

COSMOLOGICAL RENEWAL:
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS IN THE
ANDES AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

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Abstract. Rites of passage are performed on an individual or community basis in order to make visible a transformation in the status, state or temporality of a person, social group or even the entire cosmos. Such rites, which are related to the periodicity of cosmic time, imply that the universe is governed by long periods (called *pachas* in the Andean context) of stability and short periods of chaos and renovation that have repercussions in human life. Among the most important of these rites are the New Year celebrations. In the Andean case, this rite is constituted by a set of different practices which take the form of the elaboration of *años viejos* (personified Old Years) or the presence of the *viudas de año viejo* (widows of the Old Year), whose transvestism indicates the destruction of Latin American hetero-normal patterns. During this night, there is an explicit desire to destroy everything that gives order to the cosmos in order to renew it and inaugurate a new cosmic period.

Key words. Rites of passage; Old and New Year; cosmological periodicity; *viudas de año viejo* (old year's widows); cosmic night.

Introduction

The topic of the rites of passage is often traced back to the work of Arnold van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (1992 originally 1909), a classic book illustrating different human ceremonies, festivities or practices that make visible a transformation in the status, state or temporality of a person, a community or even the entire cosmos. These rites represent, sometimes dramatically, a profound transformation that will radically affect the nature of the individual or the community and in some cases will constitute the rebirth or appearance of a totally new identity. Wall and Ferguson state that these rituals 'can help us learn to harness the tension and pain that inevitably rolls through our lives' (Wall and Ferguson 1998: ix).

For the individual, rites of passage are usually performed in order to represent a change in his or her life, a change that may entail new responsibilities, roles, statuses, knowledge or states. This is visible in the passages from one marital status to another (marriage, divorce, widowhood), passages related to a new occupational role (initiation, retirement, a change of job), social status (slavery to freedom, elevation to a position of power, enthronement), separation from the profane world in order to deal with sacred responsibilities (consecration,

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dedication, anointment), passages from one stage of life to another (childhood to adulthood, first menstruation, fatherhood) and many others.

On the community level, ‘rites of passage [are] typical of small-scale societies’ (Ries 1997: 163) and are visible at events that impact on social relations between the community’s members, the living situation of the society or the daily routine of an entire community or nation. Through these rituals, entire societies negotiate the changes that are experienced and that legitimate the transformations that are about to happen. These rituals may be performed, for example, whenever a people or a community goes to war, invades new territories, legitimates the right to possess a specific land, experiences community reconciliation, or dedicates new temples, palaces or squares.

Furthermore, there is a special kind of rite of passage that relates to the concept of the periodicity of the cosmic time. These rites imply that the universe is itself governed by long periods of stability and short periods of chaos and renovation that have repercussions for human life as well. In the Andes case, dealt with here, these periods are known as *pachas*, which are:

followed or preceded, as appropriate, by other words which serve to determine spaces (cosmogonic or metaphysical), delimit historical phases (ages and periods *-in Waman Poma-*), express relative times (present, past and future), talk about fundamental changes (natural and social), set the times of harvests [and] define time-space as a globality of conjunction (*kay pacha*), among other tasks. (Manga 1994: 157)²

Because these rites represent the passage from one cosmic period to another, van Gennep affirms that ‘we should [...] include among ceremonies of human passage those rites occasioned by celestial change such as the changeover [...] from season to season [...] and from year to year’ (van Gennep 1992: 3-4).

The main aim of these festivities is not the celebration of a certain natural event or a physical phenomenon as such, but to remember and celebrate the *archetype* that is physically represented and can be found in different places, cultures and times, and appears to be constant. For instance, on the spring celebration, Friedrich states:

Its underlying pattern is the seasonal rhythm which can ultimately be reduced to the alternation of *kenosis* (emptying) and *plerosis* (filling): the evacuation of life in fall and winter, and its replenishment in spring and summer. This irreducible seasonal pattern may translate itself into [...] a great variety of rituals: death and rebirth, destruction and renovation, expulsion and reinstatement [...] and many more’. (Friedrich 2003: 163)

Festivities and rites around the change of the seasons can be interpreted as either rites of incorporation (into life in the case of spring) or rites of separation and death (as in winter rites).

² All quotes from Spanish and French have been translated by myself.

