

The Ushnu in the Andean way of thinking

Written by Luis Rodolfo Monteverde Sotil*

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{rokbox}images/stories/apachita/Apachita_17_3.jpg{/rokbox}

The present Andean way of thinking is a strong cultural continuum of pre-Hispanic roots, which basically have come down to us through oral means. When we excavated in the mountains of Tacna (February 2010), Justino, a villager from Vilavilani, after explaining how the Tacora volcano had "appeared" (in the neighboring region of Arica-Chile) said that the story was told to him by his father and that he already had passed it to his son. The words or ways to tell a myth or a story can change, but its essence remains, and is transmitted through generations. Hereafter we will try a brief essay in which we will review, based on ethnographic work, the meanings that are handled in contemporary times about lightning, rain and rocks. As we shall see, these features are associated with the current concept of ushnu (1) as they probably were during the Tahuantinsuyo; not identically but in a similar manner.

One of the main concerns of Andean people is an adequate relationship with their environment, to obtain, for example, the required amount of rainfall for agriculture. But rain always comes with lightning, and lightning is dangerous because it kills livestock and even the villagers themselves, although sometimes it doesn't. *"... When a person is struck by lightning she should not be looked at, nor should you turn to help her, because she may be torn to death... Instead we must continue forward... because after some time that person struck by the beam, will reach its home safely."*

That told us (in December 2006) a resident of La Unión-Huánuco, who worked with us during the excavations at Huánuco Pampa's ushnu (2). *"The advice was given by my mother, who ... as a little girl, when grazing on the plains with my grandmother, saw her struck by lightning. My mom ran home without turning back, and sometime later my grandmother came as if nothing had happened ..."*

In Vilavilani-Tacna and the villages surrounding Quenqo Grande and Laqo in Cuzco (stories collected by us in February 2010) or Amantaní-Puno, they maintain the idea when people were struck by lightning and survived, they remain marked and become wise, able to see the future, read coca leaves, predict if they will have good crops or good rain, feed the soil, etc. Skills, which all believe in, from the one who acquires the power to those who consult him. For example, in Amantaní, Don Jose Quispe, the paqo or wiseman of Pachamama hill, was chosen by lightning, *"... as a result he has a cross-shaped mark on the right thumb ... and each January 20th [celebration for the payment to the earth] he feeds the land ..."* (Tuesta 2010: 27).

According to Molina (2008 [1574-1575]), during the celebration of the Situa of Cuzco, images of

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Viracocha Pachayachachic, the Sun, Huanacaure and Chuquilla (deity of lightning) were taken to the ushnu of the Haucaypata plaza, where liquids were poured and toasted with them (Monteverde 2009). In some ushnus located outside of Cuzco, in the well which is located in its upper platform (e.g. Huanuco Pampa in Huánuco, Pumpu in Junín or Shincal of Quimivil in Catamarca, Argentina) or in the middle of its single platform or architectural structure (e.g. Incahuasi in Cañete or Aypate in the mountains of Piura, on the court in the B sector of the Acllahuasi) there are lots of boulders that have been placed there in times of the Tahuantinsuyo. Even in the oracle of Catequil (another name of the deity of lightning) (3), in Namanchugo-La Libertad, which dates before the Tahuantinsuyo, large quantities of boulders were found, covering the ground, around a rectangular structure that presents channels and containers filled with boulders (Topic 2009 *et al.* [online]).

According to Topic *et al.* (1999 [online]), in Huamachuco-La Libertad farmers in the area have the belief that where a lightning strikes, a boulder must be found. Meanwhile a resident of Laraos, Yauyos-Lima (Jiménez Borja 1973) "... *when, during the rainy season it does not rain ... he goes to Laguna de Circo, presents coca leaves, liquor, and throws small stones as far as he can to wake up asleep water... then fills a pitcher of water from the shore and without turning back returns to his people ... behind him the rain comes...*"

From these ethnographic references, we note a close relationship between lightning, rain and boulders in current Andean thought. If it rains there is lightning, if there's rain that means water in the rivers, if waterflow in the river increases, boulders are formed (stones that acquire an oval shape because they are continually being removed by the force of the water in the river, they crash together producing a particular sound to those stones). So if there are boulders it's because the water from the river has created them, if there is a good flow of water in rivers it's due to rain and if it has rained it's because there was lightning.

