

Intimacy and Danger. Ritual Practices and Environmental Relations in Northern Andean Argentina

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Abstract: The shepherds and shepherdesses inhabiting the Jasimaná highland, province of Salta, in northwestern Andean Argentina, perform several rituals such as self protection and healing rites, offerings to the Mother Earth, agro-pastoral rites, person's life cycle rituals, processions and pilgrimages with the Saints. In order to go beyond both the ecological functionalistic approach to the Andean rites and the cultural symbolic one to the indigenous animistic cosmology, this article follows the environmental theory of Tim Ingold (2011) who conceptualizes the environment as a "set of ecological relationships" including human and non-human elements. Using this perspective and focusing on practices, it will be possible to show how different rituals materially produce environmental relations of intimacy, but also risky ties, involving people, objects, animals, spirits, dead souls and the powerful entities of the Andean landscape as the Mother Earth, called *Pachamama*. In this article ritual practices are conceived as sequences of material actions that make the 'relationality' between different human and non-human elements and agents.

Keywords: rituals; relations; environment; Andes; Jasimaná; Argentina; 21st century.

Resumen: Los pastores y pastoras que habitan en el altiplano de Jasimaná (provincia de Salta, noroeste de Argentina), realizan diferentes rituales para protegerse y sanarse (ofrendas a la Madre Tierra, ritos ganaderos, ceremonias de ciclo vital, procesiones y peregrinajes). Intentando trascender tanto la perspectiva ecológica funcionalista sobre los rituales andinos, como la perspectiva culturalista sobre cosmología indígena, este artículo se apoya en la teoría medioambiental de Tim Ingold (2000). Este autor concibe el medioambiente como un "conjunto de relaciones ecológicas" que incluye tanto elementos humanos como no-humanos. Siguiendo esta perspectiva de estudio y enfocándonos en las prácticas, queremos mostrar de qué manera diferentes rituales producen relaciones medioambientales, tanto de intimidad como de peligro, entre personas, cosas, animales y entidades poderosas del paisaje andino, como la *Pachamama*. Los rituales serán considerados en tanto que secuencias de acciones materiales que producen una 'relacionalidad' entre agentes tanto humanos como no-humanos.

Palabras Clave: rituales; relaciones; medioambiente; Andes; Jasimaná; Argentina; siglo XXI.



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In the following text, ritual practices will be analysed as sets of specific actions that create a 'relationality' (Houseman 2006) between elements, using ethnographic descriptions of local rites, based on data collected and interviews I carried out during a fieldwork in the highland in 2011.

Since environmental ties and ritual practices entail both the human domestic sphere and important parts of a person's whole body, such as the individual life-force and soul, I argue that the ritual environmental ties are concerned with intimate relations between human and non-human elements, both those which are 'safe' and those which are 'dangerous'. For instance, on the one hand, relationships between people and saints are intimate and safe as they are based on familiarity, cohabitation and care. On the other hand, the relationship with Mother Earth can be very risky for people because this powerful entity can cause humans to fall or have something bad happen to them when they are walking through the highlands, such as causing diseases, if the people are not ritually protected or do not make sufficient offerings.

Toward an environmental theory of ritual practices

Rituals and environment are connected topics within different theoretical frameworks of Andean studies. Ecological functionalism considers rituals as a cultural device used to guarantee social and political cohesion, and which make the Andean ecological system work, whereas the symbolic approach focuses on the ritual importance of natural places and landscapes as an expression of Andean cosmology.

Since the 1970s, Andean anthropology, archaeology and ethnohistory have been deeply influenced by John Murra's (1980) theory, that followed the premise of cultural ecology (Steward 1955), according to which every cultural and social system depends on human adaptation to its ecological surroundings. Such an approach entails the academic, and generally Western, dichotomy between a human cultural domain and a natural ecological one. However, in the last few years a number of scholars have called this idea into question, rejecting any real radical opposition between nature and culture (Descola 2005; Ingold 1990, 2011; Latour 2009).

Following Murra's ecological-functionalistic theory, a number of anthropologists and ethnohistorians have shown that Andean rituals create kinship and community solidarity, and political alliances between groups in order to exploit the different natural resources at diverse altitudinal ecological levels (Murra 1980), by diversifying production and ensuring self-sufficiency. They have shown that in many Andean regions rituals support how households and kinship groups organize the ecological and economic strategies of production, interchange and consumption, and how the whole community carries out tasks collectively (Isbell 2005; Mayer 2004). Some scholars have also supposed rites to be a cultural mechanism that directly regulates natural resources. Rabey & Merlino (1988), for instance, argue that in the Jujuy highlands, in northern Andean

Argentina, the ritual sacrifice, called the ‘payment’ to Mother Earth, allows the shepherds to control the numbers of their animals according to season, climate and quality of grazing.

