The heroic journey of Ai Apaec

Aiapaec

to ulla

divine Moche *camac*

going to your death in full regalia

two-colored *chakana*
feline headdress
belt of snakes

Lima bean in hand
you descend the hollowed-out-night

spiraled being

your shirt woven by spiders

an owl comes
finally
for you

mallqui
man/sun/maize/ají pepper

you copulate
engage in combat
hybrids

pututo in hand
you are born again

Odette Velez (2014)

Recently the Larco Museum (2020) in Lima, Peru has just released a documentary that narrates the journey of Ai Apaec, a hero of the pre-Columbian Mochica culture that developed in the north coast of Peru more than 1800 years ago. The series entitled “Ai Apaec, the Mochica hero” consists of 6 chapters and won the 11th Ibermuseums of Education Prize. In my dissertation for the European Graduate School, Calderón (2015) I have already reflected on the relationship between Ai Apaec and our field of work in expressive arts. Now,

based on this new and captivating audiovisual[1] material, I would like here to continue delving into the relationship between the myth of Ai Apaec and our expressive arts work, especially in the current context in which we find ourselves.

Ulla Holmquist, director of the Larco Museum, in an interesting interview by Alberto Ñiquen (2020) from La Mula, shares information about the making of the documentary as well as her reflections on the importance of knowing more about our myths and their relevance to our present. The achievements of Ai Apaec transport us to an original (native) worldview without having had any type of external influence.

The Mochica did not have writing and they narrated the adventures of this character through three-dimensional images represented in their beautiful and mysterious "huacos" (ceramics). The documentary series has been developed based on artistic, archaeological and iconographic studies.

Ai Apaec in the language of the moches (mochic) means "doer". He was an archetypal character and human referent with divine powers who performed various feats, travels, battles, and encounters. He is represented with a human body but at the same time has particular traits and attributes that give him special abilities. He wears a two coloured chacana[2]-shaped shirt that represents his ability to travel to different worlds: the world above (hanan pacha) the world below (uku pacha) and the world from here (kay pacha). He has feline fangs and crown as well as bird feather ornaments and snake ear flaps and belt. All this allows him to obtain the qualities of these divine animals to be able to undertake his journey through different realities.

Below I describe Ai Apaec's heroic journey. This description is based on the videos from the Larco Museum and the interview with Ulla Holmquist that I have referred to previously.

"Ai Apaec's mission is to restore order and the reproductive cycle of life. Before starting his journey he prepares himself with the necessary clothing to be able to have the ability to perform his feats. The powers of felines, birds and snakes accompany him in his clothing to gain access to the different realities that he is going to travel through on his journey. He also carries with him a treasure that will be necessary for him, the black and white lima beans symbol of abundance and life, where the gods have left hidden messages engraved. He is always accompanied by the cunning lizard with a bird's crown and the spotted dog who warns him of possible dangers.

Ai Apaec goes in search of the sun that has disappeared to the bottom of the sea so that the cycles of life return and the shadow disappears. When he reaches the beach, the threshold between the terrestrial and marine world, he meets the giant crab who teaches him how to walk on the sand and feed in the sea. He then meets the great stingray whom he captures and acquires the cunning and ability from him to move swift and stealthy through the sea. The transformation of the hero has begun.

This is how he enters the depths of the sea where he has encounters with various marine beings that help him prepare for what is to come. The hedgehog man gives him a nose ring so he doesn't drown in the sea. The puffer fish gives him its crown so that he can resist the pressure of the deep and can in turn see in the dark. In return Ai Apaec gives them his sacred lima beans to receive those powers that will help him in his feat.

Already on the seabed he has an arduous fight with the giant snail and thus obtains the sacred pututo, voice of the gods, an spiralling seashell that represents the regeneration of nature. That appreciated offering must later be delivered to the god of the mountain. Then he faces the monster of darkness, a mix of sea lion, stingray and shark. In that battle he dies beheaded and thus leaves the world of the living and descends to the world of the dead.

Later some spiders unweave his chacana shaped shirt and weave a ladder that takes him to the world above. Once there some birds take him to the islands where the ancestors live to meet him with the female shaman owl who heals him and rescues him from death. Then our hero goes to meet mother earth, the pachamama with whom he copulates in order to allow regeneration. From this union the tree of life is born. Ai Apaec germinates as a fruit and transforms into maize and aji pepper.

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[1] I recommend that the reader watch the videos before continuing to read the article: https://www.museolarco.org/miniserie/ai-apaec/ since the images are vital to be able to feel and better understand what is narrated in this text.

[2] Andean cross

After all these encounters, confrontations, death and resurrection, he manages to rescue the sun from darkness and thus fulfils his mission. He returns revitalized to the kay pacha next to the sun where his community awaits him. He advances to the temple of the mountain god where he hands over his offering, the sacred pututo, acquired in the depths of the sea. The god of the mountain receives it and this ensures the rains and that the rivers continue to irrigate the field for the cultivation and harvest of the community. Ai Apaec thus manages to turn the spiral of the life cycle again.

Later, aged and already with wrinkles, he is seen playing with the sacred lima beans with his successor, thus granting him his knowledge so that he can continue with his legacy."

