REVIEW ARTICLE

A Reassessment of Social Complexity in the Southwest of the Intermediate Area

Aldebarán Vásquez Grueso

PhD, student in History, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile.

Corresponding Author: Aldebarán Vásquez Grueso, PhD student in History, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile.

Abstract

This essay proposes a critical review of social complexity in pre-Hispanic times, taking as a specific area of study the Southwest of the Intermediate Area. This area, which bears its name because it is in the middle of Mesoamerica and the Andes, is appreciated as an intermediate point, in which the social complexity that occurred towards the North and South of it was not achieved. Despite this, it is possible to suggest that it had important political, economic and technological processes, perhaps ignored or little taken into account in the archaeological analyses and debates that are carried out in the studies of social complexity. This essay is an exploration of this topic, a partial attempt given its breadth, but we trust that it will help to outline elements for future and productive analyses on this subject.

Keywords: Intermediate Area, Social complexity, Tumaco- La Tolita.

1. Introduction

It is not new to observe that the intermediate area shows a great diversity of forms of social organization during the last three or four thousand years. It lacks the cultural homogeneity that Mesoamerica and the Central Andes supposedly possess. Its old characterization as an intermediate area between the two American "high civilizations" is due to this observation (Drennan 413)

Culturally and geographically, pre-Hispanic America is divided into three areas, Mesoamerica, the Intermediate Area and the Andes (Fiedel; Hosler and Lange), characterized by processes of varied social stages, which define certain degrees of social complexity within the archaeological literature and try to elucidate important sociocultural aspects for a better understanding of social dynamics in the past.

This analysis focuses on a critical review of the complexity in the southwest of the Intermediate Area, a territory that housed the pre-Hispanic culture that is currently called Tumaco-La Tolita. We start from the central question, what is social complexity, how is the cultural area where the pre-Hispanic Tumaco-La Tolita culture settled understood, under this paradigm? The hypothesis put forward is that social complexity is an analytical framework that allows us to understand the process of social development that took place in pre-Hispanic times, organizing, so to speak, cultures into stages or moments, according to their attributes.

Despite this, the complex nature of the Interneda Area, the place where the Tumaco-La Tolita culture settled, presents nuances typical of the cacigazco, such as the lack of a centralized unity; but at the same time it allows us to ask the theory, as well as the archaeological record, so it is considered elements and stages of lesser or greater complexity. It is precisely the methodology of bibliographic analysis, previously mentioned, that is the element used to construct this essay.

About our study area it is worth bearing in mind its great geographical magnitude, more than 25,000 km^2, as well as its varied ecosystems, among which we find: mountains, coast, valley and islands, all this along the Pacific coasts of Ecuador and Colombia.

2. Social complexity

From the archaeological literature, complexity is perceived as something linked to a number of variables, such as environmental (Rodríguez 2005), socio-political aspects (Binford; Gasson), to which could be added access to strategic resources (Lange). In summary, returning to Rojas (272), complexity could be thought of as a relationship of several networks, united and in constant dialogue within each society.

Another view of complexity is perceived as linear (Lumbreras a 42), focused on evolutionary scales in which a society that meets certain aspects of the list of attributes that are required could be included. In the words of Rojas, we can specify social complexity as follows, "in the particular case of archaeology, complexity has been considered as part of the theory of evolution, to the extent that it defines steps of development, as well as in functional-structuralist theories that account for the economic and political structures that support societies" (272).

Nowadays within the archaeological discourse, the ethnocentric vision continues to reign (Trigger cited by McGuire 19), in which the issue of complexity is little explained but social processes are labeled in a range that would basically be at the top if it managed to reach the State, the highest cultural stage, under this explanatory paradigm. Campell, by the way, addresses this problem, stating that "... serves political theory in archaeology as a kind of 'end of history', but it is, in fact, an illusory and anachronistic projection of modern political contingencies" (Campell 2009, cited by Wiesheu 9).

Therefore, a kind of determinism can be seen in this statement (McGuire 20) clouding the analyses of social complexity by focusing more on what type of stage was achieved, hence the idea of "end of history", without delving into its dynamics, which is urgent to understand the social processes of archaeological contexts.

3. The Southwest of the Intermediate Area and social complexity

The first societies in this area have been located in the site called La Chimba, Otavalo, Ecuador, between 700 B.C. and 400 B.C., a period known as Early (Rodríguez 38) and characterized by indications of gold work; for the context of Tumaco, a Colombian area, these first works with gold and copper (a mixture known as tumbaga) are presented around 500 B.C. in the Inguapi phase, perhaps influenced by the metallurgical tradition that arises at the La Chimba site, which corroborates that there was a great integration in the area (Olsen 143) that allowed the flow of varied information.

