

Festive Arches in the Andean Altiplano. Materialities, Ephemeral Architecture and Ontological Status

Arcos festivos no altiplano andino. Materialidades, arquitetura efêmera e status ontológico

Astrid Windus*

Camila Mardones**

SUMMARY

The article looks at the history of ephemeral festive arches in the pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary Southern Andes. Beginning with a description and analysis of colonial-era triumphal arches, erected for secular and religious festivals in cities such as Cuzco and Potosí, we explore modes of local appropriation through semantic references to Inca festive arches and to the rainbow as an important motif in Andean mythology. However, European triumphal arches did not simply replace indigenous arches. To investigate the symbolic meanings of these indigenous arches, which cannot be inferred from textual and pictorial historical sources, we turn to the actual *arkus*, which are very common in the Aymara highlands. This interdisciplinary and transversal analysis of ephemeral arches and the practices associated with them provides

RESUMO

O artigo viaja pela história dos arcos festivos efêmeros nos Andes do sul pré-hispânicos, coloniais e contemporâneos. Começando com a descrição e a análise dos arcos triunfais da era colonial, erguidos em festivais seculares e religiosos em cidades como Cuzco e Potosí, exploramos os modos de apropriação local por meio de referências semânticas aos arcos festivos incas, e o arco-íris como um motivo importante na mitologia andina. Entretanto, os arcos triunfais europeus não substituíram simplesmente os arcos indígenas. Para investigar os significados simbólicos desses arcos indígenas, que não podem ser inferidos a partir de fontes históricas textuais e pictóricas, recorreremos aos *arkus* atuais, que são muito comuns no altiplano aimará. Essa análise interdisciplinar e transversal dos arcos efêmeros e das práticas associadas a eles fornece

* University of Cologne (UzK), Germany. a.windus@uni-koeln.de <<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6017-6430>>

** University of Hamburg (UHH), Germany. camila.marbra@gmail.com <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8930-2894>>

insights into the dynamics, the material dimensions, and diversity of transculturation.

Keywords: Andean ontologies; Ephemeral architecture; Festive arches; Qeros; Inca mythology.

uma visão da dinâmica das dimensões materiais e da diversidade da transculturação.

Palavras-chave: ontologias andinas; arquitetura efêmera; arcos festivos; qeros; mitologia inca.

INTRODUCTION

Triumphal arches were a central element of festive culture in colonial Hispano-America. Following the Roman tradition, these ephemeral structures served to stage both the power of the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church. Visual and written sources allow us to partly reconstruct the iconographic, symbolic, and material characteristics of this short-lived architecture. On the other hand, the concept of the arch erected for ceremonial occasions and for the glory of rulers was also common in the Andean region before the *Conquista*, although these differ from European triumphal arches both in their materiality and in terms of their ontological meanings. Representations of arches, mainly in the form of rainbows or the mythological two-headed serpent *Amaru*, are found on pre-Hispanic ceramics, as well as on colonial media such as ritual drinking cups (*qeros*) and textiles, revealing a certain continuity in the pre-Hispanic ontological status of the architectural element. Furthermore, the detailed description of feasts offered by the chronicler Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela shows the simultaneous presence of two differentiated sorts of ephemeral arches, built and activated on the same occasions. This coincidence of function between European triumphal arches and arches of pre-Hispanic origin, and their apparent compatibility within colonial ceremonies, brings us to delve into the complex processes of appropriation and negotiation in the highland contact zones. It raises the question if a certain degree of conflicting difference appears between both systems of ephemeral architecture. A comparison with contemporary ephemeral arches used to this day in saint festivals, civic celebrations, and traditional gatherings in the Southern Andes allows us to point out the transcultural quality of these objects, with the interplay of ontological differences made especially evident in the analysis of rural examples.

The social agencies involved in the production and use of ephemeral arches, intertwined with their materialities, iconographic elements, and substances, formed complex performative systems. Triumphal arches of European origin would bring together objects that displayed the early modern global networks of

goods, emphasizing value through both real and feigned materials, created and assembled through artistic craft. If in Indigenous arches the elements had a smaller range of geographical circulation, they did evidence regional mobility (such as vegetation from different ecological levels), as well as material richness and skillful handicraft. Both types of arches established, therefore, a material dialogue during the festivities, as differentiated colonial phenomena.