The heroic journey of Ai Apaec gives us multiple images that reach us 1800 years later. Suggestive images that might nurture our expressive arts practice at a crucial time we are currently experiencing in the face of post-covid challenges and the climate crisis. Below I select some of the images from the story of the Mochica hero and relate them to our work. I like to approach the images of this myth from the perspective of the expressive arts: honoring them, surprising myself with their beauty, listening and feeling to them sensorially without quickly reaching a forced understanding or interpretation. I believe that this imaginative way of approaching the myth can enrich our expressive arts work at a clinical, community, educational or social change contexts. I present the reflections that follow in a poetic way so that we still remain at an imaginal level.

The idea of **journey as a form of transformation**. Our expressive arts work can also be understood as a heroic journey into the imaginal world. A cyclical journey of regeneration. The architecture of a session in expressive arts can be enriched with this more circular vision that places a greater emphasis on our bond with nature and community wellbeing.

The importance of **preparing for the journey** before entering the imaginary world of the expressive arts. What do we have to take? How can we prepare for the journey to be fruitful? A previous step, even before sensitize, to enter the expressive arts process both at an educational and transformational level.

The kay pacha or **world here** connects us with our literal, interpersonal and community reality. The uku pacha or **world below** to the possibility of dying and dialoguing with our ancestors, our unconscious inhabited by various archetypes. The hanan pacha or **world above** speaks of accessing our divinities, a transpersonal reality. Our literal reality is enriched by the imaginal journey through these worlds.

Threshold between the terrestrial and marine world: windows, doors, portals, thresholds as a way to enter and exit the imaginal world, at the beginning of our sessions, classes or transformation processes. Thresholds that open to enter new depths and then can and should be closed.

The awareness of the **treasures** (sacred lima beans) or resources that we have. We have to be very aware of our resources and sacred treasures and have them "at hand" in our journey (life).

Exchange of gifts: what do I offer in order to receive new capacities necessary to continue the journey? The tinkuy or encounter (Calderon, 2019) as an ethical way of being in the world, I offer to be able to receive and this benefit not only remains with me but also extends to the community. Exchange of gifts in our sessions: I give presence, confidence and creative openness and receive the gifts that the arts bring. The therapeutic bond also understood as an exchange of gifts.

Death and resurrection: aspects of us that have to die for the new to emerge. Resistances, maladaptive personality structures, dysfunctional ways of being with oneself and with others. To thus access the transpersonal, to a greater consciousness, I have to leave something in the world of the ancestors and close that portal. Ascension can only happen if there is a "letting go" first.

The female shaman owl that heals us: poetic and mysterious image that encourages us to continue to be inspired by the female role in transformation processes.

The **copulation with nature that brings fruit and regeneration:** What role do we have from the expressive arts to favor the continuous regeneration of life and nature? Rescue the sun to defeat the shadow. What do we have to rescue in our sessions? What has gone and must come back? Has the sun gone down in present

times? What must we do to go in search of it and thus overcome the shadow in which we find ourselves? The expressive arts journey as a way to connect with eros and the ability to regenerate and revitalize.

Journey in company in community : we are accompanied in our becoming is not a lonely journey.

Male / female complementarity. Ai Apaec can return to the world of the living when connects with the feminine side of him. His manhood recovers when he rescues his vulnerability. The journey of life flows when we open ourselves to our complementarity.

Unweave our body to build a ladder that takes us to the world above: what should we unweave? How do you unravel in the expressive arts? Deformation to access our vitality as Alalu (2019) reminds us. Deconstruct to arrive at a new way of being.

Ai Apaec **the doer**: an image of an expressive arts facilitator, who seeks to make, regenerate, transform, germinate and mediate between worlds. A doer who opens up to multiple transfigurations. As expressive arts facilitators we do, respond, accompany journeys, promote encounters and honor the multiplicity of images that inhabit us. Let us as expressive arts facilitators continue to travel the journey of Ai Apaec again and again.

Transmission of knowledge: learning from our ancestors and sages and in turn transmitting their legacy to other generations. The Mochica tell us about their myth in three-dimensional images, offering us knowledge that can be re-imagined in light of current challenges. The expressive arts are a bridge that connects us with that imaginary (Calderon 2019) that comes from the past in order to re-create it in our present.

The images described provide a poetic way of understanding our work. I invite readers to continue being inspired by this original (native) myth that comes from Peru. Discover how its suggestive images can contribute to the work you are doing in the current context. Stay with the images, don't try to understand them completely, let them speak for themselves and be surprised how it enriches your practice.

Tinkuy* : The Trickster Speaks

For Jose Miguel

Standing in the place
Where all the rivers meet
Let us see what must die
So the waters may flow
Let the old acts of violence
Become a ritual dance.

The world sings
For those who can hear
And with the singing
And the dancing
The task is fulfilled
The cycle begins again.

We are Ai Apaec
The intermediary, journeying
Between worlds, knowing
The connection of all things
Remembering again that
Everything is sacred.

Remember
Ai Apaec says:
Don't take yourself too seriously.

*Tinkuy is the Quechua word for encounter
**Ai Apaec is a Quechua God

Sally Atkins
June, 2016

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Larco Museum Catalogue: https://www.museolarco.org/catalogo/

Ceremonial Vessel: code ML018882, ML018882, ML018882sup_JG

Ai Apaec after capturing demon strombus: code ML003208

Ai Apaec handling over lima beans to his successor: code ML002362

Ai Apaec beheaded: code ML002968

Corn Ai Apaec: code ML003291