

Magic in the Andes Mountains

A Mother Earth ritual by the Indians in the highlands of the Peruvian Andes

Introduction

In the highlands of the Andes at 4000 m. lives an ethnic group of traditional Indians who call themselves *Aymaras*. *Aymaras* reside in the second highest region in the world, the Andes Mountains of Peru and Bolivia. Since life outside the cities is without exception an autarkic agricultural one, life is hard as a result of the harsh climatologically conditions and the lack of governmental support.

Although Christianity has penetrated most of Latin America's countries, the *Aymaras* have not been heavily influenced in the basic axioms of their worldview. Based on the magical character of the axioms, their worldview could be identified as a pagan one. To obtain the universal goals of equity, growth and procreation of life, the culture relies on the religious treatment of their direct surroundings through ceremonies, customs and other kinds of transitional and manipulative activities. Additionally, their magical way of perceiving the world is evidenced by the intimate connection between nature, spirits and mankind that exists in the culture's daily lifestyles.

In this article we will focus primarily on the symbolical features of ritual artefacts and on the course of a fertility ritual to Mother Earth by Peruvian *Aymaras*. Let's start with some words about the setting of the ritual and about the worldview of these Indians before we describe our personal experiences and the ritual itself.

Situation

At the borders of the holy lake *Titicaca* at the Peruvian side, I was invited by Indian friends (*Aymaras*) to participate in an agricultural ritual of four small neighbouring communities. Energetic surroundings evoked by high mountain peaks and the deep blue lake made an ideal setting for my personal celebration of our Goddess with these pagan people of the Andes. Also I was willing to join the ceremony to strengthen the request for the continuation of life through a renewal of fertility and favourable weather for the crops (which means to secure the harvest, and through this, survival). Lastly, I was invited to participate in order to investigate the symbols and the symbolic actions of the *Aymaras* during ceremonies, for the purpose of my anthropological thesis.

Worldview

The way the *Aymara* perceive the world and how (s)he determines his/her position within this view are both outlined by certain magical axioms, which –as to cover most of them in a more general way- can be distinguished in two related principles. These are the *Principle of Correspondence* and the *Principle of Complementarity*. We'll explain them in the following. Keep in mind that these principles are concrete realities to the people of the Andes, and we have to treat them like natural laws that reflect the character of the cosmos. They serve as measures and as the description of the way society and social, spiritual, and political life should be organised as well as how transitional states of life should be interpreted.

Both principles are for their part based on the overall assumption of a *relatedness of all*. *Aymaras* perceive a fully related unity in which all entities –human beings, spirits, animals, plants, ...- are one, although they retain their own image. This vision implies that any entity covers its own task to contribute to the 'natural balance'¹.

The first axiom mentioned is the *Principle of Correspondence*. This involves the idea of three worlds that are related in a direct way that can be represented through symbolic, ritual and festive expressions. In this sense, the principle is of great importance for the soul of a ceremony since the magician or ritual leader is to contact entities/spirits of other kinds than our own from worlds other than ours. The worlds the *Aymara* knows are, firstly, *the world above*, of which Sun and Moon are the most important representatives, secondly, *this world* of vegetation, human beings and animals, and finally, *the world below* where a whole range of spirits lives. The tempting comparison with the Christian heaven/hell-distinction is not to be taken into account, for the three worlds of the *Aymara* cannot be separated in a spatial way. The *world above* and *below* –which are actually poor translations from the words used in local language- are always found at concrete locations on earth. For example, the *Aymara* refer positive energy found at high hilltops or in certain rocks to the world above. The world below can be found in unmoving wells (which means death) and in mines; all places where a fearful or

¹ We don't understand 'natural balance' as a static situation, though as an evolving body with a movement between boundaries. In this space between the boundaries exists a certain balance, which assures the continuation of the circle of life of species. Breaking out of this self-regulating balance results in harsh effects like natural disasters or extinction of species.

negative atmosphere determines the human feelings². In conclusion, each of the three worlds are located in our direct surroundings, they are intertwined through various threads, and each contains its own entities, rules and character.