However, from the emic point of view such a functionalistic analysis does not completely explain local ritual practices. The inhabitants of Jasimaná, for example, do not perceive their animals solely as an ecological and economic resource. Instead, an emotional tie links the shepherds to their sheep; for example, they give the animals nicknames based on their colour and shape.

On the other hand, anthropologists interested in symbolic constructions usually take for granted the dichotomy between nature and culture, even if they focus mainly on the latter, searching for indigenous worldviews and the meanings of various rites. From such a perspective, rituals express Andean “animistic cosmology” (Spedding 2008: 105) since the ecological surroundings are considered as a “living landscape” made of powerful entities, such as the mountains and Mother Earth (Spedding 2008: 108). Such a living world is also ‘inhabited’ (Tschopik 1968) by different souls, spirits and owner-entities of specific geographical places, such as lakes or caves.

Moreover, the ritual offerings demonstrate the symbolic analogy that people perceive between human beings and the living landscape. According to this, people have to feed Mother Earth’s body in the same way as the human body, because humans and the earth are similar in their bodily structure, if not in size and power (Bastien 1985: 56). Indeed, analogy does not mean symmetry, as Rösing (1994) underlines when she argues that Andean people always feel they are in debt to the powerful living entities of the landscape. For this reason, they ritually bury or burn various goods as offerings to those entities in order to avoid any troubles or diseases.

From such a theoretical perspective, rituals are a symbolic expression of a local worldview, a culturally constructed representation of the true natural world.

Going beyond both the symbolic and the cultural-ecological approach, the following analysis will focus on the ritual relations between the Jasimaná people and their surroundings using the concept of ‘environment’ as proposed by Tim Ingold (1990, 2011). According to him, it is impossible to separate the person from their environment. Therefore, every human being should be thought of as a “whole organism-person-in-its-environment” (Ingold 1990) who is totally immersed within fields or “sets of ecological relationships” between human and the many non-human elements that grow and develop together with them (Ingold 2011). Hence, he refutes the classical western worldview of a nature/culture dichotomy, according to which the human being is considered, on one side, a social person building a social or cultural world together with other humans, while on the other an organism living in a natural world. Ingold attempts to move from this dichotomy to a perspective involving no ontological gap between humans and non-humans, thereby embracing perceptions of the environments of the

hunters-gatherer societies he and other anthropologists have studied around the world. In line with the hunters' account:

There are no two worlds, of nature and society, but just one, saturated with personal powers, and embracing both humans, the animals and plants on which they depend, and the features of the landscape in which they live and move. Within this one world, humans figure not as composites of body and mind but as undivided beings, 'organism-persons', relating as such both to other humans and to non-humans agencies and entities in their environment. (...). To coin a term, the constitutive quality of their world is not intersubjectivity but interagency (Ingold 2011: 47).

Environmental relations involve different kinds of elements that are neither subjects and objects, nor just subjects, as Descola (2011: 67) argues when critically reviewing Ingold's proposal. The environmental perspective allows us to reduce the ontological superiority of human beings as has been assumed in western philosophy. Many different elements are endowed with their own agency, such as the landscape and animals. Consequently, humans and non-humans appear much more intimately, but also much more dangerously, tied, since people are not the only agents in their world, living instead in fields of environmental relationships alongside many other agents, including animals, the souls of the dead, spirits and entities of the landscape.

Thus, how do such diverse agents link together in the Jasimaná highland? What do ritual practices achieve in such a specific Andean ethnographic context?

Ritual relationality and intimacy

In the last few decades, anthropologists have developed many theoretical approaches to the study of rituals, such as semiotic, culturalist, performative, pragmatic and action-focused ones, among others.¹

In the following sections, ritual practices will be analysed as sets of actions that make connections between different elements and agents. Such an approach focuses on ritual pragmatic efficacy (Mauss 2001), and its 'relationality' (Houseman 2006).

In a famous work, Mauss wrote: "rites are eminently effective, they are creative, they do things" (Mauss 2001: 23-24). Rituals can directly create relations since they do things through actions, and even words (Austin 1962).

According to Houseman (2006: 2), rituals can be envisaged as "a distinctive way of enacting relations" which are "particular realities", since "relationships are acted out

¹ For instance, rites have been conceived as systems of symbolic communication of cultural values (Tambiah 1985); narrations that people tell to themselves about themselves (Geertz 1973); dramatic performances expressing conflicts and social order through symbolic acts (Turner 1967), even if symbols have also been thought of as embedded in actions (Bloch 1989: 19). Focusing on ritual practices has meant searching for the meta-logics that draw them (Handelman 1998), while looking at actions could correspond to take under consideration the ritualization process (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994).

and not merely referred to". Ritual is not a metaphor, for it involves a "lived-through experience" and its efficacy² is different from that of plays and spectacles. One of the main points stressed by Houseman is that ritual 'relationality' includes human and non-human elements:

While the relationships ritual participants enact are mainly with each other, they may also involve various non-human entities: spirits, gods, ancestors, animals, objects, places, liturgical formulae and so forth (Houseman 2006: 3).

