

Exploring the Grammar of Sex in Mochica

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The Mochica language, an Andean linguistic isolate once spoken in northern Peru, is documented in a colonial grammatical description and religious texts prepared by Fernando de la Carrera in 1644. Despite the absence of contemporary speakers and the limited availability of textual material, this document provides valuable insights into cultural perceptions and expressions related to sexuality. This study delves into the grammar of sex in the Mochica language, examining the few registered linguistic structures, lexical choices, and syntactic patterns that encode sexual concepts.

The documentation of structures related to sexual activity and genitalia is confined to Carrera 1644 and might be incomplete. However, the existence of the Christian Doctrine and a confessionary compensates for the lack of fieldwork and avoids the potentially uncomfortable process of interrogating speakers about topics that are generally considered taboo. A confessionary served the purpose of providing missionaries with ready-made questions to delve into the personal lives of the penitents, even probing into whether the individual had engaged in sexual activities with animals, with the priest listing possible animals involved. Particularly, great importance was given to questions concerning the sixth and ninth commandments, which safeguard against impurity and adultery.

The registered forms are *siink* ‘to fornicate with’, *siinkim* ‘to be fornicated with’, *tok* ‘deflower, take the virginity of’, *tokir* ‘to be deflowered’, *kepc* ‘to help conceal something inappropriate’, *jam* ‘to have carnal desire’. In this presentation, I will present the semantic and syntactic characteristics of these verbs. Furthermore, in the texts under investigation, three forms associated with eating and drinking are found. Notably, a passive form, *morok* ‘to be fornicated with’, literally meaning ‘to be bitten and eaten’, is present. Additionally, a transitive verb *man-* has the meaning of both ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ as well as ‘fornicate with’, while its intransitive counterpart *funo-* does not play a role in expressing sexual activity. The verb *man-* and its nominalizations are utilized to denote various aspects of sexual activity, encompassing meanings such as fornicate, brothel, sensuous woman, or man. Regarding *man-*, Salas (2012a, pp. 448-449; 2012b, pp. 53-54) suggests that its use to mean ‘fornicate with’ is metaphorical (cf. Newman 2009: 19–20). In this study, I will present my own analysis, suggesting that *man-* could in fact be a case of a polysemous verb.

Using a combination of linguistic analysis and historical documentation, this research uncovers how Mochica speakers conceptualized and linguistically represented sex. This study contributes to the broader field of linguistic anthropology by expanding our understanding of how language shapes and reflects cultural attitudes towards sex.

References

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