The second axiom, the *Principle of Complementarity*, suggests the duality of all, like the yin/yang-principle. It is shown in the, according to the Aymaras, necessity of men and women to merge to reach the synthesis of completeness. Because of the relatedness and symbolic exchangeability between the three worlds, this principle of duality is valid in all of them. As a result, it means that the feminine Moon and masculine Sun are directly exchangeable with Woman and Man, and with the feminine (earth, water) and masculine (mountains, rocks) aspects of the earth. This aspect of the worldview is used in ceremonial activities, when feminine and masculine powers are represented through the ceremonial realization with men and women, and through the symbolic representation of sex-distinguished artefacts and symbols.

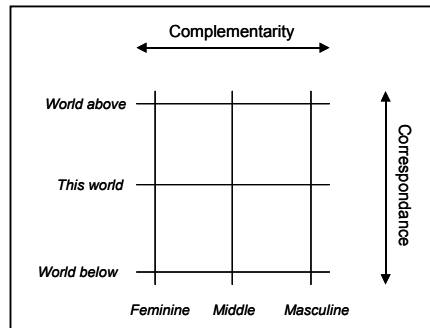


Figure 1: Both principles in an embracement of relatedness

With the mentioned principles in mind, let's have a closer look at a fertility rite to Mother Earth. This ceremony's aim was to ask for procreation of life through fertility of the cultivated crops and for favourable agricultural weather (which is not as natural in the harsh climatic conditions in the Andes). We will see that, for example, one of the ways for the Aymaras to refer to this goal is the expression of gratefulness about the good harvest of last year.

This ritual was held on the second of February of last year. In this period the crops have all come up and all plants are growing³. With this ritual -the sacrifice and the ceremonial celebration- the Aymaras intended to establish the balance of nature and the vital relationship between natural forces (Mother Earth and Father Sun) and mankind.

The ritual

At dawn approximately fifty men and women of four communities gathered at a field on the shore of Titicaca where crops of potatoes were fully covered in leaves and flowers. All were, including myself, clothed in a typical peasant outfit consisting of a bonnet and poncho, and we were curious and excited of what this day would bring to us. The leaders of the ritual were a yatiri (traditional religious leader⁴)

² Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that the spiritual inhabitants are only due to the general character of the world they 'belong to'. None is 'bad' neither 'good' as a whole. For example the frightening spirit 'el Tío', who is the 'Devil of the Mine', kills by times mineworkers and men who don't respect his underground kingdom and the spiritual darkness of the mines. At the contrary, he can let you find lots of minerals in case you bring cult to him by offering cigarettes and alcohol. A second example of great importance is the blessing of Mother Earth -expressed by fertility and good agricultural weather- and at the same time her power to punish with infertility or natural disasters in case of inequity of the natural and moral system.

³ Keep in mind that Peru is located in the southern hemisphere, where the seasons are the opposite of ours. In the same season of our year (2nd of August) we celebrate Lughnasadh with a comparable meaning. February is the month from where the decisive period of the harvest starts, and, taken into account the insecure period of the climatologically variability (too much rain, hail, etc.), it is meaningful to follow closely and influence the natural character with ceremonial activities.

⁴ It concerns the religious leader (=yatiri) *Rufino Asqui*, coming from the village *Chucuito*, who turned out to be the director of an organisation which can be described as the Committee of South-American Shamans and Ritual Wisemen. Opposite to the opinion of various authors (like the famous author about Bolivian traditions Rigoberto Paredes) Silverblatt (1987) writes that among the Incas women were able to become a priestess as well. Although I've seen several feminine yatiris in the city El Alto, where parts of the old lore (wisdom) are practised in a more 'modern' environment, with often commercial intentions of the religious practitioners, and where not all are as skilled as others, I have not found them in the communities. Nonetheless, it is said to me that community

and a woman as his feminine counterpart. The Aymara worldview does not have the exact features of a shamanistic religion. The yatiri, different than a shaman, doesn't need to get in trance to communicate with other spirits. To him, the spirits are universal, in immediate presence of daily life and in every single thing, and since the yatiri is part of the same universe as any plant, spirit and animal, he recognizes the axiomatic features not only in the outside world but as well inside himself. This implies an equal and direct communication with all other entities.