However, according to this scholar, only human agency is 'unproblematic'; where objects are included in rituals, even if they are very important, they are simply objects and depend on people's ties and actions. Non-human entities are not real agents since they only "acquire the attributes of agency, becoming virtual subjects with whom a 'relationship' may be possible" (Houseman 2006: 3).

Nonetheless, from Ingold's perspective, it is not a matter of subjects and objects, since differing elements, both human and non-human, can be agents endowed with powers of action, and these include Mother Earth or the little statues of saints in the Jasimaná highland. Indeed, environmental relations do not entail 'intersubjectivity', the connection between diverse reflective and self-aware subjects. Environmental relations entail 'intragentivity', the connection between agents with capacity of action.

Finally, such a ritual relationality entails, I argue, a certain 'intimacy' between human and non-human agents who are engaged in the same field of environmental relationships.

The intimacy concept, generally used in psychology, sociology and anthropology of family, is usually concerned with the domestic sphere, sexual behaviour, private lives (as conceived in modern society) (Giddens 1992) and by extension with stereotypical national cultural behaviour (Herzfeld 2003). Since the domestic sphere and many important parts of a person's whole body are involved in rites, the concept of intimacy will be also useful in reaching some conclusions about ritual practices and environmental relations between humans and non-humans in the Jasimaná highlands.

In what follows, ritual practices will be analysed as sequences of actions which connect different elements and agents, and synthetic formal schemes will be drawn.

2 Houseman deems that the exceptional relationality of ritual event depends on being 'integrative' bringing together "pre-existing ties, generally drawn from a wide variety of domains: subsistence, life cycle events, kinship, other ceremonial occasions and so forth" (Houseman 2006: 3). Such different ties are integrated producing 'condensation' of modes of relation and a 'recontextualization' of the elements into a new totality.

People-in-transit throughout the highland

The Jasimaná highland (3,300-3,800 m above sea level) is situated in the department of San Carlos, in the province of Salta, northwest Argentina, southeastern central Andes. There are four small hamlets in the highland: Río Grande, El Arremo, Pampallana and Los Cardones. These have a small school, a chapel and a healthcare point. Approximately 250 people live in each one of these little villages, although in Los Cardones the population is just under 80. During my fieldwork in 2011, there was no public electricity, no telephone network, and no public transport service in the hamlets. People travelled by walking or riding mules and donkeys, as there were only a few motor vehicles available, all in Río Grande. It takes approximately six hours by car to travel from the highland to the villages of San Carlos (1,700 m) and Cafayate (1,600 m) in the Calchaquí valley, from where public buses and informal taxis leave daily for Salta, the provincial capital.

In Jasimaná, people raise herds of llamas, sheep and goats, following transhumance paths. During the wet season (from December to June) the shepherds stay in the lowlands (3,300 m) to let the animals take advantage of the fresh new pastures. They live in their main house, an isolated building known as *casa de campo* (rural house), while some members of the domestic group stay in another house in the hamlet to let the children attend school. During the cold dry season (from July to November), when the pastures in the lowlands are dry, the shepherds move with their animals from the lowlands to the uplands (3,800 m), living in a smaller house known as *puesto* (hut). There, evergreen vegetation, while rather poor, is always available for the herds. Such pastoral work is considered a female task, as men are expected to cultivate small plots of land and raise cattle in the lowlands. During the weekends, when the school is closed, children help their mothers with the herds. Thus, members of each domestic group continually move, taking over from each other in caring for the herds, and dwelling in different houses during the week according to the season. Some of them also regularly go to Cafayate in the valley to sell their products (such as meat, dried meat called *charqui* in Quechua,³ wool and textiles) at the local markets, buying various items in return. Moreover, in order to earn money, the majority of adults temporarily move to villages in the valley or to the city of Salta where men work as labourers and women as housemaids.

Hence, people move weekly between their house in the hamlet and their main house, seasonally between the lowlands and the uplands of the plateau, usually by walking (from one to eight hours), and monthly from the plateau to the valley using motor vehicles. Because of this pattern of living, I argue that the Jasimaná people are people-in-transit engaged in spatial circuits and trajectories of movement in which not only are humans, animals and items involved, but spirits and powerful entities too.

3 Even if the Jasimaná inhabitants speak Spanish, they also use many Quechua words of animals, plants, meals, illnesses and medicines.

Indeed, the person-in-transit or the body-person-in-transit, who walks for many kilometres, always accompanied by at least one dog, can easily meet a lost soul, bad spirit or magic animal along the way. The landscape itself is a powerful entity called *Pachamama*, Mother Earth.