During these special times, it is not only the physical world which is transformed and renewed: in fact, physical revival (of nature in the case of the spring) is just a sign of a much deeper transformation that affects the individual, the society and even the entire cosmos. These periodic rituals and festivities show one period coming to an end through its destruction and the inauguration of a new period for which energies are renewed and a new cosmic time is established. This particular relationship to cyclical conceptions of time in Andean cultures is conceived as:

an evolutionary and non-deterministic time, made explicit in the succession / superposition of loops, where conjunctural or consequential futures [...] are generated in the immediate past as base projections, causing another space-time. [...] This spiral conception of overlapping times presents us with the cancellation of the contingent or structural future of linear nature (indefinite and unforeseeable future). Andean thought [...] does not identify [time] with linear historical conceptions with a final phase of salvationism or destiny, as in Western thought. (Manga 1994: 185)

New Year celebrations as rites of passage

In modern societies, New Year celebrations are among the most important rites related to the passage from one temporal reality to another. They vary in their duration and structure from place to place, but the general thought of a temporary transition or passage seems to be a universally shared idea. Because of its importance and significance, the liminal period between the year that ends and the one that is about to start is the most suitable time for performing different kinds of rites. In this sense, some authors have approached New Year celebrations more as an individual ritual, while others argue that this is a liminal period that favours all kinds of different rites.

For example, authors such as Tozzer, Love and Taube have criticized Landa's interpretation of Mayan New Year celebrations as unique. They argue that he actually documented not one but three different rituals that take place during the New Year festival. Among them were the ceremony of *Wayeb* before the end of the year and rites of renewal at New Year in order to avoid calamities (see Kirkhusmo 2014: 176).

Eliade, based on the works of Frazer, Wensick, Dumézil and others, mentions some of the many rituals that are performed during this time:

The end of year and the beginning of the new year opens room to a set of rituals: 1) purges, purifications, confession of sins, [...] expulsion of the evil out of the city, etc.; 2) extinction and renovation of the fire; 3) masked processions (whose masks represent the souls of the dead), ceremonial reception of the dead, who are celebrated (banquets, etc.) and who, at the end of the feast, are guided to the limits of the locality, to the sea, the river, etc.; 4) combats between two enemy groups; 5) carnivalesque intermediate, saturnalia, inversion of the normal order, 'orgy'. (Eliade 1974: 182-183)

While it is true that not all these rites will be performed at the same time in a single ritual, they all point to the destruction of the old time in order to deliver a new and revived time that will reconfigure a new creation and cosmos. For example, in the ancient Babylonian empire,

during the twelve days of festivities of New Year, in the temple of Marduk, the priests used to recite the poem of the creation *Enuma Elish*. Through remembrance of the cosmogonic myth of the conflict between Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat, the priest restored the process of the genesis of the cosmos in order to establish a new creation at New Year.

Social structures and religious practices were formed at this idyllic moment of creation, when the cosmos was still in an embryonic phase. Through the destruction of these structures, the return to a primitive chaos is celebrated. The destruction and chaos that are part of these rites of passage make possible a new and regenerated society, time and cosmos. According to Eliade 'a cosmic cycle consists of a "creation", an existence ("history", exhaustion, degeneration) and a "return to the chaos"' (Eliade 1974: 192).

As a rite of passage, New Year celebrations show dramatically the constant human desire to restore the mythic time, the great time. Scholars in the fields of the phenomenology of religion and the comparative history of religion argue that this is, in fact, a common characteristic of every ritual: to recreate a part of what was done in *illo tempore*. For instance, Gerardus Van der Leeuw states that 'the original time is a model for all the times. What happened one-day is incessantly repeated. It is enough by knowing the myth in order to understand life' (van der Leeuw 1940: 120).

This 'archetypal' thesis has significant similarities to the work of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung and the concept of common patterns or notions that are part of the collective unconscious of different societies. It is in *illo tempore* when different cosmogonic actions took place, all the religious *archetypes* having been revealed by the gods or the civilizing heroes and also when the structures and practices that bring order to social, individual and cosmic relations and times were established. In *illo tempore* the seasons of the year and the cosmic periods were created, the cosmogonical events took place and at this time Indian castes appeared from Purusha's body, the gods adopted the Pharaohs, Satan was expelled from the court of Yahweh; and every practice or story whose legitimacy is grounded on divine decisions or acts came into existence.

New Year celebrations constitute one of the rites of passage that can lay claim to an almost universal practice. In what follows, I focus on one specific example of New Year's festivities, the Andean celebration of *año viejo* (Old Year), especially in modern Ecuador and Peru. Different rituals and practices that take place on this night will be described and interpreted, including physical representations of the year that is about to end, lighting ritual pyres (to cremate Old Year), special rituals at midnight and ritual transvestism.