The ephemeral quality of these arches refers, on the one hand, to the perishable materials with which they were built (such as clay or cardboard), but their performative essence also defines the impermanent spatial and temporal aspects of the feasts, activating different cultural practices (social, political, aesthetic) (Lanza; López, 2014, p. 509). Festive arches echo, in this sense, the festivities' fleeting moment (differentiated from everyday life), establishing rhythms for the processions, blessings, and other ceremonial acts, as well as defining an often hierarchical festive space through the specific routes and movements they enforce (Lanza; López, 2014, p. 509).

A transversal and interdisciplinary view of Andean festive arches illuminates ontological dimensions of these objects. The semiological principle of representation, which works well for the analysis of European ephemeral architecture, does not comprehend the presentational quality of Andean material culture, where objects and their "agentive power" incorporate absence (Dean, 2014, p. 306). In Andean ontology, human and non-human subjects, such as animals, plants, and natural phenomena (like rainbows or mountains), coexist and relate to each other with their own spiritual interiority and physicality (Cruz, 2012, p. 235). Humans are responsible for creating and recreating the personhood of all the things by which they are surrounded (Espejo Ayca, 2022, pp. 6-9), forming a social community joined by genealogies and common mythological origins. In this ontological community, transformations between categories, substances (solid/liquid), or modes of existence (animate/inanimate) are possible, although not all non-human actors hold the same subject status, differing in the extent of their agency, consciousness, and ability to communicate (Arnold, 2022, p. 215).

Starting our analysis from colonial period ephemeral arches in urban settings, we observe a parallel development of pre-Hispanic symbolism of arches as displayed in colonial Indigenous heraldry and visual languages. Finally, we study the material ontologies of present-day *arkus* in the Bolivian altiplano. Certain "peripheral" status responds to the location of our study cases in the highland countryside, distant from the main colonial-era centers, with scarce presence of Spaniards during Hispanic domain (including parish priests who

would infrequently visit smaller chapels). Nevertheless, a significant circulation of people, objects, and materials throughout the *Camino Real* and parallel roads connected Indigenous towns with European ideas and customs, adapted within local social and religious structures.

Our research confirms that the activation of ephemeral architecture is always locally situated and takes place within specific social and ontological contexts. Moreover, the materiality of festive arches played, and continues to play, an essential role in their activation, carrying meaning and building a complex performative system.

EPHEMERAL ARCHES IN COLONIAL URBAN SPACE

The Hispanic use of triumphal arches, both of solid and ephemeral architecture, was part of the Renaissance recovery of ancient Roman practices and iconography of power (Chiva Beltrán, 2012, p. 194). They were soon reproduced in the American viceroyalties. Triumphal arches were built at the entrance of colonial cities such as Los Reyes (present-day Lima) and used within the ceremonial reception of Hispanic authorities. Ephemeral arches were a complementing ornament to civic and religious festivities, a symbolic substitution of the cities' gateways as points of territorial conquest (Chiva Beltrán, 2012, p. 195). In their display within the colonial Americas, they reproduced the triumphal motif as a material sign of the power of Christianity in the Americas (Kirschbaum, 2004, p. 355). Their material presence established visual parallels with church façades and altarpieces, combining Catholic and Indigenous symbols (Condarco Castellón, 2019, p. 43).

These short-lived structures developed, in their Renaissance version, as the base for iconographical programs that framed each ceremony, using perishable materials such as cardboard, clay, or canvas for developing ideas in the form of painted or engraved images and emblems (Chiva Beltrán, 2012, p. 195). Their formal elements were the structural organization of two or three *cuerpos* and three *calles* (or *naves*), with the middle one as a semicircular arch for passing through. The columns included all of the classical orders along with the Baroque addition of Solomonic columns, leaving several openings for the exhibition of texts and images.

