

# Recount!

## The Social Life of the Peruvian Census

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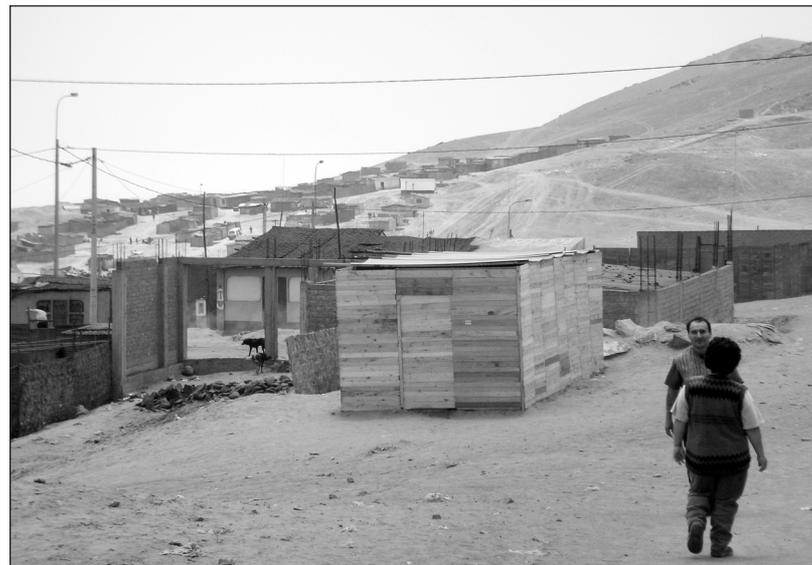
On October 21, 2007, Peru stood still. It was the day of the national census and President Alan García had issued an immobility order, threatening to fine businesses that opened that day and asking citizens to stay in their houses between 8:00 am and 6:00 pm so census-takers could get an accurate count. From where I stood in Pachacútec, a shantytown in Lima's Northwestern periphery, the stillness was a dramatic contrast to the scrambling that occurred the night before. Bus after bus burst at the seams carrying people into town from all over Lima. Those already in Pachacútec strategically shuffled family members to different houses and hastily assembled prefabricated houses on empty lots; striking poses for the snapshot of reality the census is supposed to be.

Peruvians' desires to be counted in particular places and within particular family configurations are driven by the belief that how they align with "official" census categories will greatly impact the rights and entitlements they may enjoy. Thus, as the census-taking unfolded, it seemed highly divorced from the day's feigned stillness and the ostensibly technocratic world of statistics. Fights broke out between surveyors and the surveyed, construction materials lay burning on the roadside, and police were sent to quell the protests of census volunteers denied their certificates of participation. These events reveal the Peruvian census to be a politically charged project of social construction where global technocratic imaginaries intertwine with myriad local concerns. Here censuses are shown to have complicated "social lives" (Appadurai 1988) as tools that can be manipulated by

multiple, at times competing, interpretations and produce a variety of (un)intended effects.

### Performance and Contested Counts

The 2007 census was Peru's second population count in just over two years. Though many in Pachacútec still had "house censused" stickers on their doors from 2005, few had any recollection of it. Unlike Peru's previous *de facto* censuses, which counted physical bodies where they stood, the 2005 census applied the unob-



House assembled on the eve of the 2007 census. Photo courtesy Kristin Skrabut

trusive and "democratic" statistical methods used in the United States and Europe. It took place over 32 days (July 18 through August 30, 2005) and relied on whoever was home to report household members. Although largely unseen by Peruvians, the architects of the 2005 census endeavored to leave a mark on the international stage. As the first census following the fall of Fujimori's dictatorship, it was designed in consultation with French and US demographers as a demonstration of Peru's new transparent, democratic and invest-

sample surveys ... if it had gotten that far. Shortly after the results were published in 2006, the census came under heavy fire for certain "statistical anomalies," supposedly undercounting the national population by 7% while overcounting vacant houses by 15% (*La Republica*, January 15, 2006). As a result, one of President García's first acts in office was to declare the 2005 census invalid. Meeting the needs of the nation, he argued, demanded accurate numerical knowledge of the entire population, particularly the margins, which were ostensibly rendered invisible by the previous count. García promised that his administration would conduct their census just as emperors had in biblical times, by counting every-body

for accurate data and the fanfare that accompanied the immobility order not only ensured that García "saw" those who had gone unseen, but also that he was seen "seeing" them.