***Año Viejo* (Old Year) celebrations in the Andes**

The celebration of *año viejo* in Andean cities consists of a set of different practices that

cannot be understood separately from one another. Because the year that is ending is conceptualized in the collective imaginary as an old man who is about to die, it is represented by a rag doll that is left lying in the street awaiting its imminent death. In the Ecuadorian Andes the past year is mostly represented by a doll made of old rags or newspapers, its size varying from very small figures to ones that are as big as an adult man. Anything that could make it look more like a human being may be used, especially ties, jackets, shoes and hats.

Because the doll represents the year that is about to die, in many years it is identified with an influential person that marked the year, such as a political figure, a football player, a celebrity or another important person. Because the ritual will end after the doll has been burned, figures who are not socially popular are frequently the object of derision or mockery. Thus in many cases the doll that will be burned represents a president, a congressman or any politician involved in a corruption scandal. Nevertheless, because the custom is for one *año viejo* to be made per family, sometimes the doll represents a respected member of the family such as a grandfather, father, uncle or a good family friend.

It is interesting to observe that most of the dolls represent male figures; only on very rare occasions do they represent a female person or figure. This double factor of respect and mockery towards the same reputable person or institution is a very characteristic feature of this liminal time. For example, Stiebing and Helft, commenting on a similar but more dramatic ritual during the Babylonian New Year, the *Akitu*, state:

Often understood as the ritual renewal of Marduk's triumph over chaos, the *Akitu* also served to restore the legitimacy of the king. On the fifth day of the festival, the king would enter the shrine of Marduk where a priest removed his royal insignia (staff, ring, mace and crown). Then the priest slapped the king across the face, and forced him to kneel. The king, thus humiliated, had to defend his piety to Marduk [...] The priest then slapped him a second time. If tears fell from his eyes, the gods were favorable to him and Babylon was to have a good year. (Stiebing and Helft 2017: 262)

In order to identify the doll with one specific person or situation, its face is usually covered with a mask that makes the representation more obvious. During the days coming up to the end of the year, special markets are set up in various cities offering masks based on the faces of well-known personalities. This practice is different on the Ecuadorian Pacific coast. In cities like Guayaquil or Machala the creation of the *años viejos* is a much more complex and specialized activity. Here, several families work on the creation of very well-designed *años viejos* during the entire year, or at the latest from June or July, making models with an internal structure that can hold dozens of kilograms of weight without collapsing. Using a combination of wood, glue and paper, the craftsmen can build structures that sometimes reach a height of eight to ten metres. The structures are decorated with paint and all kinds of ornaments.

While these *años viejos* are exactly the same as those in the Andean area, again representing the year that is dying, nowadays on the Pacific coast they take the form of all kind of figures: superheroes, cartoon characters, politicians, fantastic animals and monsters, something hardly seen in Quito, the capital of Ecuador in the Andes, where almost all the *años viejos* are designed in the form of a known person. Weeks before the end of year, the craftsmen offer their creations in the streets of the city, individuals or institutions buy them for a range of prices. Small and simple *años viejos* can be bought for a very few American dollars, while the most expensive ones are offered for several thousand dollars.³

During the afternoon of the 31st of December it is common to read the ‘will’ of the year that is about to die. This will is written in houses, offices and educational institutions in order to remember the good and bad things that happened during the past year. By using verses and rhymes, the Old Year distributes all his possessions among his family and friends. The main interest of the ‘will of the Old Year’ is to ridicule other members of the social group and to make fun of their mistakes or remark on their lack. On some occasions the will may also mention certain tragedies such as natural disasters, diseases and deaths that the community wants to forget or get over. At night, before the *año viejo* is burned, the will is placed next to him and at midnight both are burnt together.

The most famous practice at Ecuador’s New Year, thanks to its extravagance and open defiance of Latin American heteronormativity, is the presence of the *viudas de año viejo* (widows of the Old Year) or *viudas de fin de año* (widows of the end of the year). Because the Old Year is considered to be a respectable man in society, it is natural to consider him a married one. Due to his approaching death, his widow’s role is to mourn and cry over her loss of status. From the afternoon of 31st of December, several young men dress as widows their duty being to weep for the death of their husband (the Old Year) and to walk the streets begging money from those who pass by. They usually stop cars or buses in order to beg for some coins so they can survive now that their husband will no longer be there to provide for all their needs.