The available visual sources of ephemeral arches in the colonial Andes are few and often not quite detailed, but they are eloquent as to their performative uses. In the Corpus Christi series currently preserved in the Museum of Religious Art of the Archbishopric of Cuzco (1665-1680), fifteen big-scaled

paintings visually describe this important Catholic feast in colonial Cuzco. Five of these images present processions of parish members, brotherhoods, or religious orders as just having passed through an ephemeral structure. The arch in the painting dedicated to the Indigenous *cofradías* of Santa Rosa de Lima and “La Linda” (a local version of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception and patron saint of Cuzco), on the right side of the image (Fig. 1), shows the use of different materials in its construction: silver, precious stones such as emeralds and rubies (although they might have been feigned canvas), feathers, banners, sculpted allegorical figures, and a Holy Ghost which hangs by the main arch. A masculine saint is positioned on a globe on top of the structure, while the sculpture of a skeleton reminds the faithful of the perishable *mundo*, reproducing symbolically the ephemeral quality of life in the festive ornament. We appreciate only the backside of the arch, since the *cofrades* have just passed through it, dressed in colonial Indigenous outfits, playing brass instruments, and carrying the saint’s images on carved *andas*. As corresponding representatives of the Viceregal capital and of Cuzco, both saints suggest an underlying rivalry between cities, with preeminence of “La Linda” because she is carried on a silver pedestal and is located behind, therefore closer to the sacred host at the end of the procession (Dean, 1999, p. 92).

Figure 1: *Cofradías* of Santa Rosa de Lima and “La Linda”. Corpus Christi series (1665-1680). Museum of Religious Art of the Archbishopric of Cuzco. Photo: Raúl Montero Quispe.



The arches depicted in the Corpus Christi series function not only as a visual description but as pictorial signs of triumph, representing through architecture the entanglement of religious and secular power in Christian colonial dominance. This is also evident in Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Velas *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* (ca. 1705-1736). The chronicler offers many examples worth noting of ephemeral architecture, ranging back to the 16th century onwards. We will detail one occasion in which Arzáns was a personal eyewitness: the entrance of the archbishop viceroy Diego Morcillo Rubio de Auñón in Potosí, in 1716, on his way to Lima to take his newly appointed office. The feast for Morcillo, as embodiment of the highest political and religious authority, was also captured in an enormous canvas (240cm x 570 cm) by Melchor Pérez de Holguín, who positions himself as a witness and artist with his self-portrait in the middle of the composition (Fig. 2).

The Potosí chronicler comments that the painters did not have enough time “to feign the jaspers and marbles, the gold and colors” of the two triumphal arches built for the occasion, so they just dressed them with “precious fabrics, expensive embroidery, and rich silks” (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, p. 47)¹. The viceroy was to enter the Villa by passing through the main arch, a composite structure supported by four Solomonic columns, about twenty meters high and eight meters wide (25 x 10 *varas*), with three bodies (*cuerpos*) and three *naves*. At the top was a life-size figure of *fame*, with a banner in his hand, while an angel in the second body of the arch “appeared to descend to the gor-

Figure 2: Melchor Pérez de Holguín:
Entrance of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo in Potosí (1716).
Museo de América, Madrid. Photo: Joaquín Otero.



geous gallery” (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, p. 47). The capitals of the columns were of gilded cedar wood and mirrors, and on the cornices were several bulk images, representing the moral virtues of the archbishop. The arch is described in its architectural complexity with great detail on the statues, fabrics, mirrors, foliage, and inscriptions.

Under the main body of the arch, there was a mechanism in the form of a cloud that, when the archbishop passed, opened and let fall a tiara towards him, while “beaten silver and gold” fell on him from the four corners. In the right aisle, there was a chair and cushion for him to rest, and on the left, a theater where two children represented the Villa’s virtues of Urbanity and Liberalism. It is thus observed that along with the ephemeral materiality of the arch, human performativity and mechanical knowledge were fundamental parts of its activation. Several of these elements are recognizable in the arch represented on the right of Holguín’s large canvas (Fig. 3): the allegory of fame, a couple of statues (including the flying angel in the middle), the two children watching the procession from behind after having represented their piece, and the cloud that remained open after being activated.

