

ANDRES FIGUEROA'S DANCERS OF THE DESERT

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I.

This publication by the photographer Andrés Figueroa, is the result of ten years of work on four of the most important religious festivities in the Chilean *Norte Grande*, which take place at Ayquina², San Lorenzo de Tarapacá³, La Tirana⁴ and Las Peñas⁵.



Caravan of horses • Virgin of Las Peñas • 2015

The corpus of work are portraits of women, men and children belonging to family and confraternal groupings that prepare themselves throughout the year to dance for the Virgin or the Saint. In these territories converge dances with highland and pre-Hispanic influences that have experienced countless transformations during the last centuries, due to both the evangelization process and the transculturalization, especially during the last 100 years.

Allegorical festivities, dances and rituals that also suppose a cultural resistance, among which we can mention the *diabladas*, which in some of its dances symbolize a corporal dialogue between the right and wrong or the *llamaradas*, which connect the human with the animal in their traditional grazing relationship. The *chinos* dances are very present, word that comes from the Quechua and means “servant”, denomination used by both the Incas

and the Spaniards to designate the people that worked for them. Also, *los osos* that symbolize for many cultures the transition of the adolescence, regarding its courage and the warrior state. They also worship the *pieles roja* who, according to the historiographic records, would be a reference to the Hollywood cinematographic imaginary of the '50s in the XXth century or to the *cowboys*. We can also find that patriotism is present through dances like those of the *huaso* and the *marinero* or through references to the saltpeter works. Meanwhile the brass bands would be a sort of

DJ that introduce musical blends of the current year's pop songs with Andean world's melodies, among others.

The desert is a mystical, poetic and political territory where it is inevitable to look at the cosmos; this makes us aware of the importance to comprehend the ancestral worldviews that conceive our existence -life/death- based on a circular outline; something like the *Sumak Kawsay* or Good Living, where the reciprocal relationship

between humans and nature in constant renovation allows to coexist, focusing on communitarian and collaborative processes. Figueroa⁶ comments that here, in these lands, one can hear the wind, the steps, the breathing. A cultural and spiritual environment constantly changing, even if this change is often imperceptible to our eyes. The constant movements of the sandbanks, due to their natural characteristics, are able to conceal those geographic modifications. They make us believe that nothing changes, but there, in the most arid desert in the world, everything is in constant renovation; even if nothing disappears, because that land keeps and protects memory.

The dances can be understood as rites of passage⁷ or faith processions, in which the corporal rhythm aligns with the universe. Reverberations of those chants that resound in the bass drums are the heart of the festivity



Religious Society of Morenos • Lord of Miracles • Tacna • Peru • Virgin of Las Peñas • 2015

and its vital drive, clarifies Figueroa. Even though there are other festivals that work with the agricultural and breeding cycles in the north of Chile, such as *la limpia de canales* or *el floreo de llamas*⁸, the festivities that Figueroa portrays are characterized by their syncretism and, above all, by the participation of pilgrims and pious people.

This process has been an experimentation journey for the photographer, a journey to the depths of our highland roots. A sort of confirmation, he says, not only of heritage and cultural wealth, but also of the community gestures and of love, in a territory that is geographically and socially very harsh. People dance to protect their children and to palliate the harshness of everyday life, to worship their ancestral deities or to keep community cohesion. There is endeavor and resistance. People dance to ask and to serve; many times to keep on feet. That's how the indigenous, the popular and the mestizo conjugate, always celebrating outdoors (at the church *el Canto del Alba* is performed and *Pasitos* are danced), as a symbol for the deities to connect with the territory.

I am interested in the concept of the *Taki Unquy* or sickness of the chant, a rebellion of the Andean people of Peru of the XVIth century that resisted the Spanish invasion and its

evangelization process. "It was, fundamentally, an anticolonial resistance, that aimed, on the one hand, to claim the presence of the ancient gods and, on the other hand, to encourage the rejection of everything that identified the spiritual and material world of the conqueror. It was the reaction before the chaos in which the whole Andean society was sinking: its lifestyle, its domain over the land, its deities. Dismayed by the confusion to which the cosmic, political and social order was heading, the Andean man feels defenseless and guilty for abandoning his deities. Therefore, the underlying idea behind the *Taki Unquy* was to restore a community without injustice or illness, in accordance to the ancient beliefs and the ancient order of things."⁹ This was conducted through dance, chants and costume rituals as a form of cultural resistance, which allowed to covertly introduce their own beliefs over the ones that were being imposed. It is said that there are dances that have resisted until today, such as the *Tijeras'* dancers in Peru. Then, the dance could be understood as an insurrection, with the intention to have a direct relationship, without mediation, with the deities. We can not either forget that these festivities are organized by the people.

Figueroa portrays these dancers during the festivities, achieving to abstract them from the crowd and the permanent sound of the

instruments and chants. He insists on isolating them from the chaos that the festivity represents, which, during those days, increases the usual population by 30.000%¹⁰; he wants to build -with this publication- a great choral singing. He carefully enlightens each portrayed and he chooses the contexts that indicate both the native and the precarious construction materials; we can observe dirt and tile floor, adobe and tin walls, barren hills, *tamarugo* trees, endless valleys, in the land and the arid geography of this *Norte Grande*. We can see that while women, men and children calmly pose and their bodies prepare themselves to be frontally depicted.