During the afternoon before New Year, some young men experience complete transvestism, female relatives providing them with feminine clothes and making them up. While some decades ago these young men used to dress exactly like widows (in black clothing and veils), nowadays they wear short skirts, colourful wigs and provocative dresses to beg for money. The old focus on making people feel pity for them in order to obtain money has therefore developed into a new focus on eroticism as a means of acquiring such charity.

The clothes these ‘widows’ wear include wigs of different colours, intense make-up, fake breasts and buttocks, skirts, blouses, nylon stockings and high heels. Even though they can

³ The US dollar is Ecuador’s official currency.

hardly be considered ritual neophytes in the classical sense of the term (it is not mandatory to be an Old Year widow, and one can act the role several times in one's life), they do share some of the characteristics of ritual neophytes. For instance, on one night they experience a liminal state in which they cannot be considered either men or women. Turner explains this ritual principle: 'The structural "invisibility" of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified' (Turner 1964: 48).

This is a common characteristic of ritual neophytes during the liminal period, when they 'are symbolically either sexless or bisexual and may be regarded as a kind of human *prima materia*' (ibid.: 49). Furthermore, because of their position as beggars, their situation is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty. Rights over property, goods and services rest on the place of the person in the socio-political structure: since they do not occupy any such positions, neophytes exercise no such rights (ibid.: 49).

These *viudas de año viejo* (widows of Old Year) are rarely found in isolation from other 'widows'. In most cases, large groups of young men walk the streets stopping the traffic and asking for money from everyone they find on their way. Once in the condition of 'widows', strong ties of camaraderie are supposed to develop between them. For a night, the 'widows' live in a situation of complete equality. Any differences due to socioeconomic status, educational background or ethnicity are avoided in order to create an extremely equalitarian relation. As Gordon explains of communitarian rites of passage, 'among neophytes there is a complete equality' (Gordon 1997: 107).

This condition is reflected in the use they make of the money they have received during the night. By tradition, all the 'widows' of the group collect the money into a common fund during the celebration. Once the event is close to finishing at about two or three in the morning, the 'widows' decide how to use the money they have collected. Sometimes it will be divided between them in equal parts, but it is more common to spend it on something they will all enjoy, for example, alcohol or cigarettes.

As mentioned before, the performances of the *viudas de año viejo* have experienced a complete turnaround in recent decades. Before the 1980s the main role of these widows was to cry out aloud and to mourn because of the death of their 'husband'. Nowadays, their efforts mainly focus on dancing, erotic songs and seducing men in order to receive more money for their performances. The new role of eroticism and its demonstration on public streets and squares during the festivity reminds one of the 'orgies' or bacchanalia of New Year in different civilizations. Eliade notes of these events that even when

its violence varies widely, the orgy is also a return to the 'dark', a restoration of the primordial chaos, and as such, it precedes every creation, every manifestation of the organized forms [...]

the fact that the orgy is part of the ceremonials that indicate periodic cuts in the time, shows the *desire to integrally abolish the past, abolishing the creation.*⁴ (Eliade 1974: 184)

Through eroticism and sexual practices between the widows and the public during this night, the destruction of all legitimate behaviours in the form of heterosexuality, marriage, the law, institutions and respect for the authorities is consummated. Indeed, it is common for the ‘widows’ to look for policemen, firefighters, politicians or people of good reputation and influence in order to perform all kind of dances for them, with their sexual innuendos.

It is common to observe a total transformation of political, social and economic structures during these liminal periods. For example, it is on Saturnalia that the satirical Roman dialogue between Horace, the master, and Davus, the slave, takes place. Fitzgerald explains: ‘Horace allows Davus to speak because it is the festival of the *Saturnalia*, a time of freedom from restraints, especially for slaves who were allowed various symbolic liberties. During the *Saturnalia*, slaves dined with their masters and, according to some accounts, masters waited upon their slaves’ (Fitzgerald 2000: 20).

Those who assist at this festival usually wear masks, make-up and different outfits that prevent relatives, friends or colleagues from identifying them. The use of masks and grotesque outfits in these kinds of celebrations has been examined by several different authors. While some accept Edson’s interpretation (2009: 180) of the use of masks at rites of passage as the symbolic presence of the dead, who in this imperfect state are awaiting resurrection, again the Old Year being a venerable elder ready to die, van Gennep’s understanding of the use of masks during rites of passage as a means of reshaping individual identities (and in the Ecuadorian celebration, community and cosmological identities as well) should also be considered.

