

Virgin Mary/Pachamama Syncretism: The Divine Feminine in Early-Colonial Copacabana

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The Andean Virgin Mary/Pachamama (Mother Earth) syncretism has been understood as an intercessor to argue the petitioner's request with God the Father. However, much has been lost in translation. This understanding of Pachamama as Mother Earth and intercessor to a supreme male creator is based on Spanish chronicles written by men in a patriarchal society that assumed male supremacy, power, and privilege; it ignored, marginalized or erased female existence (divine or otherwise) in history. The chroniclers assumed that the spiritual realm was organized like the Spanish adversarial legal system. This gendered, linguistic, and cultural filter is blind to the depth and complexity of the relationship of the conquered people with the Divine Feminine, who the people living in the former Inka Empire called Pachamama. This paper decolonizes the understanding of Andean worship of the Divine Feminine Pachamama in syncretism with the Virgin of Copacabana by examining the context of a specific historical event; the people in the early-colonial indigenous community of Copacabana exchanged their patron Santa Ana for the Virgin Mary/Pachamama syncretism, who then brought rain to their crops and saved the people from starvation. Based on evidence in archaeology, art history, intellectual history of sixteenth-century Spain, colonial court transcripts, ethnography, linguistics, and the chronicles, this paper deepens understanding of Pachamama as both the creator and entity of the entire space/time continuum, and the people's replacement of Santa Ana with the Virgin Mary/Pachamama syncretism as a reciprocal act in filial (mother/child) relationships—ayni.

In 1573, write archeologists Brian Bauer and Charles Stanish in *Ritual and Pilgrimage in the Ancient Andes*, Spanish Catholic priests assigned Saint Ann as the patron saint for the indigenous people in Copacabana, Bolivia on the shores of Lake Titicaca. But within a few years, the people were starving due to extreme weather that killed their crops. In 1582 A.D., the people protested and exchanged their assigned patron, Saint Ann, for the Virgin Mary. Then rain fell on everyone's fields and the people were saved (Bauer and Stanish, 59). Depending on the cultural lens through which it is viewed, this historical event can have several different meanings. In the Andes, the Virgin Mary was subject to the process of syncretization, the melding of different belief systems and practices, and her image was combined with the representation of the Andean divine feminine, Pachamama (often translated as Mother Earth).

In *Iconografía y Mitos Indígenas en el Arte*, art historian Teresa Gisbert described the visual combination, or syncretism, of Pachamama and the Virgin Mary throughout the colonial period to the present. The Virgin's conical-shaped gown resembled the slopes of the sacred Andean mountains. The most well-known example of this similarity is seen in the colonial painting of the *Virgen-Cerro* (Virgin-Mountain) in Potosi, Bolivia at the *Casa Nacional de Moneda* (Gisbert, 1980, 20). The Virgin of Copacabana's dress resembles the shape of the nearby sacred mountain Llallagua (now called Calvario). Gisbert suggests that this syncretism of the Andean sacred landscape with Catholic iconography was utilized by both the Catholic priests and colonized Andean artists, but for different reasons. The priests embraced the syncretism as an expedient means to convince the indigenous people embrace and practice Catholicism. However, Gisbert notes, the colonized Andean artists syncretized Pachamama into the Virgin as an act of protest, designed to protect and perpetuate Andean beliefs and practices (1985:62-63, 1980:14).

Intellectual historian William Christian, in his book *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, describes sixteenth-century Spanish notions of a divine hierarchical order that mirrors the complex legal system for lawsuits in Hapsburg Spain (which was influenced by the Spanish Inquisition). Saints played the role of intercessors like lawyers that could be hired to plead a case before the supreme male judge, God. The contract took on the façade of a legally binding public vow, payable through the fulfillment of the hosting an event, such as a community feast. The local priest played the part of enforcer by refusing to give communion to the people until the vow was fulfilled. If, like human lawyers, a Saint refused to accept a case, it was acceptable to follow certain protocols and contract with a different Saint (Christian, 23-69). According to sixteenth-century Spanish beliefs and practices, the people of Copacabana realized that Saint Ann had refused their case. Therefore, they contracted the Virgin Mary who successfully argued their case before God the judge thereby bringing much-needed rain to save the crops. However, I argue that the Andean people held very different beliefs and practices about the ways in which they honored Pachamama. Even though these beliefs were syncretized with the model of the Virgin Mary, the Spanish male conquerors were blind to the Andean motives of the preservation of their own cultural ideologies.