A little further south, towards the Equator, the first crops of corn are related, around the seventh century B.C., as well as the elaboration of pottery around 3000 B.C. (Lumbreras a 37). As for large constructions, the area has few, at least to date, this could be due to factors such as high volcanism (Rodríguez 20) and changes in the coastline (Olsen 68), which would have covered much of the architecture of the area. Despite this, Fiedel presents an interesting finding:

However, more complex societies occupied the northern coast of Ecuador and the southern Andes in Colombia. At La Tolita, in the Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas, 40 earthen mounds were built between 400 B.C. and 200 A.D. The tallest of them all was 9m tall and measured 45 by 20 m at the base. Some of the other mounds were circular or oval (345).

However, the presence of elements of an agricultural nature, modifications in the landscape focused mainly on corn agriculture (Sanoja and Vargas 209) stand out, which is related to the agricultural processes that were experienced in the Southwest of the Intermediate Area, such as the cultivation of avocados around 8000 B.C., and beans. in Popayán (department of Cauca), and corn, in the Calima area, further north, around 4700 B.C. (Rodríguez 22). The subsistence of the groups that populated this area is called conchero (Olsen148), mainly aimed at complementing agriculture with fishing and the use of the marine resources present both on the coastline and in the rivers.

Tumaco la Tolita is characterized from archaeology as an area in which the tendency towards chiefdom was very marked, taking up the classification offered by Sanoja and Vargas we can define it as follows: "(...) more than a historical stage or a social type, it would be a generic way of life of the tribal food-producing formation, one of which we call egalitarian tribal and the other hierarchical cacical" (Sanoja and Vargas 203), which was almost constant during its 1,000 years of history, a consideration that allows us to speak of cyclical chiefdoms (Anderson; Redmond et al., cited in Gassón 41), which can be located for long periods of time in the areas that make up these geographical environments. This could also be analyzed from the alternation of socio-political cycles (Covey; Marcus 2008, cited by Wiesheu 17) particular to each context and of necessary approach to approach social complexity.

In this order of ideas, it is necessary to address power, seen as a determining factor when exposing social complexity. However, a question remains open as to how reliable this is for all contexts (Laguens 99); power is often seen as something linked to exploitation, (Gnecco 11). In the case of the Intermediate Area, a tendency towards a seasonal, conjunctural power (Gassón 46), linked to the religious and the political in the figure of the shaman (Dolmatoff 1988, cited by Gnecco 24) is perceived, without this being a clear marker of inequality (Rodríguez 26).

This consideration supposes, then, an exercise of power and a legitimation based on symbolic accumulation (Gnecco 29), in which one could speak of a clear tendency towards theocracy (Sanoja and Vargas 212) very possibly linked to the handling of knowledge to talk to supernatural beings. Hence, power is embodied in the shaman, a figure of power who within the chiefdom managed to exercise his authority through the management of his "supernatural" knowledge in the realm of daily life.

The appreciation is relevant because from this scheme we would be facing an area without a central power, represented in the symbolic paraphernalia of the shamanic (Gnecco 14), which leads us to a not so clear difference around the differences of the sectors that would make up its society (Fiedel 259); another aspect on which we should focus our gaze is the connectivity between the geographical and political fragmentation of the area (Moore 386) with dispersed populations in which there would have been a fragmented power, according to the geographical immediacy. This is in contrast to the centralism of a State, a form of government that would build networks to articulate its power through communicating vessels to the periphery, under a relationship of subordination of the latter to the center.

To the above must be added the intricate analysis of the material, the basis of many typologies of power. For Gnecco, for example, it is not entirely clear whether these differences (the material and its relationship with concrete agents) are due to categories of power, or if, on the contrary, they are a direct reference to the notion of sex, age, or activity of the person (Gnecco 11). Laguens provides more elements to take into account in this analysis, with an ecological and material (biological and cultural) perspective:

The dimension of this problem is more complex; to volume and properties we must add the structure of resources and relationships in the social fabric in the contexts of interaction that characterized the material configurations of the existence of past social groups (Laguens 102).

During this period of time, we refer to the pre-Hispanic era, there is also a tendency to perceive a marked tendency towards mixed egalitarian tribal societies (Rodríguez 17), notorious in the three periods that are taken for the area corresponding to Colombia, Capuli, Piartal and Tuza, chronologically located during the years 1-1500 A.D. (Rodríguez 43), cultures that present some differences in their historical trajectories.

