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Speculative Pachamama: Spectral Politics Beyond Life and Fertility

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ABSTRACT

Through an ethnography of culinary offerings dedicated to Earth-Beings, this essay explores the speculative thought of Andean herders in Jujuy (NW Argentina) as they reflect on their relations with Pachamama and the "modern" rituals of politicians and corporations. Beyond cultural-appropriation frameworks, it argues that such speculative comparisons reveal how these rituals also summon spectral forces, exposing a spectral politics that exceeds life, fertility, and modern secularity.

Keywords: culinary offerings, Southern Andes, spectrality, rituals, speculative thinking.

A través de una etnografía de las ofrendas culinarias dedicadas a los seres-tierra, este ensayo explora el pensamiento especulativo de los pastores andinos de Jujuy (noroeste argentino) mientras reflexionan sobre sus relaciones con la Pachamama y los rituales "modernos" de políticos y empresas. Más allá de los enfoques centrados en la apropiación cultural, el texto sostiene que estas comparaciones especulativas revelan que dichos rituales también convocan fuerzas espectrales, exponiendo una política espectral que desborda la vida, la fertilidad y la secularidad moderna.

Palabras clave: ofrendas culinárias, Andes Meridionales, espectralidad, rituales, pensamento especulativo.

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> A speculative possibility does not simply fall from the sky of ideas. Speculation originates in unique situations, which exhibit the possibility of an approach by the very fact that they have already undertaken it.
> (Stengers 2010, 313)

Relationality in Times of War: It's Not (Only) About "Cultural Appropriation"

Each August, throughout the highlands of Jujuy province in northwest Argentina, annual feeding rituals dedicated to Pachamama—known locally as *dar de comer* ("to give food")—are performed. People devote great care to these events, since the continuation, fertility, and multiplication of human life depend on their proper unfolding. Yet Indigenous communities are not the only ones who engage in relationships with Pachamama and with other spectral beings traditionally considered "Andean." Politicians, businesspeople, union leaders, environmentalists, and others also participate in these ceremonies, at times even conducting their own offerings.

Academic perspectives and broader analytical frameworks often interpret such practices as political strategies aimed at appropriating Indigenous symbols—an additional culturalist maneuver of dispossession targeting Indigenous territories. Beyond this explanation, however, an alternative interpretation arises from the herders themselves, one that compels us to attend to the spectral forces at play. They insist that politicians and businesspeople feed Pachamama, and possibly other Earth-Beings (sensu de la Cadena 2015), because it is through those interactions that such actors draw their power. And although herders can at present only speculate about how this transfer takes place, they do not doubt that it occurs.

That certain "modern" collectives (Latour 1992) organize and perform offerings to Pachamama is, without question, something that calls for reflection. It is equally important, however, to recognize that the dominant anthropological interpretation of these practices—one that denounces Pachamama as the object of "appropriation"—is itself a modernizing gesture. It leads analysis to overdetermine Indigenous perspectives, persuading us that the only possible relationship between moderns and local deities is that of rational agents who appropriate beliefs.

This text follows another path: a speculative exercise that takes seriously the herders' conjectural thought and the creativity they bring to interpreting contemporary engagements with local deities. From their reflections emerges a hypothesis more unsettling than symbolic readings suggest: modern ritual relations may be generating worlds in which what takes shape is not fertility and life, but a form of power that aligns with the voracity of development, rendering such development no longer modern, nor even strictly human.

My fieldwork took place in Huachichocana, a small Indigenous herding community located in a transitional zone between the Quebrada of Humahuaca and the Puna of Jujuy. The region is inhabited by a few families who cultivate maize, potatoes, fava beans, and alfalfa, and who maintain herds of goats and sheep through seasonal transhumance. Across the varied sites that make up their territory, people feed Pachamama. Their productive and ritual practices, as carried out today, reproduce a structure that has remained largely stable for at least a century, though their origins extend much further back. Over nearly fifteen years of working alongside them, I have participated in numerous *dar de comer* rituals, offerings to the dead, livestock-marking ceremonies, and festivities dedicated to saints, among others. The reflections informing this text stem from that long-term engagement but have a more specific point of departure: a series of conversations that began in 2015 concerning the presence of non-Indigenous actors in feeding rituals—specifically, politicians in office, including the then president of Argentina.

The herders' speculations about the political or corporate motivations behind feeding powerful beings initially led us into conversations about their own ritual engagements: their relations with the other-than-human world and the frequent association between Pachamama and ideas of life and fertility. Over the years, these discussions increasingly intersected with debates around extractivism, particularly lithium mining, whose growing presence—accompanied by recurrent police repression supported by national and provincial governments in alliance with corporate actors—became ever more pressing (Argento 2023; CIDH 2023; Dorn 2023). What role did powerful Andean beings play in these disputes, and how were food offerings implicated in them? What became clear was that Indigenous families were not the only ones feeding powerful beings. Other collectives could do so as well, even if their aims did not align with the sustenance of a fertile world in the way herders envisioned it.

Ultimately, these considerations invite a reconsideration of the terms through which we apprehend Indigenous speculative thought. Rather than a mode of belief or symbolic interpretation, it operates as a way of thinking that challenges the expectations we may hold—and the defenses we must build—in a world shaped by crisis and by ongoing struggles over the very definition of reality. To grasp what is at stake, it is necessary to attend to dimensions of pastoral practice that are often overlooked. Their description allows us to argue, on the one hand, that Pachamama, like other Earth-Beings, is a force marked by multiplicity and spectrality—qualities that entail, among other things, a constitutive amorality. On the other hand, the culinary offerings directed to her, together with the mamas, illas, and other powerful material forms that emerge from them, cannot be

understood solely within frameworks of reciprocity aimed at sustaining a fertile world.