Figure 3: Melchor Pérez de Holguín:
Entrance of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo in Potosí (1716).
Detail. Museo de América, Madrid. Photo: Joaquín Otero.



It is interesting how the chronicle and the painting complement each other. For example, Holguín represents a series of canvases which decorated the city forming a complex iconographic program designed to both praise and demand the new viceregal authority (Querejazu, 2007, p. 154). These are not described at all by the chronicler. In the case of the triumphal arch itself, the virtues not specified by Arzáns materialize visually in two allegorical sculptures, one with a sword and military dress, and one with a shepherd's outfit and staff. In turn, while Arzáns describes the 120 arches of wrought silverworks (*plata labrada*, also named by the chronicler as *arcos de mano*) that adorned the street of San Martín, they do not appear in the painting. Manufactured by the Indigenous women merchants “to receive His Illustrious Excellency,” each arch was formed by two columns united in a semicircular arch, “all covered with such a variety of silver pieces, ribbons, and rich fabrics, they formed a very pleasant sight.” (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, pp. 47-48)². Ensembles of arches with these characteristics often decorate current-day festivities in Bolivia (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Festive *arkus* at the feast of the patron saint, Santiago Apóstol (Tata Santiago), in Santiago de Andamarca, Carangas, Bolivia. July 25th, 2013. Photo: C. Mardones Bravo.



Querejazu suggests that their absence in Holguín's canvas may have been a technical decision to achieve the clearest understanding of the scene (2007, p. 151). While perhaps true that their incorporation would have visually hindered the image, it should be noted that Holguín's interest in representing the iconographic program that framed the celebrations might have prevailed over the inclusion of these Indigenous manufactured arches. It is feasible that their ontological value for the Hispanic and Creole public was limited to their "muy agradable vista" (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, p. 48), while the triumphal arches and canvases contained a set of organized ideas, worthy of being visually recorded, from the painter's point of view. This hierarchical perspective of what should and should not be represented is echoed in the simplified description of the festivity's second arch, both in the chronicle and the canvas, where it appears in an additional scene at the top left of the procession arriving at the cathedral.

Arzáns offers other descriptions of *fiestas* with details of ephemeral triumphal arches, but he tends to limit them to generalizations. Throughout his three-volume work are also several references to the *arcos de plata labrada* that emphasize the Indigenous agency in the religious and civic festivities of vice-regal society. In 1555, for example, the Villa de Potosí celebrated the swearing-in of its patron saints: the Blessed Sacrament, the Virgin of the Conception, and the Apostle Santiago. The procession went through thirty altars distributed throughout the city, fifteen overseen by the Spaniards and fifteen overseen by the Indigenous population (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. I, p. 95). The streets were adorned with mirrors, paintings, and hangings, and the ground was covered with "rich wool and cotton blankets that the Indians gave affectionately," and an "infinity of various flowers and fragrant herbs," as well as with arches and arbors made of "innumerable trees and leafy branches" brought from the valleys (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. I, p. 96)³. The chronicler's judgment of the Indigenous participation in the festive decorations is complex: he finds true ornamental value and laudable devotion but points out that the Indigenous people needed help to correctly build the altars (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. I, p. 95)⁴ and that the "natural beauty" of the flowers and herbs that covered the blankets on the processional ground made up for their "lack" of skills (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. I, p. 96). Apart from the fact that they were produced and erected exclusively by Indigenous people and that they were assembled with silver, textile, and vegetable pieces, Arzáns only offers superficial information on these *arcos de mano*. The flowers and herbs aesthetically appraised, for example, are not recognized as symbols of life and fertility, as observed by ethnographic studies (Condarco Castellón, 2019, pp. 43-44).