Self-protection and healing rituals

Many daily ritual activities refer to walking since the body-person-in-transit needs to protect themselves against any possible fall, shock or loss of life-force. The local idiomatic expression *andar ligero* (going lightly), used by people living in Jasimaná, means to walk quickly and carefully, avoiding being knocked down by the *Pachamama* (Salvucci 2012). Falling down, as well as suddenly meeting a spirit or dangerous animal such as a snake, could produce a shock, called a *susto* (scare), which instantly detaches a human's soul from its body. The soul corresponds to the person's name and their individual consciousness. Outside the body, the lost human soul could be taken away by the powerful entities of the landscape, such as the mountain or the river (Palma & Torres Vildoza 1974). Only a good healer can ritually bring it back, by making an offering, burying coca leaves in the place the accident happened and asking the river or mountain to give the lost soul back. The shock produced by falling into river water is said to be one of the most dangerous, since the flow takes the human soul too far to bring it back again. In this case, the healer speaks very softly and sweetly to the heart of the river, calling it *aguita* (little water), praying to it to give the soul back. It is easier to cure shock in a baby than in an adult.⁴ In the former, the healer 'calls' back the child's soul during the night while the baby is sleeping. Staying outside, but near to, the house door, the specialist, who is either a man or woman, calls the child's name, shaking their clothes or some sweets to attract its innocent young soul. By contrast, only a very powerful healer, generally a man, can call back an adult's lost soul, fighting all night long against the evil spirits that try to take permanent possession of it. Having a fall or suffering from physical injury due to heavy labour, which is called *meyjtún* (Quechua) or *malafuerza* (Spanish, 'bad physical stress') by the Jasimaná people, can move the life-force centre away from its proper place within someone's body (the womb for females and the wrist for males). When this happens, a pregnant woman can lose her baby, while both women and men get sick, progressively deteriorating until they are unable to stand up and move. In this case, the person is said to 'get dried' (*secarse* in Spanish), and after a complete loss of their life-force inevitably dies. A fall or physical stress could also break the *palito* (little stick), called *patroncito* (little master), that is supposed to keep the human chest closed and thus hold down the life-force of someone's breath. Such a break causes the dangerous loss of this life-force.

⁴ While scared babies continually cry being strange and restless, in the adults the loss of soul causes dangerous depressions and mental illness even leading people to death.

Thus, in order to prevent such illnesses people-in-transit should, it is said, be bound by protective bands, mainly around their wrists and chest, and make offerings to the *Pachamama*, putting coca leaves in the little shrines built along the paths, which are made of white rocks piled up and called *apachetas*. They can also bury or blow coca leaves anywhere they choose as a contact point with Mother Earth, and this is most often performed during a difficult walk, when riding a mule, and even when driving. Moreover, it is not only people who should bind such protective bands. Shepherds bind their dogs around the neck during the Saint Roque feast on 16th August. They also bind the little statues and images of the saints and Virgins⁵ they carry with them on a decorated mobile wooden platform, called an *andas*, as part of a procession or a pilgrimage to the churches in the villages of the valley, making sure that the statues do not fall and break on the way.

Saints and Virgins

These little statues or images of diverse saints and Virgins, which live in shepherds' houses, are known as the *patroncitos* (little masters). They do not 'represent' but 'are' the Virgins and the saints. People are supposed to 'own' and be responsible for these saints, while the little statues are said to always protect people. The saints and Virgins ask to their owners to take them for a walk and to take part to Mass, processions and pilgrimages, carried on the mobile platform.

The relations between people and their saints are based on an agreement, which usually entails physical effort or material expense for the people. For instance, people promise to carry their saint on a long pilgrimage if the saint will help them get something that they want. In the case of Saint Antonio, who is supposed to help to find lost items and stolen money, people can even punish the statue, putting it upside-down, if, after having lighted candles for it during several days with no result.

The shepherds receive their saints from their parents and grandparents, buy them in Cafayate, or even find them while out walking. In such a case, the saint is said to 'call' its future protector and owner to it, leading him or her to find it. According to the interviews, the saints and Virgins love to process around the hamlets and make a pilgrimage to the villages of the valley, and even to the city of Salta.⁶ Relations between the people and their saints is a two-way street, as both the people and the saints ask for something from the other, and both give each other their desires in order to receive what they themselves want.

5 There are different statues with their own names, identities and iconographies of the Virgin Mary, such as the Virgin of the Rosary, the Virgin of the Valley (a black Virgin from the Argentinean region of Catamarca), the Virgin of the Candlemas, and so forth.

6 The most important pilgrimage in the Salta province is dedicated to the *Señor y Virgen del Milagro*, (the Lord and Virgin of the Miracle), on 14th and 15th September.



Figure 1. *Andas* (mobile platforms) containing the tied saints and Virgins lighted by candles in the chapel of the hamlet Río Grande de Jasimaná, 2011 (photo: Daniela Salvucci).