These varied trajectories appear to be recurrent in the Intermediate Area (Drennan 414). It is important to think about its articulations, through political alliances constituted on the basis of small surpluses that would have been used to generate links (Binford 246; Gassón 32; Lumbreras b 355); for other authors, the period known as "Integration", around 500 A.D. until the Spanish invasion, would mark a turn around a process of social differentiation, which would be linked to the great advances in metal work (Fiedel 347).

Authors such as Lumbreras (b 358) have a divergent appreciation of the time range attributed to the Tuza style S XIII-XVI; for him there would be a greater concentration of the domestic economy, mainly at the agricultural and pottery level, as well as a reduction in work with gold in favor of more copper. This implies the possibility of reorienting production, to meet the needs of the moment.

The proximity to the sea is taken as a key element not only for food subsistence but also for the trade network that would have taken place from this area to the north of Peru (Sonoja and Vargas 213) and Mesoamerica; the case of the Spondylus shell allows us to articulate a dual hypothesis, as Starburk mentions, linking trade and religiosity, depending on the context, "work was done for the Andean area basically based on its religious needs, while economic and sumptuary approaches prevailed when it came to Mesoamerica" (Starbuck, cited by Fauria 110). Another point of view to analyze the trade (exchange) of shells and its diffusion is constituted by the need to acquire prestige goods.

Regarding the prestige goods there is an interesting proposal of analysis by Hosler, which links the South American influences in the beginnings of metallurgy in Western Mexico, which occurred around 600-700

A.D. during the period called Epiclassic, focusing on the analysis of the possibilities of maritime navigation from the coast of Ecuador to Western Mexico. "the introduction of metallurgy by sea routes is especially plausible, given the seafaring orientation and sophisticated navigation technologies of the socio-political groups of the Ecuadorian coast" (Hosler 162), as well as in design patterns and elaboration techniques (Hosler 146-147). These analyses are a little out of the perspective proposed in these pages, however, in the future, they constitute an interesting relationship to explore, corroborate or refute.

4. Discussions and Future Directions

Addressing social complexity is a framework study to focus on more analysis, as could be read from the perspective of various authors (Binford; Drennan; Gnecco; McGuire and Lumbreras a & b), which is why it should not be an end of such an analysis to establish whether or not it has reached the State (Campell, 2009, cited by Wiesheu 9); much less to locate power as something central to account for social complexity (Gnecco; Sanoja and Vargas), not in all contexts does the same formula apply that seems to be appropriate.

Another aspect also to be taken up within the social complexity is the great weight given to the comparative model, taking data from one context to another (Martín et al. 8), which means that the Southwest of the Intermediate Area is seen as a different area in relation to the Andes and Mesoamerica as it has not reached the level of cultural development of these (Willie 1990, cited by Lange 30). However, the reason for these differences remains unexplained (Drennan 419), leaving open an enormous research possibility for those who wish to do so.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective outlined by authors such as Binford (237) and Martín (278), the manufacturing sector is conceived as an element of social complexity. This topic is relevant since we find in the Intermediate Area a pre-Hispanic primary focus of goldsmith production (Hosler) and ceramics (Lumbreras b), as well as large-scale trade networks (Sanoja and Vargas), which would most likely reach Peru for the trade of Spondylus shells and a little further north, to Mexico (Hosler) transmitting information on goldsmith technology.

One more point to address, central without a doubt, concerns the very fact of social complexity. As has been illustrated in the previous pages, this topic has several nuances, however, it is not yet very clear which path leads to this process. Binford argues that "in any case, we know little about why anyone would 'want' a complex system to the point of investing effort to overproduce" (Binford 247).

The challenge in the case of the Intermediate Area is precisely to go a step beyond the designation of social models (tribe, chiefdom, band, among others), and to begin to understand these by assuming the variability of the area (Lumbreras a 42), an issue that can be addressed from a change in the scales of analysis, as in effect is taken from the analysis of social complexity in Mesoamerica (Drennan 416). By way of closing, we wish to present a synthesis of Drennan's on social complexity, with which it is not intended to close the debate on the subject but to open it to other horizons... prospects for undertaking a better understanding of apparently less complex areas, such as the Intermediate Area:

A kind of general conclusion is that the form of social organization of the Intermediate Area was, persistently, the chiefdom (if we take advantage of the minimum or more general definition of the word). Other, superficially similar areas (such as Mesoamerica and the Central Andes), saw the emergence of multiple examples of entities with political integration on a much larger scale (and with other characteristics different from those of any society in the Intermediate Area, which could also be emphasized). This fact has been recognized for decades, but our understanding of how or why it happened is very primitive, and we do not have very sophisticated models awaiting empirical evaluation (419).

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