Perhaps the aspect most evidently expressed by the chronicler is that regarding the high expenses incurred by the Indigenous people on religious occasions (e.g., Arzáns, 1965, Vol. II, p. 331). The topic of expense is important, as it provoked big debates within viceregal institutions on how much should be paid for feasts or priestly perquisites, along with whether to promote or limit Indigenous brotherhoods and festivities (Celestino; Meyers, 1981, p. 134). *Cofradías*, *fiestas*, and *cargos* offered colonially accepted social structures through which to reproduce a “prestige economy,” which seems to have been adapted from pre-Hispanic models of reciprocity and redistribution of resources (Celestino; Meyers, 1981, p. 110; Hidalgo; Castro, 2014, p. 633). Arzáns is clear in differentiating expenses when he describes the entrance of Viceroy Morcillo, a celebration financed mainly by the town council, whereas the silver arches were manufactured by the “indias fruteras y tenderas.” (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, p. 47). For the reception of the image of Nuestra Señora la Peregrina in 1732, the inhabitants of the Villa were ordered to decorate “from the ceiling to the ground” the eleven blocks through which the procession would pass. The Indigenous vendor women were again the ones who filled the streets with “arches of wrought silver, narrowing them in such a way that it caused admiration to see the infinity of this rich metal.” (Arzáns, 1965, Vol. III, p. 339)⁵. The collective agency of these women is noteworthy as an economically important guild in the city, materially expressed in an ephemeral architecture whose origin comes from pre-Hispanic times, as we will observe in what follows. Although the transcultural intertwining of these objects goes beyond a distinct separation of European versus Andean elements, we believe that the *arcos de mano* described throughout Arzáns’ work are ontologically related to an Andean concept of these architectural structures.

PRE-HISPANIC ARCHES

In *Historia del nuevo mundo* (1653), the Jesuit Bernabé Cobo reports on the use of ephemeral arches among the Incas. One example is the bestowal of the royal insignia on the Inca prince Sinchi Roca, who traveled to Cuzco on a road decorated with flower arches. The prince, his parents, and the priest were carried on palanquins, surrounded by dancers and musicians (Cobo, 1892, p. 129). Elsewhere, Cobo writes of Mama Roncay, chosen to become the principal wife of the 8th Inca ruler Viracocha, on her way to Cuzco (1892, Tomo III, p. 154). The noble maiden was also brought on a palanquin going through “aparatos de arcos que se pusieron por todo el camino cubiertos de flores y paños finos, dan-

zas, cantares y todas muestras de alegría.” This description is similar to those of Arzáns, combining flowers and textiles with dance, music, and smells. This also applies to one of the earliest chroniclers, Pedro Cieza de León (1518-1554), who writes of golden arches stretched over the Inca ruler’s palanquin and draped with cloths so that he could hide behind them (2005, p. 344).

Similar to Europe, ephemeral arches were used to escort, venerate, and ostentatiously stage Inca rulers and their relatives. They were erected on the occasion of certain ceremonies and were always associated with performative practices of movement: processions, parades, arrivals, and farewells.

The motif of the arch with figures arranged underneath is widespread in Andean visual culture, especially in the form of a rainbow. Since pre-Inca times, visual traditions on ceramics, stone, wood, and textiles show the rainbow as an important element in cosmological and religious thought. This is crucial to understand the history and function of ephemeral arches, as well as their performative activation as a transcultural phenomenon of the Andean region.

One of the most important pre-Inca representations of the rainbow is found in Chan Chan, the capital of the Chimú Empire, which extended along the northern coast of Peru from ca. 900/1000 to ca. 1400 AD (Fig. 5). It is part of a bas-relief placed on the outer wall of the dragon or rainbow sanctuary (*waka del arco iris, waka del dragón*) (Jackson, 2004, p. 302).

Figure 5: Wall of the rainbow-sanctuary in Chan Chan, Peru.

Source: Wikimedia Commons: Huaca Arco Iris
Archaeological site (wall). Author: AgainErik (07.31.2023).



The motif, repeated several times with slight variations, shows a rainbow with waves on its upper side, two figures within, a double-headed snake below, and two animal heads, presumably pumas, at the ends. The relief refers with some certainty to the mythical connection between rainbow and water – two symbols of fertility (Cummins, 2002, p. 265).