The payment to the earth

According to the shepherds, one of the main rites performed in Jasimaná, *el pago a la Tierra* ('the payment to the earth'), takes place every year at the beginning of August, either in the rural house or in the hamlet house. At first, the members of a domestic group wake early in the morning to perform a ritual cleaning called *pichareada* (from the Quechua word *picha*, cleaning). They use water infused with herbs, which was prepared the day before, to wash their face and arms, and clean the house by burning the trash and the dust which had been collected inside the house, together with herbs, calling such a fire *sahumar* (in Spanish). People also bind coloured woolly protective strings, made of a spun in reverse way thread, and called *el hilo zurdo* ('the left thread'), around their wrists (as well as, sometimes, the chest, neck and ankles), cutting and burying such protective strings at the end of the month.

In the morning, people sacrifice an animal's foetus or cook a large quantity of food to bury, together with wine, cigarettes and coca leaves, around midday, in order to pay and feed the *Pachamama*, asking for *una buena cosecha de corderos* ('a good harvest of lambs') according to the local statement, and for protection for the people and their animals.

The inhabitants of Jasimaná say that Mother Earth is very 'hungry' in August and as 'fragile as a pregnant woman'. The earth rises up; stones are born; the land moves up;

and consequently people could easily fall or have an accident. Going throughout the highland, walking, riding horses or mules, and driving a car is very unsafe and dangerous for humans throughout the month; thus, one should be extremely careful in August. However, the *Pachamama* is also a benevolent entity that provides many goods and resources. People speak very tenderly and sweetly to Mother Earth, often using affectionate names such as *pachita* or *mamita* ('little mum', 'mummy') when they make their offerings.

Thus, even if people also bind themselves and ritually clean their bodies and houses, the main ritual action of the payment to the earth is the offering in which the various elements are buried near the house or in the middle of the animals' corral. Together with coca leaves, the central elements of the offering are cooked food, alcohol and cigarettes, or alternatively the animal's foetus, which entails a double animal sacrifice. The cooked food or the animal foetus feed Mother Earth, materially linking the household members and their herds to the *Pachamama*.

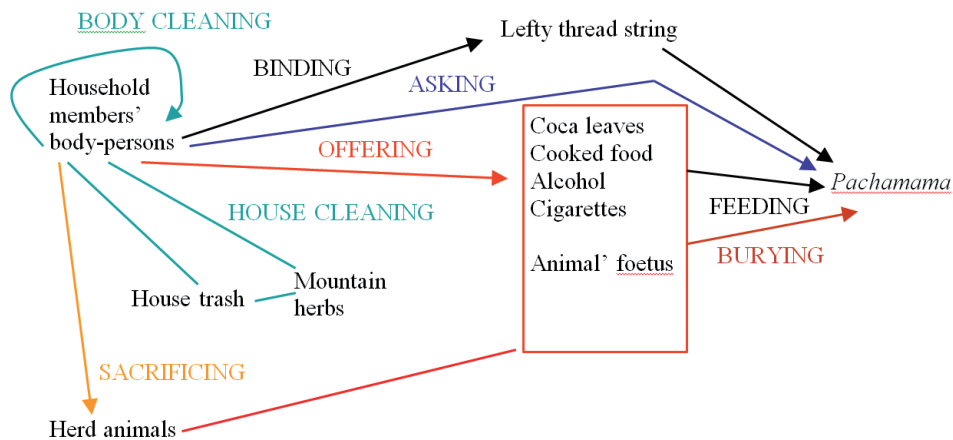


Figure 2. Scheme of actions, relations, agents and elements for a formal analysis of the 'payment to the earth' (drawing: Daniela Salvucci).

Livestock branding

In Jasimaná livestock branding⁷ is a family and collective event that mixes ritual, work and play. This kind of ritual is common in the entire Andean macro area (Rivera Andía 2014). All the participants, relatives and neighbours, gather near the animals' corrals. Branding means marking the young animals of a herd as ones individual property by cutting the animals' ears according to a personal form (e.g. a little simple cut and a little triangle). Indeed, each member of a domestic group, including children and relatives who have migrated to the valley, has a personal troop of their own animals clustered in the same family herd managed by the main shepherd and their helpers.

At the beginning, the *floreadora* (the woman in charge of the flowers) decorates people and animals with coloured woolly flowers, and the *chimpeadora* woman (from the Quechua word *chimpu*, ribbon), binds a coloured woolly bow on each animal's back. Then, people play a game called *campeada* ('fielding') using a shawl as a small field and a little animal shaped figure, for example one shaped like a sheep at the time of sheep branding. The figure is made of *yista*, the handmade paste used to absorb the drug chewing coca leaves.⁸ After cutting it up like a slaughtered animal, participants buy the *yista* pieces with coca leaves to help the owners of the herd prosper. Later, people hold an animals wedding to help the fertility of the herd, yoking together a young male and female animal, called *los novios* ('the engaged'), tying them to the ground as embracing 'bride and groom'.