Early-colonial chroniclers, Alonso Ramos Gavilán and Father Bernabe Cobo, translated Pachamama as Mother Earth (Ramos, 1867, 19-20; Cobo, 34). Even though Ramos claimed her worship ritual was "just like" Roman mother-earth worship of Tellus, much was lost in translation. Linguistically Pachamama, a shared word in both the Quechua and Aymara native-American languages, carries a far more nuanced meaning than simply "Mother Earth" (Untoja and Mamani, 1-125; Lucca, 119). Dictionaries reveal that the suffix -mama means mother, mother of pacha. Pacha has many meanings, some of which include the entire space/time continuum. Janak pacha is the realm above, and

includes the sky and the entire cosmos; kay pacha is the planet earth; uru pacha represents the underworld; and pachakuti is the turning of an era, of an epoch (Untoja and Mamani, 1-125; Lucca, 109, 119; Lara, 102, 117, 171, 271) Therefore, Pachamama is the mother of not only this earth, but of the entire universe and progressive epochs of time.

Another Andean belief that was syncretized into the Virgin is noted by anthropologist Catherine Allen in her article, "When Pebbles Move Mountains: Iconicity and Symbolism in Quechua Ritual." In the Andean cosmivision "every microcosm is a macrocosm, and vice versa. . . . All beings are intrinsically interconnected through their sharing a matrix of animated substance" (81). Ethnohistorian Tamara Bray, in her article "An Archaeological Perspective on the Andean Concept of Camaquen: Thinking Through Late Pre-Columbian Ofrendas and Huacas," goes further and described this shared "matrix of animated substance" as "a common vital force . . . that animated or enlivened . . . both people and things" (357). In other words, even the landscape is sentient. The Andean cosmivision belief that everything is interconnected, and shares a matrix of animated substance, of common vital force, that every microcosm is a macrocosm, and vice versa was syncretized with the concept of the Virgin Mary.

In his book, *Inca Religion and Customs*, early-colonial Spanish Jesuit Bernabe Cobo observed the Andean worship practices of Pachamama and chronicled that in and around Copacabana long stone altars to Pachamama were erected in every agricultural field:

They all worshiped the Earth also, and they called her Pachamama . . . And it was their custom to put a long stone in the middle of their fields . . . as an altar in honor of this goddess. They would *pray to her* before this altar-stone, *call upon her*, and *ask her to protect their (fields)* and make them fertile. The more fertile a field was, the

more they respected her (Cobo, 34) (Author's emphasis).

Cobo related specifically that the people prayed directly to Pachamama as sentient landscape, and asked for her protection. The people addressed Pachamama directly as their mother. The creole chronicler Alonso Ramos Gavilán, an Augustinian priest born in Peru, explains in his book *Historia de Copacabana y de la Milagrosa Imagen de su Virgen* that the people gave offerings not only to thank Pachamama, but also to ask that she behave like a good mother and provide food for her children (1867, 16). Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena writes in *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* that for modern-day Quechua-speaking people in Pacchanta, Peru the landscape is sentient, and the sacred mountain is a member of the family to be consulted directly (xi-xxvi). These observations from colonial chroniclers and twenty-first-century anthropologists are significant because they illustrate the Andean practice of direct conversation with Pachamama as a family member, not as an intercessor or lawyer. This belief and practice of conversing directly with Pachamama as a family member melded into the Andean concept of the Virgin Mary.

I claim that Ayni, or reciprocity, was another belief and practice that syncretized into the Andean version of the Virgin. For example, in "The Inka Married the Earth: Integrated Outcrops and the Making of Place" art historian Carolyn Dean cites anthropologist Catherine Allen's account of the descriptive ayni relationship with Pachamama.

The relationship is reciprocal, for the Runakuna [people]'s indications of care and respect are returned by the place's (Pachamama's) guardianship (Dean, 506).

Andean beliefs and practices placed the utmost importance on maintaining harmonious relationships.

Anthropologist Kenneth Mills cites testimony (in colonial transcripts of extirpation of idolatry court cases) that describes the results of failing to maintain harmonious ayni relationships with Pachamama.

. . . If (Pachamama) . . . (was) not nourished by offerings the people would lose their plots of land . . . and their irrigation canals and springs would dry up and they would be condemned to walk poor and desolate and . . . all waste away (Mills, 115).

This drying up and wasting away is similar to the drought and starvation suffered by the people of Copacabana, even though they gave offerings to their assigned patron, Saint Ann. But Saint Ann did not behave like a good mother; she did not reciprocate. Therefore, the people turned to a family member who would reciprocate, Pachamama in syncretism with the Virgin Mary.