The yatiri and the woman were given the old traditional names the Incas used in ceremonies: *Apomallcu* and *Mamataria*. A couple is necessary for fulfilling the right representation of the cosmos, in which can be recognized the *Principle of Complementarity*. This main couple was helped in their activities by a second couple (2nd Apomallcu and 2nd Mamataria). The principle is also expressed in the traditional bonnet of the 2nd Apomallcu, on which men and women are exposed hand in hand.

All participants were given a coloured flag, divided into four colours: yellow, red, green and white, distinguished by the clothes they wore. The colours refer to the four parts of the old Inca-empire (*Tawantinsuyo*; translated as 'the four parts of the world'). Besides, they refer in a certain way to the four elements⁵. Because the Aymaras once were part of the Inca-empire, in spite of their hardly accessible locations, the ritual contains much more Inca-influences, as we will learn later.

While everyone was watching, the yatiri drew a big circle with a diameter of at least twenty meters. He walked counter clockwise and marked the circle by putting little yellow flower leaves upon the ground⁶. Then everyone took position at one of the sides, their coloured flags corresponding to the former locations of the Inca-empire. Surprised I realized that all participants were standing *outside* the circle, except the four practitioners who were in the middle and the organising couple who was standing in the 'doorway' –an open part of the circle- as the authority of the four parts. Through this opening the participants were allowed to enter when they were called into the circle. As for the symbolical meaning of the circle, it refers to the cyclical experience of the unity of time and space, which the Aymaras determine as the ongoing cycle of life, death and rebirth.

The yatiri started the ceremony after preparing the altar. He called up the people of the four *suyos* and welcomed them. He explained to us that the aim of the ceremony was to accentuate youth, newness, a good harvest and thankfulness for last year's harvest. By paying symbolical respect to Mother Earth we should be able to influence the natural balance, so the creation and continuation of life would be secured again. In my opinion, the capacity of human beings to help with whatever instruments to provide maintenance and procreation of life raises the human interference to an almost metaphysical importance.

"To Mother Earth [Pachamama] we're going to pay, raising our hands. To the great Aymara leaders and ancestors we'll give it. Now we're going to call all so they'll come. At this very place they will arrive. People capable to come from all directions". [All text boxes are spoken words by the yatiri. Translation is done by an Aymara friend and myself]

The yatiri blew on a big shell. A long and meditative sound.

people wouldn't exactly reject women at this position. It is merely that tradition shows that the lore is usually inherited by the successors and male family members of a yatiri, while women use their time in breeding and watching the household and their children.

⁵ About the connection to our Western way of interpreting colours by Tarot, through archetypes, etc., more can be read in my thesis. Beside the question for what part the use of the four elements contains a traditional ground in Andes-rituals, I've found interesting comparisons and differences to the system which we usually are familiar to. Firstly, in stead of following the circle *deosil*, the Aymaras follow the movement of the sun of the Southern Hemisphere; the direction is north, than west, south and finally east. The order of the elements is neither equal to ours. They do not use the measure of volatility, but, as far as I can see, they base their order at the character of opposites: water facing fire, earth facing air. Which makes sense to me, according to their axioms.

⁶ Beside the discussion we could, but don't, start about the origin and differences in meaning of the circle as a ritual instrument, we mention here that the Aymaras talk about 'realizar el círculo': to *realise* the circle. However it can be a poor translation of their proper language.



[foto 1: 'horn blowing': Calling of the Aymaras]

"In Your name [Mother Earth], in my name, we all raise up. In this year all of us ask You for a good harvest. For that, we please You grain, potatoes, quinoa. For that, this old man is here at this land. I'm here so we all can ask You to fertilize our alimentation. I say that in Your name this land is a sacred place. It's a sacred place where no bad people shall arrive. Mother Earth, You recognize these people. Now, great Mother Earth, in the name of all Your children, we offer You wine. Like all the Aymara leaders offer You wine".