### Marginal Appropriations

When the census touched down in the "marginal" area of Pachacútec, it was once again transformed. Although García's administration marketed the census as a rare and important step in the development of the Peruvian nation, in Pachacútec, the census was far from novel. Instead it was assimilated into a system of counts and recounts that occur regularly in this area, each promising to see the population as it "truly" is, and to distribute resources accordingly.

Since 1945, when mass urbanization began in Peru, the people at the margins of society, literally squatting in Lima's periphery, have been central to the legitimacy of the state. As the number of people living on the margins grew they became increasingly vocal, demanding infrastructure and legal recognition of their rights to land. Politicians who provide land titles thus may be rewarded with the political support of the poor, as well as a legitimacy that comes from being viewed as active on their behalf (Corbridge et al 2006; Collier 1976). In this context, the impoverished masses become a precious commodity and politicians from local, regional and national governments compete for the power to "properly" categorize the *truly* needy. Surveyors in colored vests arrive at doors daily on behalf of various authorities, each promising to "see" squatters as they *really* are, recognizing and re-recognizing their entitlements to land via (re)counts, surveys, censuses and eventual formalization.

Thus, despite authorities' assurances that the census had nothing to do with property rights, most Pachacutanos assumed them to be related. As I accompanied census-takers in 2007, we frequently came across people who wished to be counted in particular places and demanded to review the census document to ensure they were recorded exactly how and where they wished to be. It was as if

### COMMENTARY

competing parties for use toward their own ends. In the Peruvian case, the 2007 census circulated at local, national and international levels to be remade through

ment-worthy status (INEI 2005; Zagarra 2006).

The basic information collected in the 2005 census would have been supplemented by ongoing

inside the houses to which they belonged.

Far from a genuine disagreement over "the facts," this recount points to the social significance of counting as a performance for particular audiences and the ways that simple distinctions in statistical method become imbued with political meaning. All censuses are born into a global historical context in which counting a population is itself associated with development and modernity. Taking a census not only implies political stability and territorial control, it also offers a performance of modern statehood for international and domestic audiences alike. Yet the Peruvian case also demonstrates how easily "apolitical" governance techniques may be co-opted to serve populist politics and clientelist ends. The political clamor

See *Recount* on page 15

not, unfortunately, even need to consider the 260,000 registered Sudanese refugees living in exile, nor the Sudanese diaspora. Displaced following long decades of war, both groups have been excluded from the census that will be used to determine the political future of Sudan. Apart from even these important concerns, one only needs to look at basic census findings, and the responses of local political leaders and the public to those findings, to recognize the degree to which counting has functioned as a political instrument in much of the country.

Luka Biong Deng, the GoSS Minister for Presidential Affairs, argued in an interview with *Al-Sahafah* that it was not logical that the population of South Darfur would have increased by 90% since the partial census of 1993, as the 2008 census claimed. The 322% increase in the population of Arab nomadic groups, he noted, was especially surprising. His fears about the validity of the census results were widely reflected in the SPLM. Some voiced concern that

many residents of IDP camps in Darfur were not counted, as the Central Bureau of Statistics chose to estimate rather than count the number of people in camps and other “unsafe” areas.

It was against this background of politicized demography that the SPLM rejected the results of the census. It took months of negotiations before, in late February 2010, the parties agreed to increase the number of seats given to southern Sudan in the national parliament; like the other seats, they will be appointed on the basis of the election results.

In a divided country, a quantitative survey required a qualitative, political solution.

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## Recount

*continued from page 13*

they were posing for an evidentiary photograph. While Pachacutanos realize that no single survey will guarantee land rights—recurrent political contestation makes this a seeming impossibility—they understand that every “official” count helps them to construct a paper trail that they can use to legitimate their land claims.