Taken together, these conditions allow us to consider both the possibility that other collectives may also relate to Pachamama and the Indigenous creativity involved in engaging with more-than-human beings—entities for whom they are not the sole interlocutors. Such paths open onto inherently exploratory forms of reasoning. Following Debaise and Stengers (2016), speculation may be understood as a form of knowledge that refuses to relinquish any part of experience, even when doing so challenges dominant politics of evidence (and, we might add, ethnological canons). Here, this means granting equal analytical weight to the consequences of non-Indigenous actors engaging with Pachamama. As we show, herding families compare their own experiences with those of others without reducing them to their own frameworks (Miranda and Pazzarelli 2020). In doing so, they elicit novel and unexpected associations between ideas and practical details from their own rituals—associations that resist incorporation into a holistic model, as though they constituted an alternative knowledge system describable through the same logic that centers reciprocity as the organizing principle of the world. Rather, these insights foreground the spectral nature of other-than-human forces, one that resists totalization or explanatory closure.

Whenever we discussed how to apprehend the relationships between spectral forces and "modern" collectives, the herders drew upon their own knowledge and careful observations to formulate hypotheses about what they saw and what consequences might follow. From an anthropological perspective, our ethnographic account echoes this local reasoning and should likewise be understood as speculative—much as Strathern (1987) considered ethnography itself a kind of fiction, though not a mere exercise of imagination (see also Debaise and Stengers 2016). The mode of thought at stake is, as Nodari (2024) suggests, one that takes the encounter between the possible and the impossible as its raw material.

In the end, this work illuminates not only the ritual world but also the very nature of spectral forces, inviting us to approach them through alternative ontological perspectives. At the same time, it offers a way of understanding the challenges our interlocutors perceive in their worlds and the kinds of alliances they deem necessary to confront them.

Spectral Analepsis: Experience and Difference

The powerful beings of the Andes—mountains, lagoons, devils, and the dead—have long been described as ambiguous entities (Mariscotti 1978; Martínez 1989; Fernández Juárez 1995; Rösing 1995; Harris 2000; Spedding 2008). They hold

the power both to generate all that exists in the world and to destroy it; they possess civilized and wild aspects, oscillating between nurturing and predation. Only a certain harmony within this alternation allows for the life and fertility on which people depend.

According to much of the literature, this always-precarious balance is maintained through various kinds of ritual offerings: substances, smoke, drinks, and food meant to please, "reach" (*alcanzar*), or "seduce" the gods. Vital transfers of this kind—namely, the movement of life-giving substances from one side to the other—form the basis of the so-called "pacts" that seek to sway the will of powerful beings toward the domestic, civilized, and nurturing pole of the human world (Fernández Juárez 1995, 1997). These transfers are not confined to formal rituals; they occur daily, sometimes through minimal gestures almost invisible to the untrained eye.

As Ludueña Romandini (2022) argues, politics unfolds as an unceasing commerce between the visible and the invisible. Drawing from this ceaseless exchange—one that makes it possible to conceive the very distinction between life and death, or between human and nonhuman—we may tentatively refer to these Andean transfers as spectral analepsis. By this I refer to the connections that people (and other beings) seek to establish with the exterior or para-ontological domain of the spectral: attempts to catalyze the circulation of forces that enable them to "multiply" existence on this side of the world—animals, plants, but also money, health, and creativity. *Multiplicar* and *multiplico* ("to multiply" or "to make proliferate") constitute the local way of conceiving the reproduction and sustenance of the world, and, as we will see, it is a notion that precedes the very idea of Life itself: a generic movement that herders transform into fertility.

The notion of spectral analepsis highlights a crucial aspect of herders' rituals and their interpretations of others' practices: *dar de comer* summons generic forces of multiplication without a direct connection to Life as telos. Only afterwards can the residues of these interactions be translated and reworked into specific relations with Pachamama, inaugurating balanced connections between Life and Death and, simultaneously, revealing the limits of the anthropological language of "offerings" and Fertility that so often frames our interpretations (see Pazzarelli and Lema 2024).

Herders frequently explain that nothing is possible in the mountains without Pachamama's approval—that is, without entering into a relationship with her (see Mariscotti 1978; Bugallo 2008). This is, in a sense, akin to de la Cadena's (2015) idea of being-in-ayllu: to dwell in the mountains is to exist in and with Pachamama. These relations are best understood as intra-actions in Barad's (2007) sense: relations intrinsic to the very constitution of the entities involved, which do

not preexist the processes that bring them into being. Such a formulation helps us grasp how families and Pachamama mutually belong to one another.

The assertion that Pachamama is multiple—at once one and more than one—carries several implications, each pointing to the impossibility of any totalizing definition. When I spoke with my interlocutors about the modes of existence involved in their relations with Pachamama, they consistently emphasized that no single truth can encompass them. The figure of Pachamama comes into being through the particular relationships established with each family in the community that holds faith (*fe*) in her. Although we may describe spectral forces as generic movements of multiplication, the pathways that reach them are always specific. There is no generic Pachamama whom families feed in interchangeable ways; rather, Earth-Beings and persons emerge from a spectral outside and become distinct through the ritual gestures that bind them to a given world. In this sense, whenever a herder speaks of Pachamama, they are referring to experiences that differ, however slightly, from those of their neighbors. Pachamama is never the same—nor, for that matter, are her rituals.