Pachamama worship was especially strong in Copacabana. Bolivian historian Teresa Gisbert writes in *Iconografía y Mitos Indígenas en el Arte* that prehispanic Copacabana was a major location for what she calls the cult of Pachamama (1980:17-29). Historians Jose de Mesa and Gisbert note in *Bolivia Monumentos: Historicos y Arqueologicos* that the Catholic Church complex was built on top of the prehispanic open-air temple of Pachamama (Mesa and Gisbert, 20-21). Anthropologist Jessica Joyce Christie points out that Copacabana was a major prehispanic pilgrimage destination directly connected to faraway Cuzco, the center of the Incan Empire, by a ceque line (Christie, 199). Ceque lines were stone-paved roads, lined with shrines, which radiated out from the main temple in Cuzco. Copacabana was the terminus of a ceque line from Cuzco, however, remnants of other prehispanic roads radiated out like ceque lines from the Catholic Church complex, which was built on top of the open-air temple to

Pachamama in Copacabana (author's unpublished fieldwork). The Copacabana ceque lines that showed the route to the temple emphasized the importance of Pachamama worship in the Andean culture.

How and whether to use Andean sacred sites for Christianization was hotly debated by Spanish clerics in the Sixteenth Century (MacCormack, 623–47; Rubiés, 571–596; Johnson, 597–621). Some colonizers built churches or chapels over these places, or if this was impractical, at least planted a cross on top. This practice of destroying sacred sites was supported by passages in the Old Testament of the Bible:

But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exodus 34:13, 14). But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire (Deuteronomy 7:5).

Art historian Merlin Stone points out in her book, *When God Was a Woman*, that these biblical passages documented patriarchal efforts to replace Goddess worship with Judaism (193). In the case of the colonial Andes, the Spanish attempted to replace Pachamama worship with Catholicism. A photo of Copacabana taken by German photographer Herbert Kirchhoff in the 1940s, depicts the enormous Catholic Church complex surrounded by open countryside, dotted by a few buildings. It could be argued that the huge church was built to honor the huge miracles of the Virgin of Copacabana. The point could also be made that the huge church was an attempt to blot out the memory of Pachamama.

Gisbert noted that when the Basilica was built (presumably with forced Andean labor), the people did not want to enter it. They were accustomed to worshipping in the open air. In their efforts to increase church attendance, the

Spanish constructed an open-air chapel (Gisbert, 20-21). Kirchhoff noted that the open air chapel was also called the Indian Chapel and that three large crosses stood inside the structure. In the description of the photograph he took of this chapel in the 1940s, Kirchhoff wrote that the crosses sit atop an Inkan sacrificial stone altar that stood on a hill facing Lake Titicaca. Mesa and Gisbert conjecture that the statue of Pachamama, called Copacabana, once stood on this altar gazing out to the lake (Mesa and Gisbert, 21). The Spanish destroyed the statue, or idol, as they called it. Early-colonial chronicler Ramos, cited by Christie, described another sacred statue/idol near Lake Titicaca that still existed in the 1500s, and also was set on a hill overlooking the lake. The local people explained to Ramos that the Andeans prayed to this statue for rain that would result in crops that would supply food (Christie, 152).

These examples resonate with the intent of the people in Copacabana when they turned to Pachamama as syncretized with the Virgin Mary. This followed their disappointment in Saint Ann who they blamed for the unseasonable cold weather that froze the crops just when they came into bloom, and was followed by drought. The people gave offerings and prayed for rain and food from Pachamama/Virgin Mary, and like a good mother, she reciprocated. The Andean approach is very different from sixteenth-century Spanish notions of an adversarial heavenly courtroom, where the Virgin Mary acts as an intercessor like a lawyer.

Observers might question why the people of Copacabana replaced Saint Ann with the Virgin Mary, rather than worshipping both as patron saints. After all, embracing multiple family members in reciprocal relationships characterized the Andean tradition. For example, testimony from the mid-colonial campaign to extirpate idolatry documents a Quechua-speaking man named Gregorio Taco in the Southern Andes who secretly took care of several mummies of his

ancestors (Salomon, 1987, 154-156). Taco, like most people in his community, worked by trading goods up and down the routes in the Andes. When trusted friends asked Taco the reason for his great success, he credited the mummies, especially the one named Coyaqa Mama. Taco introduced the trusted friends to the mummies so they could share in his good fortune. One friend testified to the Spanish conquerors that Taco demonstrated how he gave regular offerings and devotion to each of the mummies, but the mummy named Coyaqa Mama reciprocated with abundance, so he paid special attention to her (Salomon 1987, 154-156). Although Andean practice was to honor multiple family members, even if only one seemed to strongly reciprocate, sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic Church general practice was to hold in esteem only one patron saint at a time for a community.