People drink and consume coca leaves to celebrate, and offer wine and coca leaves to the 'married' animals. Then, the branding work takes place and, at the end, all the little pieces of animals' ears are buried in the middle of the corral, in the same place as last year's ceremony, as an offering dedicated to the *Pachamama*. People collect the used shears, the extra woolly flowers, coca leaves and cartons of wine and put it all into a shawl, before folding and closing it. Such a full, folded shawl, called 'the treasure', has to be carried back by the main shepherd who acts as if treasure is very heavy, as this would bring good luck, pretending to fall down a number of times, making people laugh and enjoy themselves. At the end, the participants process three times around the corral, singing a particular *copla*, a musical and poetic form, about the herd, and playing a drum of goat's leather. Then the main shepherd opens the corral to put the herd out to pasture. Finally, people build an *apacheta* near the corral by binding together white rocks, one for each animal, using colourful woolly string.

7 The livestock branding of sheep, goats and llamas, called *señaladas*, take usually place between January and March, whereas the *marcadas*, the bovine cattle branding, are generally in April.

8 People consume coca leaves forming a ball of leaves on one side cheek, called *acullyco* in Quechua, and absorb the drug to not fill hunger, thirst and tiredness. They use them communally and ritually, not only in the Jasimaná highland, but also in the Calchaquí valley, in the entire western province of Salta and in many other areas of northwestern Argentina.

In the case of cattle branding, the animals' owner, generally a man, cuts his calf's ears and brands the animals with an iron mark, helped by other men who throw a lasso to catch the calf to be branded by the legs, knocking it down and keeping it motionless. Throwing the lasso is a game of skill, during which a woman called *yerbeadora* (a woman in charge of the herb) gives a *yerba mate*⁹ infused with alcohol to the players. At the end of the ceremony, the lasso boys and men pretend to catch people, especially girls and young women, to the amusement of those watching.

The livestock branding is a complex sequence of actions that link relatives, neighbours, the animals of the herd and the *Pachamama*.

The branding itself is the central action, but several other actions are also very important as part of an effort to bring health and prosperity to the herd and their owners. This sequence includes actions such as burying pieces of the animals' ears, processing around the corral and binding stones to build an *apacheta*, to create a material connection between the herd and the *Pachamama*.



Figure 3. An *apacheta* made of white stones bound with coloured woolly strings and piled up. Río Grande de Jasimaná, 2011 (photo: Daniela Salvucci).

9 *Mate* is an infusion made of chopped dried leaves called *yerba mate* (*mate* herb), very common and popular in subtropical South America, especially in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Southern Brazil where the *yerba mate* plant (*Ilex paraguariensis*) is also cultivated.

The rituals of a person's life and death cycle

On the Jasimaná highland, the ritual relations between the people and the herd start with the *ruti*, a child's first haircut, even if nowadays many inhabitants no longer organize such a ceremony for their children. However, it is still an important rite of passage in the Andean macro area (Spedding 2008: 64). This family ritual is not linked to baptism, and takes place when the child is between one and a half to five years old. People of Jasimaná say that "tenés que tener tu hacienda de tu pelo" ("you must have your herd by your own hair"). During the *ruti* the child's relatives, i.e. the parents' siblings, the grandparents and the godparents, cut, one by one, a baby's hair wisp or little braid, giving some money or a small-sized animal, such as a chicken, in return, as they see fit. Parents write the donors' names and their presents on a notebook and use the money collected to buy the child's first lamb or goat.

The Catholic priest who travels from San Carlos to the highland region twice a year performs the main Catholic rites concerning a person's life, such as baptisms, Communion, confirmations and funerals. Some of the Jasimaná people have converted to the Evangelical church that has become very popular also in northern Andean Argentina in recent years (Sagato 2007). Wedding ceremonies are not as common since people prefer informal partnerships, in spite of the priest's complaints. There are also many single mothers, and extended and multinuclear female households. The Catholic priest carries out a collective funeral for all the people who have died since his last visit. Nonetheless, the church does not control other important death rituals, or the second burial. In this ritual, when a person dies, the body is buried the day afterwards in the cemetery. Their relatives and neighbours keep vigil (stay awake and watch) over the dead person's clothes for eight days and nights. Then some of the neighbours who are not relatives wash the clothes and bury them near the house during the second burial, together with the deceased's *poncho* ('cloak') and hat, and with food and coca leaves. Many people told me that during their grandparents' and parents' second burial the person's favourite dog was also buried after being killed, together with a doll made of the deceased's clothes, and placed on the dog's back as a rider on a horse. This is because the dog is considered to be much more than an animal; it is a helper in pastoral work and a guide to the Afterlife for its human owner's soul (Flores Ochoa 1977; Harris & Bouysse-Cassagne 1988: 255; Hoyos 1999).

The rites of the person's life and death cycle produce relations between the individual, their relatives, neighbours and animals. The *ruti* creates a 'giving' connection between the relatives who cut the hair and give money and the baby's parents who give the child their first animal, buying it with the collected money. This rite produces the owning relation between the child as a future shepherd and their animals through a specific person's organic element. Both the *ruti* and the second burial entail specific elements, such as human hair and clothes, that are said by the people to contain the

human life-force, as ethnohistorians and anthropologists have also highlighted it (see Arnold 2008; Murra 1962).