### The Beginning of the Story

Three years later, data from the 2007 census have finally been fully elaborated and the statistics are ready to take on lives of their own as they appear in political speeches, NGO mission statements, corporate investment strategies and the popular imagination. Yet community leaders in Pachacútec argue these data are already obsolete. Many of the houses built on census day lay abandoned. Others were quickly “sold,” leaving new occupants eager to be recognized as

owners. In still other cases, the recognition of one house prompted the construction of 50



more houses alongside it, creating a new generation of need that waits to be counted. Community leaders, local governments and NGOs therefore continue to take their own opportunistic censuses, constantly updating data in ways that drive, rather than simply reflect, local social dynamics. Far from a “snapshot of reality,” the Peruvian case demonstrates that taking the census photo is itself integral to Peruvians’ livelihood strategies. As ethnographers we would do well to move beyond critiquing categories to consider what role censuses play in the various places they land and the social dynamics engendered by the very act of (re)counting.

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## Anthropology News Calls for Proposals

### November 2010 Issue: Tourism



In reflecting on the anthropological gaze, many have compared fieldwork with the participant-observation of the tourist and travel writer. However, as anthropologists become increasingly involved in both global tourism industries and tourism studies, additional opportunities develop to examine the practices, ethics, flows and relationships involved in the commoditization, consumption and marketing of cultures, histories and people. What do tourism practices and encounters say about concepts such as authenticity and ownership in relation to the cultivation, management, display and erasure of difference and otherness? What consequences do tourism programs

and industries have for local sites, populations and economies? How can we understand tourism’s simultaneous dependence on global flows (of money, images, people, information) and the maintenance of boundaries and local specificity?

For this thematic issue, we welcome work engaging a variety of types of tourism and related topics, including, but not limited to: ecotourism and sustainability; thanatourism or “dark tourism”; world heritage tourism; disaster and volunteer tourism; food and agriculture tourism; museums, fairs, theme parks, memorials and historic landmarks; performance and representation; tourism and community development; pilgrimage; collective memory and contested heritage. Additionally, we welcome proposals that reflect on anthropology’s particular entanglements with tourism zones, such as the promotion of tourism as a tenet of postcolonial “development” plans in communities that have traditionally hosted anthropological research.

**Proposal submission deadline: May 25, 2010.**  
**Early submissions are encouraged.**

### December 2010 Issue: Music and Sound

The AAA Music and Sound Interest Group gathered for the first time in 2009 to recognize the increasing production and impact of aural anthropology projects. Anthropologists of music and ethnomusicologists are today developing innovative work on musical experience and performance, sound recording and broadcast technologies, public soundscapes and more. As recording technologies become more accessible, the topics available for study and methods for approaching them continue to expand. For example, scholars are currently researching the music and verbal art of gospel choirs living with HIV in South Africa, playback singing in Bollywood film, and the use of sound in military practices during the Iraq war. Their research contributes to broader anthropological literatures in areas ranging from linguistics to aesthetics to economics.

Still, significant room for growth remains. As interest group convener David Novak noted in February 2010 *AN*, “aurality is underrepresented in comparison with visually as an area of anthropological research.” The December 2010 *AN* issue offers contributors an opportunity to (1) consider both the challenges facing the anthropology of music and sound as a growing discipline, and the unique and compelling insights it can provide; (2) share current scholarship in this topical area; and (3) examine the interrelationships among various disciplinary approaches to the study of music and sound. In addition to textual and visual submissions, we also welcome sound recordings, to be posted online in conjunction with print publication of the issue.

### Guidelines

To participate, email a 300-word abstract and 50-100-word biosketch to *Anthropology News* Managing Editor Dinah Winnick (dwinnick@aaanet.org). Proposals for photo essays should also include five high resolution photographs (tiff or jpg), each with a caption and credit. Proposals for audio submissions should also include selected sound clips, to illustrate audio quality, style and content. Selected authors will be notified of their status in late June, and full articles—commentaries of 1000-1400 words or shorter pieces for other article types, plus any multimedia submissions—will be due September 1 for the tourism issue and October 1 for the music and sound issue.