The passage between Old Year and New Year reaches its climax at midnight when the Old Year has just finished. The *años viejos* are burnt in front of the houses of the families that have made or bought them. It is common to observe fires all along the streets at midnight. On many occasions, the *años viejos* are doused with petrol and filled with explosives. Some people also jump over the burning *año viejo* in a clear sign of the transition from one *pacha* to another and the passage it entails. The study of the altar of fire as an element of rites of passage has a long history in anthropological research about New Year festivities. For instance, Eliade states:

In effect, the altar of fire reproduced the universe and its erection was equivalent to the creation of the world; every time that one of these altars was built, the archetypical act of creation was repeated and time was ‘built’ (cf. *Catapha Brahmana*, VI, 5,1s; ‘the altar of fire is the year’, *ibid.*, X, 5, 4, 10; the altar of fire has ‘five layers... [every layer is a season], the five seasons

⁴ Eliade’s emphasis.

make a year and Agni [= el altar] is the year',⁵ *ibid.*, VI, 8, 1, 15). (Eliade 1974: 189-90)

Thus at twelve midnight the *años viejos* are burned in the streets, all kinds of explosives are detonated, and fireworks are lit. Most houses will turn off their lights, and for a short period of time the only light is that from the fires in the streets, which recalls the practice of turning off the lights and lighting candles during birthday celebrations as a passage between one old time to a new one. People shout and dance around the fires, and the *años viejos* are beaten to symbolize leaving behind the year that has just finished. The frenzy is finally completed with alcohol, loud music and dances.

During this night, there is an explicit desire on the part of the society to destroy everything that gives order to the cosmos: the old *pacha* is destroyed by burning the *años viejos*; the skies are burned and ripped by all kinds of fireworks; social, economic and political authorities are no longer respected; the 'widows' challenge the classical heteronormativity of Latin American societies; and moral laws are negated through the consumption of alcohol and music. In conclusion, the entire old cosmos, with its rules and order, is left behind, and a real passage is experienced in order to live a new cosmic time. It is this night of destruction and cosmic chaos that Eliade calls 'the cosmic night'. And further:

The 'cosmic night' [is the night] on which all the 'shapes' lose their contours and are confused. On the cosmological reality, 'darkness' and chaos are the same thing, like re-igniting the fire symbolizes the creation, the restoration of forms and boundaries. [...] In a certain way, it could be said that in the 'darkness' and the 'chaos' established by the liquidation of the old year all the modalities come together [...] ('night' = 'deluge' = dissolution). (Eliade 1974: 183)

On this night all kind of superstitious practices take place. For example, it is common to attract money for the coming year by putting banknotes inside the shoe or wearing yellow underwear. If an individual wants to attract love, red underwear is worn. Those who want to travel during the year that is about to begin may walk around the neighbourhood with an empty suitcase. It is a common practice to eat twelve grapes which represent the twelve months of the coming year, and to make one wish for each grape at midnight.

In the Peruvian region of Huarochirí, the game of the *pichcamanta* takes place. The leaders of the Pacota community ask the spirits called the 'owners' and the snow-capped mountains of the Pariacaca mountain range for their blessings for the New Year. The 'owners' announce the place of the coming rains by the leaders of the community throwing a pyramidal dice into the air at the cry of '*Huayra huayra pichcamanta!*' ('the ace, the ace of the five!'). The place on the playground at which the dice falls (mountains or coast) shows where rain will fall during the coming year (Salomon 2002: 13-16).

These practices are very similar to the Babylonian celebration of New Year. During the

⁵ Eliade's emphasis.

twelve days of the *Akitu*, the Zagnuk was celebrated, a festivity in which a prototype of the coming twelve months was elaborated by the priests (Bertman 2003: 130-131). Similarly, Al-Biruni states of the Persian New Year or *Nauroz*: ‘On the same day the Happy lots are distributed among the people of the earth. Therefore the Persians call it “*the day of the hope*”’ (Al-Biruni 1879: 201). Similar references can be made to the Feast of the Tabernacles (based on Wensinck’s research) and the Chinese tradition (based on Franet’s work).

In spite of all the connotations of destruction that can be observed during this night, because it is a rite of passage a new *pacha* must be opened and experienced. In many cities on the Ecuadorian Pacific coast the purity and innocence of this new time is represented by the practice of welcoming in the New Year by wearing white clothes. Immediately after the burnings of the New Year, people come back home, change their clothes for new white ones and return to the streets in order to participate in the New Year dances and parties. Thus, the rite of passage has been carried out and a new *pacha* been inaugurated.

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