[foto 2 'altar': Main part of the altar]

The altar consisted of an array of artefacts and symbols that need some explanation. Let's start with the main cloth. The traditional yellow cloth symbolizes the Sun, while the black one represents the earth, which are the two complementary powers of the unity. The 'golden' plate at the end is the actual offering plate, which was later filled with serpentines and sweets in different forms, like plants and animals, from the plate aside. The silver plate is the symbol of silver and gold, which represents the old Indian civilizations of the Inca's, Nazca, Chavin, Tihuanacu and more. As one of them put it: "All is white of happiness". At the left side we find a shell that is meant to be blown, to thank the Gods for their presence. Beside the shell a pretty decorated staff can be seen, which is a representation of the staffs the Incas carried. This artefact's goal is to make the flowers grow nicely. The stone at the side reflects the power of the earth. Then, the arrow with the *chakana*-symbol in black and white. This symbol represents not only in colours but mostly in its symbolic form the two cosmological axioms of the Aymaras. In this sense, all powers are gathered.

The golden pins and images refer to the legends among the poor Aymaras, such as the great time of the Inca-empire when the peasants were respected and well. The bell is used several times during the ceremony to realize certain parts of the ritual and to bring to life powerful words of the yatiri. In the middle of the magical work it is rung once, with the specific goal of the increase of the llama population in this area.

Also a feather is located at the altar. This refers to the feather worn on the heads of the Inca-messengers, the *chaskis*, who brought messages all through the empire by running, and, put in ceremonial terms, because of this task they were the symbolic messengers between the worlds. Furthermore, the round stone with signs is an old inheritance of the Andes-calendar of the agricultural year, on which the peasants these days are still dependent. At the very right are flowers in three colours. Like the flags, they represent the four *suyos* (since green flowers don't exist, the green of the stalks function as the fourth colour).

The two ceramic vases and the two carved wooden cups are used for drinking the light alcoholic, traditional corn drink *chicha*. The old day custom of drinking with Mother Earth continues to be practised with each who drinks will spill some drops at the ground before sipping. The two seashells, finally, are the symbols of the sea and water. They're merely used for wine.



[foto 3: 'whole altar' with from left to right: Mamataria, 2nd Apomallcu and 2nd Mamataria]

The second part of the altar consists of a collection of vegetables. In the dishes they have collected the best products of last year's harvest: potatoes, *quinoa*, broad beans and more. It is the symbol of life and the prevention of sickness. The products in the middle refer to the harvest of this year, for which they expect good results. And again, the four sides of the cosmos are represented by the flags around the altar.

Counter clockwise the yatiri invited us, the participants, into the circle to compose a range of three times seven coca leaves, for the coca leaf is the holy leaf of the Andes, and they were put on the yellow offering plate to be burned later during the ceremony⁷. The quantity of seven refers to the

seven colours of the rainbow and of their Aymara-flag, and finally to the division of Mother Earth, Father Sun and the five stars (which form the *chakana*-cross). The yatiri asked three times this amount of seven, so the participants could do three wishes: one for themselves and two for relatives or friends. Then, the yatiri called the Sun to ask him for his light and powerful energy. All participants moved to all four directions to welcome the Sun. We raised both arms during this slow and concentrated movement. Besides the feeling of peacefulness that started to flow through my body, I watched very closely the participation of the people: all seemed to join in an intrinsic and serious way.

[foto 4: Two women welcome the Sun. The plume in their hands represents the germ of a plant.]



After welcoming the Sun, all participants were asked to welcome Mother Earth and show her respect by going down on our knees and by putting our foreheads to the ground.



[foto 5: All welcome Mother Earth]

The boy standing in the picture has the traditional role of looking for new participants and –symbolically- seeing all that happens in daily life outside the ceremonial activities. The feather on his forehead refers to the aforementioned *chaskis*, who could be recognized with this sign. In previous times

this task was appointed to adults, but since this specific ritual represented 'youth' the boy was chosen. To complete the relatedness between all, we, the participants, embraced each other as well, to welcome and to show respect and warmth.

⁷ The coca leaf is holy and an indispensable ceremonial product during already thousands of years. The leaf carries this label because of the favourable usage for peasants' hard work in the field. It eliminates during chewing the feelings of hunger, tiredness and boringness and it gives a certain amount of energy. Further, they're traditionally as well as in these days used for prognosticating by the intuitive reading of the leaves.