The person's life and death cycle also includes el *día de las almas*, 'the souls' day' (1st - 2nd November), as the souls of the dead are supposed to return home once a year to visit their house and family. The ceremony takes place in the rural house or in the hamlet house where relatives and neighbours come together to wait for the souls of their dead relatives and ancestors. On 1st November people cook a great quantity of food¹⁰ throughout the day for these souls, and place the largest part of every cooked meal on the dead souls' table. They eat the remainder sitting around a different table. Before eating, they offer part of their own meal to the souls. They also place drinks, mate, wine, cigarettes and coca leaves on the tables of the deceased.

Before the dinner, people perform the *desatada* ('untying') to untie the saints' statues that are bound to each other on the mobile platform. One by one, all the participants untie one little statue or a painting of a saint or of one of the Virgins, offering some money as they want. A member of the household writes the givers' names and the amount donated in a notebook. The saints and virgins are placed in their own room in the house, into which people can enter to pray and light a candle. After dinner, a member of the household reads the dead souls' names from a list that every participant or family has written for this occasion: it is called *nombrar las almas* ('name the souls'). Finally, the same person reads the names of the people who untied a saint or a Virgin and gave money in return, and rewards them with homemade donuts. The participants remain awake as long as possible, and candles made of cactus and sheep fat light the dead souls' table. On 2nd November people again gather to cook but hurry as they have to do so before noon, in order to greet the dead souls who at that time have to leave the house: it is called *despachar las almas* ('to send or dismiss the souls'). The majority of the food on the deceased's table is put in a large basket, together with that food people have offered from their dish before eating. All participants leave the house and bury the food offered in a hole in the ground near the house.

10 People should cook the favorite courses of their ancestors and prepare them in the traditional way (for instance using handmade clay pots instead of the industrial metal ones). For this occasion a whole llama can be slaughtered to make sausages, grilled meat and boiled llama head, together with local potatoes, the *mote* corn, brad beans, salad fritters made of *suri* (Andean rhea's) eggs and herbs.

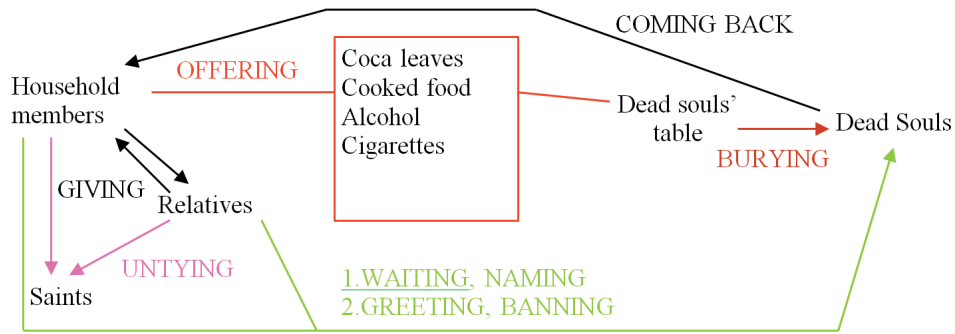


Figure 4. Scheme of actions, relations, agents and elements for a formal analysis of the ‘souls’ day’ (drawing: Daniela Salvucci).



Figure 5. The dead souls’ table with the offered cooked food for the dead souls. Río Grande de Jasimaná, 1st November 2011 (photo: Daniela Salvucci).

The activity of untying involves saints, household members and relatives in a giving and giving-in-return sequence of actions, whereas making offerings and burials connects people and souls, even if too intimate a relationship with the dead souls is dangerous for people who, after awaiting them, have to greet and banish them by noon on 2nd November.

The souls of people who died violently on a journey need more time to reach the afterlife and can suddenly appear in the world, causing fear and alarm. For this reason, there are many crosses along the highland paths and the road down to the valley, used as reminders of the most serious accidents which have occurred, and where people-in-transit can offer coca leaves to those restless souls that continue to traverse the landscape.

Ritual environmental relations

In line with Ingold's perspective, the Jasimaná inhabitants as organism-persons-in-their-environment are engaged in a set of environmental relationships that include people, animals and plants, as well as saints, souls and Mother Earth. In many cases, such relationships are ritualistic ones. Members of a household and their relatives, for instance, are united by kinship, domestic and ritual ties. They are linked with their dead relatives and ancestors through rituals such as funeral wakes, the second burial and the annual dead souls' day. Economic and emotional, as well as ritual ties connect the shepherd to their animals. The first haircut ritual and the annual livestock branding enact a ritual relationality between shepherds, their relatives and their animals, while the payment to the earth enacts a relationality between shepherds, their animals and the *Pachamama*.

