

Maize Deity or Spirit in the Andean Worldview

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Fig. 1: Collection: Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món de Barcelona; Object number: MEB 16-695; Name: bridge and spout vessel with maize divinity; Place & Community Details: Northern coast, Peru, Chimú culture (Late Intermediate Period 1000 -1476 CE); Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: ceramic, made from a mould and then cut, smoothed and polished; Collector: Leopoldo Gómez Alonso; Date collected: 1952.



This piece was chosen for the study by the museum not just because of the uniqueness of its formal characteristics, but also because it includes several ears of maize. This is, in fact, the main reason it was chosen. More specifically, it might be considered the contemporary evocation of maize, which is one of the cornerstones of nutrition in Indigenous communities, and which inevitably brings to mind both the crisis facing our planet as a whole and the plundering of resources such as water and Indigenous lands, in particular. Just like land and water, maize plays a crucial role in food sovereignty and is a true symbol of Indigenous autonomy, as well as of the Indigenous peoples' way of interacting with the Saramama, including agricultural rituals.

(Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món de Barcelona)

In the Peruvian Andes, maize ('Sara' in Quechua) is the main food of humans and sacred beings. For this reason, farmers need to obtain an abundant maize harvest with the help of the deities. Through rituals, communication is established with the life-giving forces of nature for the continuity of human and non-human life.

One concrete example at the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món de Barcelona is a whistling bottle from the Chimú culture (1000–1476 CE), which represents the maize deity or spirit and a hybrid being (feline-serpent-bird) known as a 'lunar animal'. As to the first, in the Andean world the Saramama (Mother Maize) is responsible for the protection and abundance of the maize harvest. She was represented in the northern cultures of ancient Peru in the shape of a large, anthropomorphized corn cob, surrounded by her children, who are small corn cobs.

In colonial times, Christian evangelizers destroyed stone Saramamas because they were highly revered by the Indigenous people. The Saramamas' idea of maternity is repeated with other natural beings, such as Cocamama (Mother Coca), Papamama (Mother Potato), Cochamama (Mother Lake), Yacumama (Mother Water), and many others. Pachamama (Mother Earth) is the mother of everything and the giver of life.

Another common belief is that if the cobs are joined at their base, they are twins. This is a form of Saramama. The biggest fruit becomes Saramama, Waka (sacred being) and Illa (a kind of amulet). In the same way, creatures with a physical defect, twins, or those struck by lightning are special and sacred, as they are the children of the lightning. In this case, if they are maize cobs, they are Saramamas.

For the farmer it is good luck to have Saramamas that are corn cobs or those manufactured from stone or other materials. They receive offerings of food and drink because they are living beings who are hungry and thirsty like people. According to the principle of reciprocity, one must return or 'pay' an offering to the Wakas for favours received, but the 'payment' is also given before receiving a favour, so that 'permission' is first requested from Pachamama to sow and cultivate.

The second representation in this object, the image of the 'lunar animal', was associated with the mythical animal Qhoa, or the flying feline, the creator of rain that controls the weather. The 'lunar animal' is also related to Mamaquilla (Mother Moon), who at the same time has a great influence on the cultivation of maize and is linked to water. Furthermore, Saramama is symbolically fertilized by the life-giving liquid, water or chicha de jora (corn beer) that circulates inside the whistling bottle to produce sounds connected to the deity.

Andean societies developed a complex system of beliefs and values, which were expressed through the rites held for the community's main deities and other beings of power in order to maintain or re-establish the balance of harmonious coexistence, respect, and fair treatment among all the inhabitants of the cosmos, or as Josef Estermann calls it, the cosmic house (in Quechua Wasi). This set of rituals is shaped by agriculture and water, as the agricultural cycle of maize helped build the Andean worldview. The pursuit of a continuity of existence generates a system of relationships between all human and non-human beings. As everything is interconnected in some way and nothing can exist on its own or in isolation, any change to one of the parts will affect all parts. Thus humans become interrelated with the Saramama through agricultural rituals.

Bibliography

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