Each person and each family "has their own experience" and sustains a pragmatic relationship (Debaise and Strathern 2016) with the divinity that belongs only to them: the practices and evaluations developed over generations concerning what is most appropriate and effective for engaging with "their" divine forces (for a discussion of the notion of experience, see Miranda Pérez and Pazzarelli 2020; see also Lema and Pazzarelli 2015). This helps explain why, on many occasions, Pachamama's punitive force—triggered, for instance, by a poorly conducted ritual—may manifest toward specific families rather than the community as a whole. At the same time, the fact that Pachamama can multiply wherever she is summoned is what led my interlocutors, from the very beginning of my fieldwork, to encourage me to make offerings to the Earth even when I was back home in the city.

The singularity that characterizes the relational force of these experiences means that people do not speak openly about the practices of other families[1]. Because Pachamama always exists differently, no one would presume to explain what others do with Pachamama, nor, of course, what Pachamama does with them. I never once heard anyone judge another's ritual actions as wrong or misguided (though this did not necessarily imply agreement on their

[1] This seems to be common across several other Andean regions. Absi (2020) notes, for Potosí (Bolivia), that a stranger could not (at least not easily) enter into a relationship with the Pachamama who inhabits a region that is not their own. Ansión recovers a similar idea in Ayacucho (Peru): "The Taytacha is one and many, just as the community is one and many, as was also the Inca Empire and as Peru is today. It is likely that the same occurs with Pachamama: she is the same everywhere, but different in each place" (1987, 144). See also Spedding (2008) and Miranda Pérez and Pazzarelli (2020) for similar examples.

effectiveness). Gradually, I came to understand that this restraint was not only a sign of respect toward neighbors or kin but also an expression of caution when speaking in the name of the other-than-human forces being invoked. As I have mentioned, the different versions of Pachamama exist in relation to the analepsis that summons her, and to question the rituals of others would entail presuming a complete understanding of what she is like or what she might desire. In this sense, discretion in evaluating others' ritual forms becomes, in effect, an expression of care toward the relational fabric that binds worlds together, and toward the cosmic transfers that simultaneously act upon both sides of the relation.

Pachamama and the "Moderns"

In 2019, then-President Mauricio Macri traveled to the high Andean lands of Jujuy to seal his political alliance with the provincial governor at the time, Gerardo Morales[2]. The agreements between the national and provincial governments, which predated this visit and continued under subsequent administrations, aimed, among other things, to facilitate the various extractivist projects looming over the province. In August of that year, the politicians, accompanied by their wives and several representatives of Indigenous communities, took part in a *dar de comer* ritual in the town of Purmamarca, near Huachichocana, where I was conducting fieldwork. The event received extensive media coverage, and we followed it in part through radio reports while performing rituals at an isolated *puesto* (a temporary residence used during animal herding) with one of our host families.

The participation of politicians, union leaders, and businessmen in this and other rituals is not unfamiliar in the history of the Andean region, where relationships between human and spectral powers have a long tradition. Over the past few decades, large public performances organized in Bolivia, most notably by Evo Morales's party during his presidency, were widely broadcast, critiqued, and analyzed. Added to this is the incorporation of Madre Tierra into the Ecuadorian constitution; examples abound (Arnold 2008; Schavelzon 2015). In the Argentine case, more recent but similar in pattern, commentary and critique largely echoed what had already been said about other Andean countries: the use and patrimonialization of Pachamama (and other powerful Andean beings and figures) as a political strategy that allows states to advance over nature under a veneer that combines Andean cosmologies with "green" ideologies (see, for example, Bugallo 2008; and especially Espósito 2022). It is important to emphasize that no one can reasonably doubt the intentions of the State–Capital alliance in

[2] The official information can be found here: https://www.casarosada.gob.ar/slider-principal/45960-macri-participo-de-la-tradicional-ceremonia-de-ofrenda-a-la-pachamama

driving the neo-extractivist advance on Indigenous territories, as these texts clearly demonstrate. Admittedly, for many of us (academics and "progressive" environmentalists alike) Macri's image appeared as yet another mockery, part of the historical perversion through which the country has viewed and treated Indigenous peoples throughout its history.

However, and this point is crucial, none of this corresponded to how the Indigenous herders with whom I have spoken for years approached the issue. There is no "common" perspective (Blaser 2024), and this should alert us to our own interpretive eagerness. In stark contrast to the interpretive zeal of many academics and commentators, the herders refused to offer any opinion on the event (as I had invited them to do in our conversations): first, because how could they possibly know the true faith of Macri? And second, because existing in relation to Pachamama is not a purely human decision; it also depends on the forces of the Earth. How could they know what those forces might be doing in relation to the president? In other words, how could they define or totalize what had happened in either a positive or a negative light?[3]. What was needed, above all, was caution and time to evaluate how those relationships would unfold. Without in any way endorsing or justifying what was taking place, they extended toward the president's ritual the same gesture of caution they show toward their neighbors.

This caution expressed two key points. First, the idea that Pachamama can be "used" or "patrimonialized" rests on an assumption my interlocutors found questionable: Pachamama is not a "thing" or a "symbol" to be appropriated, but rather a force that also decides which calls to answer and which offerings to accept. In this sense, we might suggest that in the two-way analepsis initiated by ritual politics, the patrimonialization of Earth-Beings must be understood as a spectral politics, an attempt to summon a singular version of Pachamama, one clearly distinct from the one nurtured by herders in the highlands and aligned instead with "modern" interests. Framed this way, the thesis of the modern "appropriation" of Andean gods, conceived as the conversion of Pachamama into an empty signifier or green label, proves to be a fragile and reductive argument, one that obscures the ethnographic dimensions through which these relations acquire their force. From the herders' point of view, the real danger of presidential rituals lies not in the symbolic appropriation of nothing, but in the literal analepsis being attempted with Pachamama. This brings us to the second point.