From this perspective, rituals are neither a cultural device to create the social cohesion people need to adapt to the natural Andean surroundings nor a symbolic expression of a culturally constructed local representation of the natural world as a living one.

We can understand these rituals as a specific kind of practices that create relationality (Houseman 2006) between human and non-human agents and elements, materially producing environmental relations by actions and sequences of actions.

Agents are elements endowed with their own autonomous agency or capacity for action. Not only do people take action, but all agents can do that as well. For instance, the *Pachamama* makes people fall, possibly hurting themselves. The mountain and the river can steal a lost soul and perhaps return it. Dead souls come back and visit their house and family; the faithful dog leads its owner's soul to the afterlife; the saints and Virgins grant wishes in return for being taken for a walk or taking a pilgrimage with their human owners.

Agents are both physical individuals such as people, dogs, healers, souls, saints, and so on, and physical spacious entities as Mother Earth, the mountains and the rivers. Some of them depend on other agents' actions on specific ritual occasions. In a healing rite, for instance, the sick person ritually depends on the capacity of action of the healer who is calling their soul or binding them. During the Saint Roque feast people have to bind their dogs with protective strings, while after death the faithful dog guides its owner's human soul. A double dependency links the shepherds to their little masters: people bind and light candles for the saints and the Virgins that, in return, protect them.

Moreover, some practices entail a ritual specialist, called 'particular agent' by Houseman (2006), who has a central role or special power, such as the healer for curing rituals and priest for the Catholic rites. The healer may have gained his curing power from the ancestors, in a dream, or after lightning struck him. Twins are also supposed to become healers.

However, in Jasimaná the majority of ritual practices do not entail a specialist or particular agent since single persons-in-transit and groups of relatives perform the rites. Analysing the ethnographic data, the most frequent actions people perform, in many different ritual contexts, are binding and giving offerings through burying objects. People bind themselves to avoid losing their life-force, or even their soul, since the body-person is a precarious bundle of diverse forces and centres of awareness that can move, become lost, or even be stolen. Furthermore, they offer goods and bury them in the ground to create material points of contact with agents such as the *Pachamama* and the souls of the dead. The offerings can also be thought of as agents, since the strings protect people, animals and saints, while food or the animal's foetus and coca leaves feed the earth and the dead souls.

Intimacy and danger

An analysis of ethnographical data about ritual relationality shows how the Jasimaná inhabitants as organisms-in-their-environment are ritually engaged in several environmental relationships with other human and non-human agents. Some of these relations are concerned with the intimacy of the human body-person and could be very dangerous. Many environmental relations involve important parts of the body-person: the life-force centred in the male wrist, the female womb and the breath in the chest; the soul that corresponds to their personal name and individual consciousness; the hair and clothes that contain a person's life-force. Several different agents, such as wild animals, spirits and restless souls, can scare and shock the body-person, provoking the loss of their soul. Aspects of the landscape, such as the mountain and the river, can steal such a lost human soul, while Mother Earth makes people fall, while a heavy labour which involves physical injury can provoke the movement of a person's life-force centres or the breaking of the little stick that keeps their life-force of the breath inside their chest. The *Pachamama* can also make animals and saints fall down, become sick, or break.

Therefore, rituals are a type of human practice that make such dangerous intimacy between agents less risky for people, producing safer environmental relationships.

Indeed, the person-in-transit's ritual practices create a less dangerous relationship with Mother Earth by binding bands and offering coca leaves in the *apachetas*.

Moreover, many rituals take place in the domestic sphere that includes the house (the rural main house, the hut, the house in the hamlet), members of the household, their animals and the saints' statues. The statues and paintings of saints and Virgins

live in the shepherds' houses; sometimes they even have their own room. The relations between people and their little masters entail cohabitation and curing, since the statues and paintings are lighted by candles, touched, dressed, handled, bound, also punished.

The ritual relations between the household members, their animals and the *Pachamama*, made by offering and burying goods during the payment to the earth ritual, takes place in the domestic sphere: some of the actions performed are carried out inside the house, such as the ritual cleaning and smoking fire, or near the house, as with the ritual burial of selected goods. During the livestock branding, pieces of animals' ears are buried in the animals' corral, in both the human and animal domestic sphere.

Ritual practices involving dead souls are also performed inside the house, where people wait for the souls of the dead between 1st and 2nd November, and in the yard where the deceased's second burial and the burial of cooked food offered to the dead take place.

Hence, 'burying' material creates a point of contact with some dangerous agents, such as Mother Earth and the dead souls, producing safer relations with both along the way, where the persons-in-transit bury coca leaves in the *apachetas*, and in the more intimate domestic sphere where a number of ritual burials are performed. By contrast, 'binding' protective strings helps to avoid any contact with the dangerous agents of the Andean landscape, making relations between people, animals and saints with the *Pachamama* safer. Finally, by going on processions and pilgrimages people are in transit with their own domestic little masters who protect them while they move through the landscape of the Jasimaná highland.

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