

POPULAR RELIGIOSITY IN CHILE'S NORTE GRANDE

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When the War of the Pacific ended, which confronted Chile against its neighbors Peru and Bolivia (1879-1883), the central State had not only the challenge to govern in a political and administrative way these new territories rich in saltpeter, but also, and this was the complexity, to establish cultural sovereignty.

From Santiago, the capital, the white elite designed a process of chileanization by means of education and other instruments. In other words, a civilizing crusade. The idea was to align the geographic borders with the cultural ones; in order to do that, the feeling of national identity or *chilenidad*, had to be installed among the inhabitants of the current *Norte Grande*; not such an easy task. This proposal referred to clichés of Central Chile: music, dances, landscapes, food, etc.

The so-called *Norte Grande* has a long history of around 10 thousand years. Men and women that tamed the territory, filling it with inscriptions from the mummification of the Chinchorros, the cave paintings, the cult of the *animitas* or roadside shrines, to the complex Marian sanctuaries like Las Peñas



Carriers of the Virgin of the Rosary of Las Peñas - Virgin of Las Peñas - 2015

in Arica, Ayquina in Calama, La Tirana and San Lorenzo in Iquique, give an account of complex popular religious practices that defy simple explanations.

Education tried to abort these practices but wasn't able to accomplish its objective. It repeated the subject of modernity and the neighborhood, the support of renewed tradition, was imposed. More important than the classroom, their streets, their corners, their football courts, their head offices, people recreated in the religious dance an old tradition. The soundscape of the streets of Iquique was composed by the bass and snare drums, the *siku*, the whistles and then the brasses; also by the calling of ice cream and fish vendors.

The religious dance, a cross-generational structure (grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren), endured the symbolic violence of the educated society that treated them as ignorant, Indigenous and, incidentally, non-Chileans. Enrique Lafourcade, author of the novel *Palomita Blanca* (Little Dove), after assisting to the festival of Ayquina, considered this festivity as a theological kitsch.

Rooted in the neighborhood, the religious dances have developed strategies to defend their cult. One of the most elemental forms has been to part with folklore. La Tirana, in order to mention the biggest festivity of the *Norte Grande*, it's neither a folk activity nor a carnival. The Marian cult of this part of the country is a ritual through which you can have access to the sacred, either to salute and to renew oneself or to ask for health. These festivities are not a place to show off, a dancer told me. Moreover, he added: Who is going to show off if you have to dance at three in the morning or at noon? The cold and the heat do not accompany the exhibitionism mentioned.

It was the saltpeter cycle that, since the end of the XIXth century, expanded the festivity to everyone. There are marks of its existence even before the nitrate boom. The thousands of men and women that populated the "más cabrón"² desert of the world, as the Chilean novelist and poet Hernán Rivera Letelier describes it, sacralized and spread this cult in which the figure of the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), was disguised as the *Virgen del Carmen*.

THE LEGEND

The three great Marian sanctuaries are raised based on a legend. In both Ayquina and Las Peñas, the Virgin's image found on a hill or at the valley lead to pilgrimage. The legend of La Tirana is a love story. The encounter of two worlds.

A cruel and mercilessly Indigenous princess captured a Portuguese man who had worked at Huantajaya. She fell in love and convert to Christianity. They were both executed. Some time after that, a friar found a mound and, on the top of it, a crucifix. This is the version that describes the historian Cuneo Vidal. That's how the pilgrimage to the *Virgen del Carmen* emerges.

La Fiesta de la Tirana, conducted every June 16th in the village that holds the same name, at the *Norte Grande* of Chile, has a strong impact over the everyday life of men and women that inhabit that extensive territory. The pilgrims travel not only from Chile, but also from Peru and Bolivia in order to worship the "China", as she is affectionately called.