As ethnography shows, throughout Andean history there are numerous examples of spectral beings coexisting with extractive activities, provided that

[3] That relationships with spectral beings (including disbelief or rejection) vary according to "personal experience" is also noted by Ansión (1987, 113).

companies perform the appropriate rituals to forge a successful relationship[4]. More traditional mining operations in Jujuy, for instance, used to organize large offerings to feed Pachamama, in which both managers and workers participated (Santander 1962)[5]. Thus, Pachamama, or one of her manifestations, can exist in/with corporations just as she exists in/with the herders. This may help explain the apparent contradiction of Pachamama allowing those who pollute entire rivers to go unpunished, while attacking herders (sometimes fatally) when they fail to show proper respect.

These questions arose frequently during fieldwork: at times, it is enough to carelessly kick a stone in the mountains for one of the beings who dwell there to take offense and try to devour the walker. So then, why does the Earth not swallow the mining companies? One possible anthropological answer is that these companies do not exist in/with Pachamama and therefore remain outside the circuits of reciprocity and, consequently, of counter-predation. But ethnography suggests another possibility: that people apprehend companies and businessmen as having other—and sometimes, perhaps better—agreements with spectral beings than they themselves do.

The concern, then, is not simply that these companies are "too modern" and violate a "living" landscape, but rather that they reveal a non-modern aspect of themselves and attempt to enter into relationships with Earth-Beings for capitalistically oriented purposes —in a way that resonates with the analysis put forward by Tassi (2013) in relation to some Bolivian contexts. From the herders' perspective, it matters little that this relationship differs from their own: it could not be otherwise, since everyone has their own "experience". It is also important to clarify that they are not suggesting that politicians have learned to connect with certain forces in order to turn them against those who have long coexisted with them, Indigenous peoples. Rather, these politicians are summoning specters, as they always have, and as they continue to do (the perspective on the matter is no different, and perhaps even more profound, in the new era of President Javier

[4] Examples or mentions of mountain and mine beings aiding entrepreneurs through pacts appear in Spedding (2008, 115). The idea that different huacas support their worshippers and confront other huacas is also suggested by ethnohistorical accounts, so it is not surprising that people today may be convinced that others, too, have dealings with some Pachamama (Ramírez 2005, 61). More recently, Absi (2020) analyzed the war between the witches allied with the MAS government and the comunarios of Potosí in Bolivia.

[5] For example, the famous Cerro Rico of Potosí, Bolivia, permitted exploration in exchange for proper offerings made, and still made, to the Tío or other mountain beings. Vital transfers with mountain beings are attributed to a range of other professions as well: it is often claimed—especially in the Bolivian highlands—that engineers and architects make offerings when undertaking large construction projects, particularly bridges and major buildings. In the more radical versions, it is said that they perform human sacrifices (*kuchus)* (see Spedding 2016).

Milei; see Frigerio 2024). As Latour (1992) classically reminds us, we must forget the Modernity we claim to uphold and suspend analyses of political strategy that prevent us from confronting the full dimensions of spectral forces. We might say that the herders radicalize, and take seriously, the idea of a perverse "animism" underlying capitalism (Povinelli 2016), which continually brings all parts of the world into the "life" of economic performance through pacts (Taussig 1993).

At this point, it becomes necessary to remove from the equation any secularity of power, but also any presumed morality surrounding the forces of the Earth, and to suspend their unequivocal association with the realms of life and fertility. This is why I use the term spectral to refer to them (Ludueña Romandini 2010). It is necessary to emphasize the exterior condition of these forces in relation to the human world, that is, their alien nature and their existence beyond the teleology of fertility with which they are commonly associated. This amoral exteriority is precisely what allows them to be summoned from all sides of the conflict. Here lies the herders' deepest concern as they observe the feeding rituals of powerful actors: not that Pachamama has been "appropriated," but that she may, at any moment, respond. Earth-Beings emerge from a spectral background that belongs to no one.

A Spectral Exterior

The relation with an exterior that is alien to any human teleology is something that herders experience in other aspects of their lives as well. This exteriority is not an abstract notion but a tangible presence whose constant interference forms part of everyday existence. Animal and plant husbandry in the Andes is usually understood through the dualism that grounds fertility: a complementary relation between the domestic and the wild, in which the domestic pole must encompass the wild to ensure the continuity of life. Every known being or force has both "sides," yet fertility depends on maintaining this fragile balance.

In previous work (Pazzarelli 2022), I explored how this interpretation unfolds when one considers certain radical expressions of wildness within domesticated animals. Ethnographic observations suggest that animals are connected to a force exterior to fertile dualism. Although this dimension might initially seem to coincide with ordinary animal wildness, it cannot be reduced to it; it resists domestication, incorporation, and comprehension. It can only be perceived indirectly, through what might be called its residual manifestations: unexpected crises of rebellion in a particular animal, or subtle behaviors visible only to a trained eye—a goat that gazes differently at its caretaker, a sheep that suddenly halts on the way to pasture, or one that refuses to be slaughtered (see Pazzarelli 2017, 2020).