The rainbow was also worshipped by the Incas. Chronicles tell of a room within Cuzco's *Coricancha* dedicated to the rainbow (*chuycu*, in Quechua). According to Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, its image, painted on a gold plate, stretched the entire length of the room (2006 [1609], pp. 39-40). Guaman Poma stresses the performative effects of the temple, among them the "apparition" of the rainbow: "[...] en el templo de Curi Cancha, que todas las paredes alto y bajo estaua uarnecida de oro finícimo y en lo alto del techo estaua colgado muchos cristales y a los dos lados dos leones apuntando el sol. [...] [E]ntrauan el uiento del soplo y salía un arco que ellos les llaman cuychi [arco iris]. Y allí en medio se ponía el Ynga, hincado de rodillas, puesta las manos, el rostro al sol y a la ymagen del sol y decía su oración" (1615/1616, fs. 262 [264], 263 [265]).

Like most sacralized natural phenomena of the Andean cosmos, the rainbow was considered an entity endowed with its own subjectivity. It was ascribed an ambivalent character: dangerous to look at, but closely related to water and fertility. To avoid serious consequences, certain behaviors were required, such as covering one's mouth to hide one's teeth, which would otherwise become consumed and rotten (Garcilaso de la Vega, 2006 [1609], p. 40). Guaman Poma mentions the "rain with sun disease," named after the rainbow *chirapa uncu* (1615/1616, f. 280 [282]). Martín de Murúa (1590-1615) and Bernabé Cobo report that Indigenous people avoided looking at the rainbow or even pointing fingers at it because it brought death, diseases, or terrible disasters (Murúa, 2008 f. 293r; Cobo 1893, Tomo II, pp. 149-150). Murúa also points out that many people believed that the rainbow grew from a fountain (2008, f. 293r), confirming its relationship to water, as evident in the depiction from Chan Chan.

The Indigenous chronicler Joan de Santacruz Pachacuti Yamqui (1613) visualizes the rainbow in his famous representation of the Inca cosmos as part of the male hemisphere. He describes it as a positive and identity-forming element that was part of the Inca myth of origin. The first Inca ruler Manco Capac, on his migration from Lake Titicaca to Cuzco, went to a high mountain,⁶ where two of his brothers had turned to stone. A rainbow rose beside him and above it another rainbow, so that Manco Capac stood between the

two arches. Considering them a sign of prosperity and victory of the Incas, he sang with joy (Santacruz Pachacuti Yamqui, 1879, p. 241). The rainbow here is a sign of the transition to a new age in which the “primitive” Incas became rulers and bearers of culture. Its form symbolizes the link between times and spaces, as well as a bridge between the waters of the earth and the sky (Cereceda, 1987, p. 214).

A motif closely related to the rainbow is that of the double-headed serpent, found in the relief from Chan Chan, but also in numerous colonial-era representations. The association between snakes and rainbows may be based on the notion that rainbows are snakes that rise from springs when it begins to rain (Cummins, 2002, p. 265). At the same time, the snake motif was an Inca insignia of rulership. Like the images of the sun and moon, it was part of the Inca’s public display when he traveled the territories of his empire in his gold-bound, gem-studded palanquin (Cieza de Leon, 2005, p. 344).

During the *Conquista*, the motif of the rainbow lined with two snakes became the symbol of rulership that adorned the banners of the Incas. A variant of this was the rainbow that grew from two torn snake mouths. After the implementation of the Spanish colonial regime, certain rights and privileges were granted to the new Inca nobility of Cuzco, especially to the members of those kinship groups that traced their lineage to one of the twelve rulers of the Inca dynasty (*kurakakuna*). They appropriated the rainbow and snake motif, originally reserved for the Inca himself (Cummins, 1991, p. 219), for their coats of arms, and as an essential part of the elite insignia with which they depicted themselves (Gisbert, 2004, pp. 157 ff, esp. 168-169; fig. 177, 201, 205, 207).