Every year on June 16th, men and women travel looking for health and well-being; those are the main reasons for their *Mandas* (vows of sacrifice). Iquique, the nearest coastal city to this sanctuary located 72 Km away, is where the pilgrims develop along the year different activities in order to prepare themselves in the best way for the festivity. One of them is to rehearse and to raise money in order to get a lodging as good as possible for the nearly ten days that they stay in the village. The same happens at Ayquina, Tarapacá and Las Peñas.

Nevertheless, it is possible to notice at least three interpretations regarding the Virgin that is venerated during La Fiesta de La Tirana, all of them complementary. The Chilean militaries that invade the South of Peru, today the *Norte Grande*, bring with them the image of the *Virgen del Carmen*, which can be interpreted as the Patron Saint of the *Ejército de Chile* (Chilean Army) and as the Mother of God. They come to civilize pagan and Indigenous territories in which they must teach the true religion. However, with them comes a group of poor farmer soldiers, who joined the Army

but believe in a cosmic Christianity very different from the one that the elite believes in. These are the ones that, along with the native population of the *Norte Grande*, will give a new impulse, this time a popular mestizo one, to the cult of La China. It's them who see in the Virgin the image of the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) in terms of giver of life, health and food. They will not deny the other interpretations but they have with her a relationship of closeness, trust and respect.

Something similar occurs at Las Peñas and Ayquina. San Lorenzo, called El Lolo, is seen as the guy that helps you but in exchange of loyalty.

HISTORY THROUGH THE DANCES

It is possible to make a chronology of the religious dances according to a pattern that goes from the local to the international, and



Altar · Español del Carmen Religious Dance · Antofagasta · Virgen of La Tirana · 2017

For the thousands of men and women that assist annually to the festivity, the year is divided between before and after the celebration. This way of structuring the everyday life implies that the daily routine adjusts to that date. Assisting to the festivity becomes the most important thing; that day, the small village of La Tirana gathers more than one hundred thousand people.

even to the global. The first dances, from the end of the XIXth century until the '30s, are dances inspired by the local Andean landscape: Chunchos, Cuyacas and Morenos (dances), represent the macro Andean zone. The shepherding and the chores of the Bolivian yunga are reproduced through the songs and dances. The Chino dance is the first Chilean dance that spread from Andacollo to Peru of that time. They are Pirquineros (artisanal miners) and as visitors they have the honor to carry La China throughout the procession. Between the '30s and the '50s there was a proliferation of American Indian dances. Aniceto Palza, the tailor, is the creator of the redskins. Then others would appear like the Dakotas, the Sioux, in addition to Gypsy, Cossak, among other dances. In the end of the '50s "el Goyo" Orbénes and Tito Rodríguez, "el Manicero" or peanut seller, burst in La Tirana with the first Diablada or Dance of the Demons. Ultimately, the brasses would replace the wind instruments manufactured with canes, like the *quenás*, the *lacas* and the *sikus*. Few dances still use the whistle. During the '80s, the Bolivian migration to Iquique lured by the Zofri (free zone of Iquique) produced the Sambo Caporal dance. Then it would be the turn of the Tinkus dance and many more.

The above speaks of a long process of inventiveness and appropriation. La Fiesta de La Tirana, as well as La Fiesta de San Lorenzo, just to name two, cannot be understood without the creative act of their protagonists, not only in the choreography but also in the music. La Tirana is a staging that combines what is local and what is global. Tarapacá, in this perspective, is a territory that is constantly being recreated. Ayquina, on the other hand, has a strong Andean/Bolivian component, both in the costumes and in the sonority that is noticed as soon as we arrive to the village. In all these festivities the Andean component is present.

