminutives. Thus, we have the augmentative *-enque*, as in *cholenque*, ‘big boy’, and *chinenque*, ‘big girl’, and the diminutive *-ash-* as in *cholasho*, ‘little boy’, and *chinasha*, ‘little girl’. The latter has at times been mistaken for the Quechua diminutive *-cha* (as in *niñucha*, ‘little kid’) (Caravedo 1992; Calvo 2017), an example of the process of minoritization of the region’s indigenous language even in the academic sphere, due to the greater emphasis on and prestige of Quechua.

A number of specialized cultural fields have also been important in the study of indigenous linguistic legacy in the region. In particular, the field of traditional textile production, where several words and terms naming tools and instruments associated with the backstrap loom have been found to recur throughout the region (see Image 3). Although not all those words and terms can be attributed to Culle, the entire set of names is distinct from those used in other regions of the Andes, even though the techniques and instruments are essentially the same. Other areas of traditional culture require further research, as will be detailed in the next section.

4. Current circumstances and future challenges and opportunities

Future research on Culle should focus on heretofore unaddressed areas; among these, anthroponymy stands out. The information contained in indigenous last names has proven valuable for the study of the history of Andean languages. While some last names that can be attributed to Culle survive to this day (for example, *Quino*, *Sirumbal*, *Huanambal*), the richest sources for research are to be found in the archives, in the form of censuses and tallies of indigenous populations recorded at different points along the region’s colonial and republican history. Such sources demand a more thorough and detailed philological analysis than they have as of yet been subjected to (Rojas 2013). Also in the domain of onomastics, while the study of place names has been particularly intense and productive in the case of Culle, more so than for other Andean languages, as was seen in Section 3, a state-of-the-art review is needed for an updated panoramic of what has been found and what requires further research and clarification.

Another important task is the systematization of the various lexical lists available for the language, as these are based on differing collection, identification, and orthographic criteria. Completing this task will support better discrimination between words of Culle origin and those taken from Quechua. Lexical studies devoted to specific cultural areas—such as traditional weaving—have proved fruitful, but similar efforts must be carried out in other semantic fields that favor the retention of indigenous words, e. g., agriculture, vernacular health wisdom, and child-rearing.

Besides such academic needs, there is a growing interest among the residents of different cities in the northern Peruvian Andes in recovering the linguistic knowledge linked to Culle and to the cultural manifestations associated with it. One example of this are the decades-long efforts by school teachers in the region to emphasize, as an instructional activity, representations of the mythological foundation of Huamachuco compiled in the sixteenth-century *Relación agustina* (San Pedro 1992 [1560]). Although those representations give priority to the names of the *huacas* (deities) as recorded in the colonial-era document, the costumes and rituals strongly resemble those used in the Inti Raymi, the solar festivity performed yearly in Cusco, a contact zone for Spanish and Southern Quechua. Here we have a parallel example, in the broader cultural field, of how certain characteristics that can be attributed to Culle are at times mistaken for Quechua, as we saw in Section 3. It may be possible for interdisciplinary academic efforts to identify and discuss this tendency towards the “southernization” of indigenous features from this region, a type of bias seen not only in linguistics but also in material culture studies (Sillar and Ramón Joffré 2016).

As caveat to all this, we must note that research projects in the academic sphere should not allow themselves to be determined by existing social enthusiasms around legacy languages. In recent years, for example, a trend has been observed to inflate the ancient indigenous language’s geographic and political reach, to the point that, in some formulations, its distribution ends up covering both northern and southern areas for which no sufficient evidence is at hand. A case in point is the postulate of a “Culle macro-language” (Paredes Estela 2020), with dialects for the Cajamarca region from which certain toponyms are supposed to derive; those toponyms, however, are better explained by a hypothetical Cajamarcan indigenous language, independent from Culle, as posited by Torero (2002) and argued more recently by Ramón and Andrade (2021). With regards to the south, there is also an occasional tendency to postulate Culle influences on Quechua morphology and lexicon without sufficient empirical evidence (Paredes Estela 2020).

To summarize, an effort to better connect specialist initiatives with region’s growing interest in this extinct language is needed, without casting aside the standard criteria for academic research and debate. Lastly, a careful study of local initiatives concerning the region’s indigenous language and culture is also required, in a similar vein to those currently underway for Mochica areas (Eloranta and Bartens 2020; Tavera Peña 2022). Despite pronounced differences in the documentation and register of these two indigenous languages, the “Mochica renaissance” evident in recent decades in Peru’s

northern coastal region can provide a significant source of inspiration for Culle-related initiatives.

Illustrations:

Image 1. Colonial list including Culle words

Caption: Martínez Compañón's vocabulary

Image 2. Map of the area

Caption: Map of the Culle area

Image 3. Traditional weaving

Caption: Lexical studies devoted to traditional weaving have proved fruitful in the case of Culle.

Image 4. Landscape

Caption: The town of Otuzco, quite close to the coastal city of Trujillo, is nestled in the Culle area.

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