I perceive these dances as energetic forces, resistances in an environment that acts in a collective dimension -which is the opposite of the individual relationship with the introduced deity- building bonds that surpass the festivity days, in order to exist in the day-to-day preparations. Therefore, that struggle between the right and wrong or the intense colors of the costumes that in a certain way replicate the worldview of the light particles, intermingle with symbolic characters from other territories, mythical animals and ethnic groups from other latitudes in order to dance, all together, in the desert.



Demon's mask • Virgen of Ayquina • 2016

II.¹¹

GUADALUPE DE AYQUINA

One of the many legends has it that a very ill lady asked her son to go fetch a herb for her to heal. While walking through the countryside, a woman appeared and gave him a plant for him to take back to his mother. The lady was

healed and the boy, who explained what had happened, showed to the people in the village the spot where the appearance occurred. This place is the one that is now known as Ayquina, which means corn in Aymara, food sustenance for all our Latin American people. Nowadays, they still plant and harvest mainly corn along with other vegetables, around 3.000 meters above sea level.

SAN LORENZO DE TARAPACÁ

The miner's and the poor's Patron Saint, was named the protector of the village of San Lorenzo since the arrival of the Spaniards. The legend says his massive worship dates back to 1938 when, on August 9th the chief of one of the saltpeter mines did not allow his workers assist to the festivity, threatening with getting them fired if they didn't arrive to work in the early morning. That day the saltpeter work caught fire (the Saint was burned alive on 258 A.D.). From that day on, they massively assist in order to worship him.

NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL CARMEN
DE LA TIRANA

It is said that during an expedition to Chile commanded by Diego de Almagro, that carried the Inca Prince Huillac Uma and his daughter Huillac Ñusta as prisoners, these ones decided to escape in the area of Pampa del Tamarugal along with several Indigenous, launching a rebellion. La Ñusta was called La Tirana, because she sent to kill both the Spaniards and the baptized Indigenous. Time after that, she fell in love with an expeditionary Portuguese man called Vasco de Almeida; both were discovered and killed for their betrayal. As a request from the princess they were buried under a Christian crucifix, at the same place where today the festivity is celebrated.

LA VIRGEN DE LAS PEÑAS

This festivity occurs at early August each year in the Livilcar area, place that was the path to carry the silver extracted by the settlers at Potosí, Bolivia, where Peruvians, Bolivians and Chileans come as pilgrims. Another legend says that in the mid XVIIth century, a muleteer found in the area a shepherd that was being attacked by a snake. The muleteer couldn't



Altar, Bolivian Religious Society Santa Cecilia • Arica • Virgin of La Tirana • 2010

help the woman, and while he was crying for the occurred the Virgin appeared unto him; the Virgin remained carved on a stone. There, at that same place, the pilgrimage is performed every year.

III.

One of the most important photographers of the XXth century in Latin America is the Peruvian Martín Chambi (1891-1973). In 1925 he portrayed a *Diablo Menor*¹² at the festivities of Puno. On the picture we can see a man frontally posing for the camera, with a background in which it is possible to see the adobe and stone construction of that time. Most probably it is about noon, because of the contrast of the image and the projection of the shadow. It has been 92 years since that image and the dancer's spirit, the warrior spirit, is still present.

IV.

The dragon that receives us, the mask that greets us, the monochrome landscape that makes us slip in the immensity of the desert, warns us in this publication about the spiritual strength of whom have been portrayed in this collective chant. In this publication I can see bird-women, fantastic animals, oriental remi-

niscences, metaphoric representations of the cosmos' forces, pre-Hispanic princes, warriors, gypsies, Andean people without borders, angels, mythical creatures, authorities, sailors and so many others. Each of them get ready for dancing to their beliefs, to their emotional bonds, to their worldview, to their universal energies. The dancers dance in the desert, while their chant is listened from the starry sky to the depths of our Mother Earth.

- 1 Researcher on topics about image, Chief Editor of the South American magazine Sueño de la Razón.
- 2 Provincia de El Loa, Región de Antofagasta, travels to the Festivity on 2008, 2014, 2016.
- 3 Provincia del Tamarugal, Región de Tarapacá, travels to the Festivity on 2008, 2011.
- 4 Comuna Pogo al Monte, Región de Tarapacá, travels to the Festivity on 2008, 2010, 2017.
- 5 Comuna de Arica, Región de Arica y Parinacota, travels to the Festivity on 2015.
- 6 All the annotations by Andrés Figueroa in the text, are paraphrased extracts from interviews he made during the edition of this publication.
- 7 It is understood as an initiation rite; the passage of one state to another.
- 8 According to Gavilan & Carrasco (2009) " [...] they mark the transit from one season to another by the means of the cult of their deities and ancestors and focus to celebrate the fertility as a desire of well-being and abundance, and celebrate death-life in a permanent fate cycle. Gavilan Vega, Vivian, & Carrasco G, Ana María (2009). Andean festivities and religiosity in the north of Chile. Chungará (Arica), 41(1), 101-112.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0717-73562009000100007>
- 9 Ostria González, Mauricio, & Henríquez Puentes, Patricia. (2016). ARGUEDAS AND TAKI UNQUY Atenea (Concepción), (513), 73-85.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-04622016000100005>
- 10 For example, in the village of Ayquina around 50 people live there permanently. This number can be increased to 70,000 during the Festivity.
- 11 There are several myths and legends about the festivities, with small variations and sometimes with divergent stories. The ones indicated here are those that are most mentioned at grassroots level.
- 12 This image has been very important to Andrés Figueroa; a filiation dialogue with the photographic practice of our continent, especially with The Dancers of the Desert.