The above makes of the *Norte Grande* an enigmatic territory for the center of the country. It is often a place that defies the idea of national identity (*chilenidad*) produced by the elites of Santiago. Its people, dressed as an "Other", dance and sing to melodies that are not those of the central Chile. The ideal

for the center is to see this place completely "chileanized". There is something of that. Suffice it to see how May 21st 3 is commemorated. The streets are filled with a "chileanizing" aesthetic, where all the civil society parades in honor of Arturo Prat and his men. But every year, on July 16th, the Andean and mestizo side of this part of the nation shows up in a powerful way. The more than 250 fraternities that arrive to La Tirana, expression of a long multiculturalism, reminds us the longstanding *Norte Grande*, with its more than 10 thousand years of history. On the other hand, Ayquina, Las Peñas and San Lorenzo still breathe a certain local air. The presence of the Catholic Church at those places is not as strong as at La Tirana.

SINGING TO LA CHINA

The dances salute the Virgin, dancing and singing. People sing collectively and anonymously composed songs; simple verses addressed to La China.

For example:

To this temple so sacred
We enter with bows
Arabs of Antofagasta
That destine your presence

They tell where they come from and whom they represent. Many of them refer to the long path they had to travel in order to arrive to the center of the world: the temple. Mr. Arturo Barahona, Caporal of the Redskin dance of Iquique, stands out for his compositions. Each dance has its own book of songs. Complementary to this, other songs are listened. One of them, maybe the most famous one is "La Reina del Tamarugal", a Viña del Mar Festival winner on the folklore genre on 1985. "Rocío de la Pampa", by Patricio Flores, is also chanted by thousands of pilgrims.

LAS MANDAS OR VOWS OF SACRIFICE

The dancers have a *Manda* to fulfill, a sort of contract with the Virgin. They ask her for health and, in exchange, they promise to dance for a given time. Other pilgrims crawl from the Calvary to the temple. *La Manda* is a promise; the Virgin always delivers as long as the pilgrim delivers too.

THE COSTUMES

The religious dancers make great efforts in order to present a good dance to the Virgin. They use eye-catching and colorful costumes, with offerings from very modest to very expensive and conspicuous. The costume is sacred and can only be used during the festivities. Some people have their costumes tailored in Oruro or La Paz, in Bolivia. They stand out for their colors and elegance.

THE BANNERS



Carrier of banner Chino Dance · Franco Fernández · Virgin of La Tirana · 2017

Each dance has a banner, where the dance name, the dates of its foundation and the place where it comes from, are inscribed. It has cheerful colors and, with its aesthetics, refers to the Andean world. Snakes and condors are the most present animals; they sometimes cohabit with the national emblem. It is one person that will be designated to carry the banner during the festivity.

THE MUSICIANS

Each dance has its own band. Initially the bands played wind instruments like *sikus* and *quenás*, and were accompanied by a drum

bass and a tambour. Nowadays, most of them have brass instruments. The Indian dances still have percussion bands and use a couple of whistles. Some dances, especially *Diabladas* and *Sambos Caporales*, hire bands from Oruro. This annoys the old dancers, who say the festival is becoming a carnival, referring to the carnival of Oruro.

THE HEAD OFFICE

Having a head office in town for their dance is the dream of all religious dancers. Some of them have it, some others don't. A lot of them set up a camp on the outskirts of the village. Pogo Almonte's city hall, as well as Arica's and Calama's, provide them with water and the basic conditions for a better stay. In the head office of each dance, there's the image of the virgin they carry towards the church. When already there, they salute and sing to her. The head offices are normally made of light material and very few are made of solid ones.

CHURCH AND DANCES

The relationship between the religious dances and the Catholic Church hasn't been exempt of conflicts. The fight for the control of the festivity was a constant until the '70s. An everyday concurrence illustrates this. Around the '40s the Redskin Aniceto Palga, attacked a priest. The priest supposedly said: "Why don't you put coins instead of candles?". The reaction did not take long to arrive and Aniceto slapped him on the face. The Church took decades, especially because of the conferences of Medellín in Colombia and Puebla in Mexico, to value the so-called popular religiosity. The Chilean coup on 1973 changed the balance of power. The religious dances, perceived as suspicious by the military, took shelter in the Church. Lots of pilgrims were persecuted, exiled and imprisoned. The protection, nevertheless, turned them into subjects available for evangelization, or rather, for catholicization. One expression of this process can be observed in the change of the religious songs. This was the traditional composition:

*Campos naturales
déjanos pasar
porque morenos
vienen a adorar*

This is the current one:

*Campos naturales
déjanos pasar
porque tus morenos
vienen a bailar*

“To Jesus through Mary” is the phrase that sums up the above. The old dancers complain about the fact that at La Tirana there is less and less space and time to dance. On the 16th, the so-called big day, the Catholic Church reduces the space for the dances by holding masses. These ones proceed incessantly, while the dancers wait at their head offices to take part in the procession in the afternoon. The young dancers assume that this is normal. But at the same time, this catholicization acts as a protection for the pilgrims from the attacks by evangelical groups.

RELIGIOUS DANCES, ARCHIVE AND MEMORY

The festivities in the *Norte Grande* are a staging of the history of this territory. Its varied occupations are represented by the means of its religious dances. The ethnic dimension, not only the Andean, expresses itself in dances such as *Los Morenos*, *Cuyacas*, *Pieles Rojas* or *Redskins*, *Gitanos*, *Morenos/Sambos*. But also the Chilean nationalism that goes through everyone: the patriotic colors and the Chilean flag accompany the Virgin. A way to say: “we are Chileans, but we sing and dance for the Virgin”. La Tirana is an extraordinary text in which what is national dialogues with what is Andean, with all the paradoxes and contradictions that this implies. The military marches cohabit with *Las Sayas* and *Morenadas*. Until the '60s the *Marinero* dance existed in the Santa Laura Saltpeter Work. People from La Pampa used to dress as Chilean sailors and carried the *Virgen del Carmen* on a boat. With the closure of that one and other saltpeter works, like Humberstone, the dance disappeared. Nevertheless, in Calama, for the *Ayquina* festivity, a similar dance is in good shape. These are strategies for assuring that, even though we are Chileans, our identity is regional; and in this, there is no contradiction.

During the '60s the festivity was more local and had much more Andean influence. Mr. Nelson Jeria, the last *Caporal* (foreman) of the Santa Laura *Marinero* dance, tells us that in the end of the festival, they sang through

the village with a *Cacharpaya* rhythm: “Adiós chascos de La Tirana”, “Adiós comerciantes especuladores ya se han hinchado como alfajores”. Or in the same logic that provoked Palza’s reaction, this stanza: “El cura de este año no quiere velas, quiere que los bailes le traigan plata”.

Until the '70s, the pilgrims performed in the play *La Cautiva* that represented the legend of La Tirana, where the Indians, betrayed by La Ñusta who was in love with the Portuguese Vasco da Almeyda, kill them both. This act can also be read as the representation of the Conquest of Chile. La Ñusta becomes La Tirana and out of love she converts to Christianity.

La Tirana is under the control of the Catholic Church, and with the help of the government has been surrounded, during the month of July, by a health security belt. It is no longer possible to drink alcohol and gambling games are not allowed either. It is a Marian cult that is more and more focused on the figure of Christ. Maybe this is the same reason why, in the town of Tarapacá, San Lorenzo festivity grows every year each August 10th. Be that as it may, the Marian cults of the *Norte Grande* have a long life and are in good shape. The religious dances have proved through history that they have the ability to adapt, react and innovate. The *Norte Grande* festivities will continue to generate regional identity insofar new generations are being recruited, as it has been happening until now.



End of festivity · Virgin of La Tirana · 2017

- 1 Sociologist Andean Studies Institute at Isluga, Arturo Prat University.
- 2 Chilean colloquial expression for “harsher”.
- 3 The Battle of Iquique of 1879, during the War of the Pacific, is commemorated. (This is the commemoration of The Iquique’s Navy Battle, on 1879, during the War of The Pacific.)