In such cases, herders wait for the crisis to subside, for the animals to return voluntarily to the herd. Despite the disruption this causes, these episodes are often described as signs of life, as if the very existence of such deviations were a trace of another world—one that persists within the boundaries of the human and the domestic, enabling vitality. In other words, herders contend with more than one being within each animal: the goats and sheep that belong to the herd, and their wild, spectral doubles, which exist in parallel to the human world yet provide an essential residue that allows fertility to continue. This is what I call spectral exteriority: a mode of force that, although unfolding outside any human vital teleology, remains partially entangled with the human world, making it possible.

This dynamic resonates with another example, a classic in Andean ethnography. After living in Sonqo, Peru, Catherine Allen (2002) described distinct vital dimensions ("above," "here," and "below") as parallel states of existence, each unfolding with a degree of independence. Among her examples, the world of the dead plays a crucial role in sustaining complementary relations: it is often said that the deceased help the living, provided they are properly cared for. Allen recounts how the dead come at night to visit one another, wandering through the human village and crossing the "same" agricultural fields cultivated by the living. Their nocturnal movements, she writes, fertilize the people's fields, thereby sustaining life. Yet this fertilizing effect does not seem to result from intention or volition on the part of the dead; it is, rather, a side effect of their visitations. Meanwhile, people remain inside their homes, avoiding encounters with the dead for fear of illness or misfortune. Contact with the deceased is limited to annual feeding rituals, for the dead, like all powerful beings, embody both nourishment and danger.

Reciprocal help has long been anthropology's favored way of describing this relationship, emphasizing the importance of fertile dualism for understanding human–nonhuman relations. But we might speculate—following the herders' own reasoning—that from the perspective of the dead, fertility is merely a residue, an unintended consequence of moving through a shared world. The dead, like animals, appear doubled: from the viewpoint of the living, they participate in pacts of reciprocity that sustain fertility; from their own, they seem indifferent to humans, their existence unfolding in a parallel dimension—a spectral exteriority[6].

One might question the speculative exercise of reinstating the spectral perspective of animals and the dead within these relational dynamics. Yet this line of analysis resonates with the speculative work carried out by the herders themselves. During fieldwork, such reflections frequently arose as exercises in

[6] The radical wildness of animals can be linked to that of other beings frequently mentioned in Andeanist literature, such as kharisiris and devils, who operate outside the frameworks of reciprocity (Pazzarelli 2022).

thought: people wondered how they are—or are not—seen and perceived by other beings, animals, or forces. These were not abstract gestures but grounded reflections on coexistence and vulnerability. The path opened by these examples shows that relations with the spectral exterior permeate the fabric of everyday life: in herding, illness, the unpredictable behavior of animals, and the unseen movements of the dead. The only possible interaction with this exteriority is through its residual manifestations—traces that people then translate into the fertile dualism that sustains life. From this perspective, fertility appears not as a stable condition but as a process of translation, through which residues from a parallel world are reworked into forms that sustain human continuity. This vantage point prepares us to reexamine the relations established with Pachamama and the role of feeding rituals in managing spectral residues.

Tijtinchas

In the highlands of northwest Argentina (the provinces of Jujuy and Salta) and in some areas of southern Bolivia (the southern departments of Potosí and Tarija), tijtincha is the ritual food specially prepared for Pachamama, whose mouths are opened from August 1 until the end of the month. Tijtincha is also made to feed Saint James (San Santiago), a saint identified with lightning, whose feast day is celebrated on July 25. This date marks the beginning of the ritual cycle of the dry season, which continues throughout August and is dedicated to Pachamama. The connections between Saint James/Lightning and Pachamama, as well as the shared culinary complex centered on tijtincha, point to beings of deep identification and profound significance for local life (see Bugallo 2009 for key clarifications). While it is not possible here to elaborate on the details of the rituals dedicated to the saint, the ideas developed in this article may also illuminate his spectral figure.

Tijtincha is prepared from the meat of adult animals, both fresh and dried, and from dried corn cobs. The corn cobs are deliberately modified: kernels are removed to create lines representing corrals, paths, or houses. These ingredients are boiled in abundant water for many hours, ideally overnight, making tijtincha one of the longest-cooked dishes in the local culinary tradition. The prolonged boiling causes the meat to shred and nearly detach from the bones, while the corn kernels swell, sometimes bursting to occupy the spaces left by the removed kernels. It is said that in this way, both the cobs and the host household are filled with suerte ("luck"), and their petitions will be fulfilled accordingly.

During the ritual, tijtincha is offered directly into the mouths of Pachamama, pits dug into the earth and reopened annually for the occasion. It is accompanied by large quantities of *chicha* (maize beer) and other beverages, as well as coca leaves and cigarettes. Another portion of the tijtincha is consumed by the

participants, also in large quantities, while taking care to reserve the bones and cobs for later burial in the mouths.

The feeding events can last for hours, and a single family may feed several "mouths" (in the house, the corral, the herding outposts, the water springs), activating practices rich in detail and gestures that express a nuanced understanding of the forces they wish to summon. Generally, people offer whatever they wish to multiply: if they want crops, they offer crops, or an image of crops expressed through a specific offering. An extensive network of "symbolic" correspondences and analogies between offerings and desires has been explored over decades of Andean ethnography (Martínez 1987; Fernández Juárez 1995, 1997) and continues to be reproduced in the concrete, situated experiences of families.

The singularity of these practices makes it impossible for herders to produce a single, substantive definition of how tijtincha should be prepared, what desires motivate the offerings, or, even more so, the nature of the other-than-human forces that manifest during the rituals. In Huachichocana and surrounding regions, however, herders agree that among all possible culinary offerings, and regardless of family-specific details, tijtincha is the one that must never be absent, because its remains, bones, and cobs are considered the most important elements for ensuring future fertility and multiplication.