[foto 6: 2nd Apomallcu and 2nd Mamataria embrace each other]

Then, when all were present and ceremonially bound, the yatiri continued his magical work. The main part of the ceremony was about to begin.

“Today is a good day. We’re going to pay our Mother Earth. Today, with all our love, with all our hearts, to the holy Mother and to Father Sun. It lightens up our day. Today the land receives the blood of this animal [a sheep, decorated with a ring of flowers around its neck was carried along]. It’s a good day to offer the heart to Mother Earth. Great Earth, to You we offer this heart and blood. Here are the flowers for You, Earth!”

Together the eldest person and the eldest bachelor cut the throat of the sheep. The ring of flowers around its neck coloured red with its blood, but the sheep made no sound. Most of the blood was caught in a bowl, which they carried quickly through the ‘door’ to the nearest crops. They put the blood in a hole that was dug into the ground. The warm blood was then covered by a bed of little flowers. The blood was meant as the symbolic fertilizer for the ground, while the flowers referred to an embracement with Mother Earth, for she likes flowers. It is a real and rich offer to Mother Earth coming from these people who possess neither much money nor cattle. It proved to me their real faith in the significance of this sacrifice. I was delighted, since I felt the meaning behind the killing of one of their own as well. It was certainly carried out with great sensitivity and the sacrifice was of the highest importance in the worldview of these respectful and animal-loving people. And I could feel the presence of the powers flowing through my veins, and I knew that what we were doing was something real.

“Now we have paid to Mother Earth. We have made the sacrifice for everybody and we’re happy; let’s listen carefully now. Listen well to the songs of carnival of Bolivia, from the Aymara villages. Now Mother Earth, we have fulfilled our payment. Let’s sing”.

And all sung; during the boning of the sheep -for eating it later and for removing the heart- and traditional music was played, a big fire in the middle of the circle was lit and the offering plate of symbolic sweets and coca leaves was further prepared by the yatiri. They sung the following words:

*“On our knees we come closer to you, Pachamama
Your name we mention with pleasure, Pachamama
We put pretty flowers on your lap, Pachamama
With wounded knees we arrive to you, Pachamama
The universe loves you, Pachamama”*

After singing, dancing and listening to the music, the yatiri spoke again, and asked everybody to take each others hands and to circle around to all the four corners. In the meantime the second couple in the circle came by to invite every person to drink *chicha* with Mother Earth. When finished preparing the offering plate, the music stopped and the plate and the sheep’s heart were brought to the fire. The sweets and leaves were now well prepared and ready to be thrown into the flames. This made it possible for the earlier wishes to be fulfilled. The yatiri held the heart high above his head as a gift to Mother Earth to ask for meat for the people. By saying words of thankfulness and again of hope for fertility he threw the heart into the flames. After some more ritual words of the yatiri, Mamataria put the offering plate into the lightning fire as well.



[foto 7: The yatiri facing the fire. The heart has already been thrown in the middle, Mamataria still holds the offering plate.]

"Mother Earth. Father Sun. You have seen us. The stars turn the same as Your children do. We have seen there are good products. You are great, Cultivated One. All who live here will harvest in great quantities. In Your name, of the highest Father Sun, You take care of us with good heart; without laziness, without theft, without lies. [these are the three former Inca-rules on which their empire was based]. For all this, I drink with You again, Mother Earth. It's a good day. I drink with You so we all live well. We all embrace each other for these good hours. Let's eat coca leaves, too. So it will be a good hour.

And everybody embraced all, and we all yelled three times: 'Jallalla Marka!', which is a proud yell that means 'Life to our villages!' Then, after closing the ritual by speaking the words of farewell, and breaking the circle, all participants gathered to follow the yatiri to the field where the first plants of this year's cultivating process showed their presence above the ground. As the tradition of *sataccato* prescribes, the yatiri led Mamataria into this field, so she could put *chicha* and three coca leaves at the feet of several plants to thank for fertility and to stimulate the growing process.

To finish the happy day of unity, all participants had dinner together at the house of the organising couple, which was a pleasant and very welcoming happening, in spite of the lack of hunger which was evoked by the amount of coca leaves we all had chewed during the ceremony. And so we returned to normal life again.

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