From this, we notice a cyclical Andean cosmology that tries to explain the natural environment. So when a local says that where lightning struck a boulder appeared, he does nothing else than to synthesize the cyclic process of rainfall-lightning-rivers-boulders. Also, when a local throws stones (boulders) to lakes or rivers, he tries to symbolically reproduce this process. In relation to ushnu, Polia Meconi (cited by Astuhuaman 1998), noted that in contemporary times: "... *the mushcas / muchca or hot stones are used in rituals for rain ... and are likely to be treated as offerings left (in the ushnu of Aypate-sierra de Piura) by current healers...*"

After the Spanish conquest, much of the deities in the Andean pantheon were associated with

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saints or virgins of the Christian religion. Thus, the Andean religion was christianized, but at the same time the christian religion was andinized. An example of this was Illapa or the god of lightning who was associated with the Apostle James. In contemporary times, that association still persists in the Andean way of thinking. This is demonstrated by Yaranga Valderrama (1979) who recorded a prayer to Illapa or James in times of drought in the area of Victor Fajardo and Cangallo in Ayacucho, "*... as our pacha, existing in the world above, in the world below, in this world, in three one, of the shaman, his creator, begetter of ushnu, donor of justice, creator of the waters ...*"

This sentence highlights the association between ushnu, Illapa as the creator of the waters and the cosmological vision of the union of the three planes of the Andean world. Regarding the latter, the concept currently had of the ushnu in various areas of Peru, is the place where water is sucked up by the earth (area of Tarma: Adelaar 1977, cited by Matos 1994), that is a hole, subterranean, where water is filtered, or a well, where there are lots of shingle (areas of Tarma and Ancash: Pino 2005) or a glass for drinking water (area of San Sebastian-Cuzco: Information collected by us in February 2010).

Finally, we'd like to comment that the liquid spilled on the stones is also associated with the good health of the locals. In Atuncolla- Puno, there is a rock whose texture resembles grains of corn, which they call the name of misa rumi or miraculous stone. According to locals, its powers come from immemorial times. One day the nephew of Maria, by playing near the stone, fell ill with fevers and odd pains. A paqo or wiseman "... that talks to the gods suggested to give the rock a few glasses of wine ..." so her nephew would heal (Tuesta 2010: 44). Nowadays the ushnu, like Atuncolla stone, is also considered a miraculous stone, a "... inkap misan [arrangement for a modern ritual] ... table or altar ..." like Pumpu (in Junín) according to ethnographic works from Matos (1994). Just to make ethnohistorical parallels, in the Situa (Molina 2008 [1574 to 1575]), where evils from Cuzco were expelled, the ushnu (a large stone with well and channels) was the focus of the ceremonies, where fluids were poured and toasted.

Notes

1. The ushnu is located in the main squares (in the center or at one of the internal or external ends) of Tahuantinsuyo settlements. It consists of an architectural structure of rectangular, square or trapezoidal shape; with one, two or more overlapping platforms; stairs

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and access bays; with tianas or seats and small wells linked with channels in its upper platform. These features are not always all present in one ushnu. In the case of Cuzco's ushnus, according to chronicles, the basic formal composition would revolve around a large stone with wells and channels. Also, ushnus, in general, according to records, fulfilled different functions within the settlement, as being the place where they drank and poured liquids, where capacocha or child sacrifice was practiced, where the Inka presided at a series of political or military ceremonies or where he practiced astronomical observations. (See Apachita 13:6-9)

2. Licenciado Alfredo Bar Esquivel was the Director of the Proyecto Arqueológico de Puesta en Valor del Ushnu de Huánuco Pampa from 2006 to 2007.

3. The god of thunder and lightning was known, in different regions and different periods, in the pre-Hispanic Andean world, with the names of Illapa, Pusikaqcha, Chukill, Catequil, etc. (Yaranga Valderrama 1979:697 and 699).

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