As mentioned earlier, one of the signs that tijtincha is ready is when the shredded meat begins to detach from the bones, leaving them gleaming. Each year, the whiteness of the bones becomes part of a broader cosmological evaluation: every August, when people reopen the earth mouths, they carefully inspect the bones buried the previous year[7]. They expect them to be clean, white, and luminous, an unequivocal sign that the offering was accepted by the spectral forces. These signs affirm the strength of the intra-actions that bind each family to the particular Pachamama they summon. But bones and cobs are more than signs; they are material condensations of spectral force, which then circulate through family relations, helping to multiply the fertility of herds and fields, as well as other aspirations for abundance. Herders explain that both the cobs and the meat

[7] That bones must remain intact so that beings can "reassemble" is a practice found not only in other Andean regions (see the killp'a ritual; Arnold and Yapita 1998) but also across the Americas and beyond. In the Arctic Circle, Brightman (1973) describes almost identical customs among Cree hunters, who wonder whether today's animals are reassembled from the same bones preserved in earlier hunts. Carlo Ginzburg (1989) traces this idea to early hunters in Lapland and Siberia, who offered bones to invisible beings as part of an exchange between the living and the dead, a pattern he saw spanning hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and agricultural worlds. Revisiting this hypothesis, Ludueña Romandini (2022) argues that such dynamics exceed the human species and should not be reduced to fertility rites: the renewal of life, he suggests, is only a superficial effect of a deeper commerce with spectral forces.

and bones, when properly cooked and digested by Pachamama, become *mama* or *illa*. In Andean contexts, these terms refer to objects from which a force of multiplication emanates, a force that is not of this world but can be channeled to generate life. Put differently, the analepsis carried out through tijtincha, where food is sent across to the other side, simultaneously initiates a counter-passage: the return of remains, mama, infused with spectral potency.

Mama: Lithic and Culinary Remains

The term *mama* (also rendered as *illa* or *inkaychu*) refers to small objects—often lithic in nature—widely recognized throughout the Andes as sources from which a generative, multiplying force emanates (Flores Ochoa 1977; Allen 2016a, 2016b)[8]. Most have specific shapes that allude to what people wish to nurture: animals, crops, or places. These mamas are carefully treasured, typically wrapped in textiles and kept in protected locations. They must be attentively cared for and regularly "fed," for they are understood as beings of intense hunger. When properly attended to—through smoke offerings, libations, and other acts of nourishment—they transmit their power to animals or crops, encouraging proliferation. During ritual work, it is expected that a multiplying force will flow outward from them. If neglected, however, their potency becomes dangerous. Indeed, forgotten or unattended *illa* are regarded as the most perilous, since their hunger is thought to be greatest. Their ambivalence—capable of both sustaining and threatening life—reveals that their power is never wholly domesticated but remains partially connected to a force exterior to the human world, one that exceeds the boundaries of the domestic and the visible.

The power of *mama* does not originate in this world; its very provenance lies elsewhere, in an other-than-human domain (see also Bugallo 2022 for similar reflections). In some cases, mamas are found during walks in the mountains, stones with unusual shapes or colors that attract attention, emerging as fragments of powerful beings that, for some reason, have crossed into this world. They may also appear at the edges of lagoons, privileged thresholds to the other side of existence. Stories about the discovery of *illa* often emphasize the need to trap or capture them, and then feed them regularly, because otherwise they will try to escape (Flores Ochoa 1977). Made of stone, *illa* can be kept for years and even

[8] The concept of *illa*, along with the constellation of ideas surrounding it, has been the subject of debate in Andean ethnology for decades, including the corpus of stone *illa* crafted by ritual specialists in the Peruvian–Bolivian highlands (which I do not address here). The connections I trace between these discussions seek to broaden our understanding of the local meanings recovered in Huachichocana. As a partial connection, this dialogue does not aim to establish a general definition but rather to suggest that, according to the ethnography presented here, *illa* can only be understood through the filters of singular experiences.

passed down through generations; as long as they are properly cared for, their power does not diminish. It is said that these *mama* are indispensable for the proper multiplication of life on this side of the world.

In many cases, particularly in Huachichocana, they are recovered from the insides of animals during sacrificial rituals, appearing as bezoar stones. The animal's interior is, quite literally, an "other side," distinct from the solar world of the shepherds' everyday experience (Pazzarelli 2017, 2019), and bezoar stones embody a transfer of forces from one dimension to another. These mama are sometimes kept, but more commonly swallowed immediately by the herders, in order to absorb their potency and prevent it from escaping. "It is pure luck," people say, "that's why you have to swallow it" (*es pura suerte, por eso te la tenés que tragar*). Whether caught at the edge of a lagoon, swallowed, or wrapped in cloth to prevent flight, the stories surrounding *mama* suggest that life on this side depends on capturing spectral fragments that have crossed over but whose multiplying power was never originally destined for this world. Otherwise, they would not try so desperately to flee.

Catherine Allen (2016a, 2016b) describes the power of *illa* as fractal, a capacity for multiplication through the creation of identical beings across different scales and contexts (see also Itier 2021). I heard a similar explanation, in relation to other lithic kin, during a visit to a *quipildor*, a site where lightning had struck years earlier. In this context, lightning is identified with San Santiago, to whom people also offer tijtincha. In the wake of lightning's spectral impact, the so-called "lightning stones" (*piedras de rayo*) are understood to appear. These stones are heavier than ordinary ones, white or sometimes violet-iridescent, and emit a distinct metallic sound when struck. They are widely known across the Andes for their ritual and medicinal uses, and are often collected, stored, and even sold in ritual markets.