In several representations of the Corpus Christi series, the rainbow is part of the headdress of Indigenous authorities, as in the case of the standard bearers of the parishes of Santiago, San Sebastián, San Cristóbal and the Hospital de Naturales. It is also present in the painting “Cofradías de Santa Rosa de Lima y La Linda” (1680), analyzed above (Fig. 1). In the center of the representation, a man walks holding a white cloth with a headdress, as worn by the Inca rulers. It consists of a headband (*llawt'u*) to which a plate is attached (*tupaqochor*), decorated with geometric patterns (*tocapu*). Attached to this is the red forehead pompon (*mascapaycha*), the most important symbol of the Inca ruler. Attached above the *tupaqochor* is the *suntur pawqar*, an arrangement of feathers, flowers, and a rainbow – in other cases, pennants and animal figures were also incorporated (Dean, 1999, pp. 128-132; Ramos, 2005, pp. 46-47; Wuffarden, 2020, pp. 149, 157 y 158).

The *suntur pawqar* (and the rainbow within it) survived as a sign of pres-

tige and of the *kurakakuna*'s legitimate claim to political power, and not only in painting. The motif was also reproduced in other representational and material forms, for example in a 17th-century processional tunic (quechua: *uncu*) made of camelid wool and decorated with silk and metal embroidery and glass beads (Mujica Pinilla, 2020, p. 199).

However, a look at another tradition shows that the rainbow also played an important role in other contexts of representation. For example, many of the ritual drinking vessels called *qeros*, handed down from the colonial period, are painted with scenes depicting a rainbow (Fig. 6). *Qeros*, which were mainly made of wood, were an indispensable part of drinking rituals performed in Andean societies on all social, political, and religious occasions (Cummins, 2002, p. 221 ff.). Drinking together represented an act of exchange and complementarity between two people or entities. It articulated and confirmed the ontological order of *yanantin*, based on dualistic principles such as up/down, male/female, and the complementary union of opposites. Accordingly, *qeros* were made in complementary pairs, with slight differences in size, color, and design (Martínez, 2018, p. 461; Flores Ochoa; Kuon Arce; Samanez Argumedo, 1998, p. 109).

Figure 6: Pair of colonial *qeros* – *yanantin*, displaying the Inca-Coya-motif. Source: Brooklyn Museum BM 64.210.2 y 1993.2. Photo courtesy J. L. Martínez, Proyecto Fondecyt 1130431.



Despite being sanctioned by the Spaniards, drinking rituals remained widespread after the *Conquista* (Martínez, 2012, p. 187) and continue to be part

of social and ritual practices to the present day. Colonial-period drinking cups have a rich pictorial inventory that, in contrast to Incan *qeros*, is strongly figurative. In several respects, they articulate transcultural knowledge, revealing Indigenous perspectives on pre-Hispanic and colonial history, mythology, culture, and everyday life. In doing so, they employ a hybrid visual language that combines figurative and geometric elements and draws on Andean concepts of time and space in arranging the pictorial elements on the surface. Beyond this, the objects themselves embody the principle of *yanantin* in their context of production and use (Martínez, 2018).

The rainbow motif is common on *qeros* throughout much of the colonial period, usually placed on the upper rim of the vessels as two rainbows springing from the heads of felines. In the 18th century, the “Inca-Coya motif” was particularly popular. It shows within the arches, a pair of figures consisting of either a man and a woman, or single male and female figures. Men and women are facing each other, with the men depicted as pre-Hispanic warriors or as Inca, and the women (*coya*) with traditional outfits, holding flowers (*kantuta*) (Cummins, 2002, p. 262; Martínez, 2012, p. 183).

As in the *suntur pawqar* from Cuzco, the rainbow appears here as a sign of Indigenous authority. Like coats of arms or paintings, *qeros* served to legitimize the prominent social position of Indigenous elites within colonial society. On them, the rainbow symbolized not the authority of the Inca ruler himself, but that of his descendants, the *kurakakuna*, who were part of the colonial ruling apparatus (Cummins, 1991, pp. 218-219). They assumed a mediating function between the Spanish rulers and the mass of Indigenous people, similar to the symbolic role of the rainbow connecting the powers of the inner world with heaven (Pillsbury, 2020, p. 128).