Further evidence of the longstanding importance of the Andean belief and practice of directly revering the Divine Feminine in Copacabana was recently unearthed by archaeologists Bauer and Stanish. When they surveyed the Islands of the Sun and Moon just offshore from the Copacabana peninsula they found incense burners with feminine iconography that spanned almost a thousand year period from 500 BC to 400 AD (Bauer and Stanish, 91). They also noted family shrines in agricultural fields on the Island of the Sun (Bauer and Stanish, 180, 219). While Bauer and Stanish did not go into detail about these family shrines, perhaps they were the same long-stone altars for Pachamama that Cobo had seen hundreds of years before in every agricultural field. In addition, Bauer and Stanish note in *Ritual and Pilgrimage in the Ancient Andes* that nineteenth-century archaeologist Bandelier found a large silver female figurine in the temple area on the Island of the Moon, just offshore from the Copacabana peninsula (126). Comparing the photograph of this prehispanic figurine (Bauer and Stanish, 126) with the face of the Virgin of Copacabana photographed by Herbert Kirchhoff (Kirchhoff, Pl. 43), one can see significant similarities, especially

the stylized eyebrows and nose, and the flatness of the cheeks. This additional archaeological evidence further points to the deep roots of Andean beliefs and practices that honor the divine feminine, Pachamama, in the Copacabana area.

In conclusion, the stories we tell create the world we live in. Spanish Catholic assumptions of life on heaven and earth as adversarial, like lawyers arguing before a judge in a lawsuit, informed their invasions and conquests. On the other hand, Andean assumptions of life as a reciprocal family affair strengthened their community with each other and Pachamama, which endures to today. For example, in an interesting syncretism of familial relationship with Pachamama and Spanish-originated courts of law, in December 2013 Bolivian President Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the Americas since the conquest, enacted a law declaring Pachamama legally a person and assigned her an ombudsman to argue her interests in court.

The Spanish chroniclers were blinded by their limited worldview. People other than themselves were either satanic and should be eradicated, or were idiots or ignorant children who needed to be educated. Sympathetic Spanish priests chose the education path and attempted to indoctrinate the people in the patriarchal hierarchy of Catholicism. The priests searched for, or created, similarities upon which to build. Pachamama worship was said to be just like Roman worship of Tellus. Pachamama, as syncretized with the Virgin Mary, was assumed to be an intercessor between humans and a divine male God. Based on archaeology, anthropology, art history, the intellectual history of sixteenth-century Spain, colonial court transcripts, linguistics, and the chronicles of Ramos and Cobo, this essay presents the challenges of translation when both Spanish and Andean beliefs and practices were melded into the Virgin Mary/Pachamama syncretism. Sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic beliefs and

practices imagined the spiritual realm as structured like an adversarial court of law where saints were like lawyers hired to argue cases before the supreme male judge, God. In contrast, the evidence supports that Andean beliefs and practices were neither hierarchical, nor adversarial. The Andean cosmivision has been most concerned with maintaining harmonious relationships through the reciprocal practice of ayni. For the people of Copacabana, Pachamama was both the creator and entity of the space/time continuum, as well as a member of the family with whom people could communicate directly in a reciprocal relationship. Where the Spanish could only imagine Pachamama as “just like” the pagan Roman Mother Earth goddess Tellus, the Andean people of sixteenth-century Copacabana had a more expansive cosmivision. Pachamama was mother earth as well as the mother of earth. Pachamama was the sentient landscape, and also mother of the entire space/time continuum, all of which manifested as a microcosm containing the macrocosm, and vice versa. This cosmivision continues today, where all share the same matrix of animated substance, are imbued with a common vital force, which can be called Pachamama.

When the colonized people of Copacabana exchanged their assigned patron Saint Ann for the Virgin Mary in 1582, instead of seeking a different intercessor to better plead their case to God, evidence supports they were reconnecting with their family member, Pachamama, with whom they and their ancestors had lived in a reciprocal ayni relationship for perhaps thousands of years. The beliefs and practices of the people in Copacabana were of direct and reciprocal nature that mirrored mother/child relationship with the sentient landscape and mother of all space and time, Pachamama, who they syncretized into the concept and statue of the Virgin Mary. Pachamama worship was neither hierarchical nor adversarial; it was a family affair focused on the maintenance of harmonious relationships.

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