These stones come into being when lightning splits preexisting rocks in two. From that instant, they begin to grow. It usually takes about a year for them to become visible, and they continue to replicate for some time, until their force is exhausted. Unlike most beings in this world, herders say that lightning stones "raise themselves" (*se crían solitas*). In a world where herding and nurturing animals is central, this autonomous reproduction gestures toward an alternative conception of multiplication—one that unfolds without owners. The lightning's force wounds the earth, opening it to self-replication. The residue of this spectral impact gives rise to a process of cosmic twinning (sensu Coccia 2021): a generative power embodied in stone, which people may attempt to redirect toward healing or other desires. In the case of quipildores, we also witness an analepsis: lightning often kills animals—or even people—after which white stones appear.

Although *illa* and lightning stones are not identical, they offer parallel images of force transfers between worlds. Lightning stones suggest that self-replication is a defining property of spectral residues—a fractal potency, as Allen proposes for *illa*. Yet this capacity precedes Fertility or Life, even though it can be redirected toward them in the herders' world. While no herder is interested in defining what a mama is, they consistently emphasize what these beings do—their capacity to proliferate—and recognize this fractal power as a shared attribute. Understanding these two modalities of spectral potency—timeless lithic residues that arrive from elsewhere and proliferate autonomously, and cultivated ritual forces that people attempt to harness—allows us to grasp the differential temporalities of reproduction in the herders' world. It is from this point that the remains of tijtincha become intelligible.

On the one hand, bones and corn cobs are called *illa* because they emanate multiplying power and are therefore treated with great care during rituals, sometimes consulted or interpreted based on their condition from previous years. In these cases, fractal reproduction is both literal and figurative: bones and cobs multiply animals and crops while also carrying this potency into the realm of thought and desire.

On the other hand, if we consider the relation between Pachamama and Lightning/San Santiago—and between them and mamas as spectral residues—we might say that feeding rituals help bring temporary mamas into being. Tijtincha, in its passage from one world to another, acquires a reproductive force that, unlike lithic *illa*, must be periodically renewed. Thus, the herders' world consists of timeless stones received from elsewhere—scarce and enduring—and of culinary *illa*, fabricated in cooking and feeding rituals but ephemeral and requiring annual renewal.

Yet, as suggested earlier, speculation refuses to exclude any part of experience. We must therefore consider not only the fractal power of *mama* but also their condition as spectral exteriorities—one that makes them desirable to non-Indigenous actors as well, thereby expanding the field of relations in which they circulate.

Beyond Life and Fertility

Within this broader landscape of spectral residues, tijtinchas emerge from the everyday experience of southern Andean herders as channels of analepsis—material pathways through which *mama* are retrieved from the other side. One might describe these acts, heuristically and with due caution, as a form of "culinary shamanism." This is not a native category, but rather an analytical image meant to evoke the ways in which spectral fragments intermittently surface within

the human realm through practices of cooking, feeding, and transforming substances. These *illa* are not inherently tied to fertility; their fractal potency—their capacity for autonomous replication—can instead be translated by people into forms of life, abundance, or luck. The ownerless multiplication manifested by the *mama* is reconfigured through the ongoing web of relations between herders and their animals, relations that nest within one another and gradually take the form of what is recognized as "mutual nurturings" (Martínez 1976; Arnold and Yapita 1998). In this sense, fertility is not an ontological given but a translation of spectral residues into human modes of continuity and care.

This is the local experience: the colossal cosmic politics that herders enact each day in the mountains, reaching for and reworking powerful spectral residues so as to transform them into media for the multiplication of life and generativity. But once we understand that these generic forces of multiplication can be translated in multiple directions—not only by herders, but by any collective capable of reconfiguring spectral residues—the implications become more unsettling. If mama and tijtinchas can be activated, redirected, or reworked through relational practice, then the ritual actions of the "moderns" must also be read through this same lens: as attempts to summon, channel, or repurpose fractal forces rather than as instances of mere symbolic appropriation. The power to multiply Life can just as readily be harnessed to sustain, or even to multiply, Terror.

Once again, following Latour's now-classic arguments, we may recognize that it is only modern hygiene that persuades us that a separation between sacred and profane worlds could ever exist—a distinction implicitly assumed by certain anthropological interpretations of "modern" rituals. From the herders' perspective, however, the rituals enacted by politicians, environmentalists, or corporate actors—whether through patrimonial claims on Pachamama or through constitutional invocations—appear simply as alternate ways of summoning spectral forces, of fabricating and exploiting their residues, whether they call them *illa* or refer to them otherwise.

There may, then, be no such thing as the "appropriation" of Pachamama. Rather, the discourse of appropriation functions as a hygienic operation, purifying what is actually at stake: the invocation of specters. From this standpoint, the rituals of the powerful, and the modernizing interpretations that surround them, unsettle herders precisely because they risk opening conduits to spectral forces that exceed both political intention and anthropological comprehension.

On the Notion of Ritual

Although the term ritual is widely employed in Andeanist literature, it is not a word that circulates locally in the Andean Spanish of northern Argentina to describe the acts of feeding Pachamama, known simply as *dar de comer*. My use of ritual throughout this text is therefore deliberate, meant to draw attention to a specific mode of practice rather than to a universal category.

Following Asad's genealogy, we might argue that *dar de comer* recalls an older sense of ritual: less as a symbol than as a technique—a set of procedures for doing something in such a way that a particular alignment of beings or dispositions may emerge, sustaining a continuity between the inside and the outside of life.

From certain anthropological perspectives, however, things appear otherwise. When performed by political or economic elites, *dar de comer* is interpreted through a modern notion of ritual as symbolic action, which presupposes a division between inner and outer realms. It becomes spectacle, a cynical appropriation of Indigenous symbols—gestures rendered empty because faith is presumed absent. In this reading, *dar de comer* is a social drama in which power relations are manipulated, and where the exterior (a ritual act simulating belief in Earth-Beings) is detached from the interior (the performer's supposed convictions), giving rise to strategies of symbolic capture (see Asad 1993: 83).

The herders' gaze, however, sees things differently. For them, *dar de comer* is a threshold, an opening sustained only by the Earth-Beings' recognition. If they do not receive, if they do not answer, the opening closes. What anthropology may call spectacle they may see as contact. Thus, when herders watch a minister or a businessman feeding the earth, their speculation moves in a direction few anthropologists follow. They do not ask whether the gesture is authentic; they ask whether it works. If continuity between practice and faith did not exist, politicians would not even be able to open the wells through which offerings are made, for such openings depend on Pachamama's acknowledgment of the legitimacy of those who summon her. In their eyes, there is no "empty" ritual—only risky ones.

Conversely, the increasing proliferation of "modern" rituals over recent decades mirrors the expansion of extractivist frontiers across the Andes, a correspondence whose unsettling literalness is not lost on Indigenous observers. Once we appreciate that spectral residues can be activated, redirected, and reinterpreted by any collective—not just by herders—the actions of the moderns must be understood in this same cosmological key. Their rituals mobilize forces rather than merely signify them.

On more than one occasion, I tried to speak with the herders about the details of these "non-Indigenous" rituals. Over time, I came to understand that

such an exercise was unnecessary. The herders' position, and thus the one adopted here, is not to undertake a point-by-point analysis of modern rituals but to consider the cosmological ground that makes them possible. What they have taught me is that the principles guiding their own ritual practices—those described here, through which spectral connections are patiently woven—form the very foundation from which "modern" rituals can be thought: those glimpsed by chance, or accessed through rumor, radio, or the distant light of a television screen (after all, perhaps the only ones with the time to observe and record the rituals of others are, in the end, anthropologists).

This is not an ethnocentric gaze. As we have already noted, experience does not operate as a totalizing vantage point over the practices of others. Rather, it stems from the conviction that no world can be detached from spectral power. What would be truly exceptional, from their point of view, is the idea that the powers governing us could ever be entirely secular. The *dar de comer* of the powerful thus appears as one among the many ritual negotiations that politicians and businesspeople maintain with entities of the cosmos—whether or not these are considered "Andean," whether performed in public ceremonies, and whether or not they activate spectral analepsis through tijtinchas.

The herders' perspective challenges the modern assumption that politics operates apart from gods and specters. Instead, it draws attention to the specific ways powerful actors engage with spectral forces. "How do others feed?" people asked repeatedly during fieldwork. "What are their experiences?" These questions expanded into others: Are there other Pachamamas? What kinds of worlds are brought into being by those who feed powerful beings in order to seize control of them? Which are their *illa*?

The singularization of gods, on both sides of the conflict, redraws the map of political dispute and offers an alternative lens for understanding so-called "Indigenous religions" and their entanglement with the state. It also calls for a different kind of engagement on our part, especially when we attempt to ally ourselves—through activism, writing, or ethnographic analysis—with our interlocutors. "There are many Pachamamas," people in the highlands say. And that statement should not be apprehended as a multicultural description of the world, but rather as a declaration of the terms on which the war is being fought.

Speculative Pachamama: Some Final Words

People and Pachamama are singular expressions that belong to and nourish one another. When people perform feeding rituals, they are fabricating the relation of existing in/with Pachamama that constitutes both parties. Pachamama can thus be understood as a split being. On the one hand, she is connected to a spectral,

para-ontological potency exterior to the human world, a devouring force that consumes what crosses her path and leaves behind residues charged with generative power. On the other, from the herders' perspective, she is also a nurturing presence: the one summoned from spectral residues who appears to humans and sustains, with them, the fertility of this world.

The herders' commitment to life and fertility guides their work of redirecting spectral potency toward the multiplication of the world. Yet the possibility of conceiving this dual existence arises from the same condition that allows herders to lovingly raise their animals while never forgetting the unknowable background that inhabits them. The world is never fully present to itself; it is always edged by an exterior. And it is precisely this exterior—its residues, its fractures—that convinces herders that they are not the only ones capable of accessing powerful fragments. Other collectives too can summon, redirect, or distort these forces.

The challenge they place before us is whether we remain capable of thinking politics otherwise—beyond the modern and modernizing frameworks that claim to define it. The perversity and cynicism of the State–Capital alliance in its long history with Indigenous peoples have already been described, perhaps too exhaustively. Yet critique alone no longer suffices, for the same interpretive habits persist: the modern conceit that gods belong solely to Indigenous worlds, while modern politics unfolds within the sanitized comfort of its own secular denials. The herders remind us that if we remain anchored in this perspective, we miss not only half of what they think but also contribute to the very secularizing colonization we claim to resist.

To attend to these speculative reflections is not simply to document belief, but to recognize speculation—as practiced by herders—as a mode of thought capable of generating theory. In this sense, anthropology's task is not to interpret speculation from afar but to think speculatively alongside those who cultivate it, allowing its own conceptual habits to be altered by the worlds it seeks to understand. The herders confront us with the cosmic terror that emanates from the rituals of the powerful and from the futures—equally terrifying—that these rituals set in motion. Faced with such a warning, the modern pride in secular explanation may need to surrender its certainties.

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