Although the contents and their figurative representation may have been similar, *qeros* nevertheless communicated a different message than the paintings on canvas. The images on *qeros* were generic in nature and, unlike the depictions of the *kurakakuna* on the paintings from Cuzco, did not represent individuals. They cannot be considered independently of the object that functioned as a screen; therefore, they activated memory in Andean contexts through the conjunction of meaning and use. They contributed significantly to the construction and dissemination of a *new* colonial Andean memory of the Inca past and became media of reflection on the colonial situation of the Indigenous people (Martínez, 2018, p. 455).

The question now arises as to how we can tie back the motif of the rainbow, so significant for Andean ontology, to the ephemeral arches that decorated the

streets of colonial cities during religious and secular feasts. What conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between these phenomena, and how can we describe the transcultural dynamics articulated through material culture?

In order to further explore the ontology of ephemeral arches in the southern Andean region and complement colonial-era sources, a final digression is necessary. Numerous examples from urban and rural spaces in the Bolivian highlands show that ephemeral arches continue to be part of the cultural repertoire of Indigenous communities. In the following analysis, we will examine Aymara *arkus* to demonstrate that both the materiality of these objects and their meanings are embedded in local ontologies that already characterized the production and use of colonial and pre-Hispanic ephemeral arches.

CONTEMPORARY AYMARA ARKUS

Festive arches, or *arkus*, continue to thrive in present-day festivities of the Aymara people. These are used to solemnly honor and greet religious and civil dignitaries, as well as images of virgins and saints carried in processions. They consist of two vertical wooden bars anchored in the ground, connected by a horizontal stick. These are wrapped with textiles and adorned with *aguayos* (quadrangular pieces of woven cloth with stripes of different colors and widths), to which silver objects, taxidermied or toy animals, and other significant objects are attached, depending on the occasion and location (Condarco Castellón, 2019, p. 45).

The arches articulate local social structures. In the case of patron feasts, they are commissioned annually by the *pasantes* – a couple of commoners, husband and wife, who organize and finance the saint's festivities of the year – and built by the communities that form part of each *ayllu*. The structures are located in defined positions of the town's public space, usually in the churchyard or near the church (Condarco Castellón, 2019, p. 45). In religious feasts, the procession passes by each arch or assemblage of arches, with the priest stopping to bless each community⁷. What can we learn about the transcultural society of Viceroyal America from these present-day arches? Although much has changed, continuities are astonishing.

We will illustrate this through a series of *arkus* from the Bolivian highland Province of Carangas, erected for the celebrations that marked the inauguration and consecration of six renovated chapels on November 19, 2010⁸. The restored buildings all belonged to the main parish of Curahuara de Carangas. The ceremonies were attended by the members of the communities, the local

and regional Indigenous authorities, the parish priest, the bishop and political authorities of Oruro, the representative in charge of the U.S. Embassy, which had financed the project, the architects in charge, and numerous visitors.

Our first examples are two arches from Rosapata, a settlement of llama farmers that forms a small hamlet (*estancia*), located northwest from Curahuara, a few kilometers away from the main road. Its chapel is built on a hill, which is considered a *wak'a*, a sacred place⁹, and surrounded by a *vía crucis* with several small altars. The first arch erected on this day by the community spans the entrance to the churchyard (Fig. 7). It contains all of the material elements described by Arzáns, from textiles to silver objects, including the fragrant leafy branches¹⁰.

Figure 7: Festive *arku* at the entrance of the churchyard in Rosapata de Carangas, Bolivia, 2013. Photo: A. Windus.



Two *aguayos* hang over the horizontal bar. A metal bull miniature, possibly silver, is fixed at the center. Underneath is an arrangement of objects: a stuffed armadillo placed on top, a llama fetus (*sullu*), a *chuspa* (traditional pouch for carrying coca leaves, worn by Indigenous authorities), and a *pututu* (wind instrument, in this case made of a bull's horn). A taxidermied wild cat (*titi*) on the left and a stuffed cub or fetus of a vicuña on the right look towards the center. The arches' columns are wrapped with textiles and decorated with branches, silver spoons, *chuspas*, and chinaware. Balloons and paper streamers emphasize the structure's ritual character.

Figure 8: Festive *arku* in Rosapata de Carangas, Bolivia, 2013. Photo: J. Matas Musso.

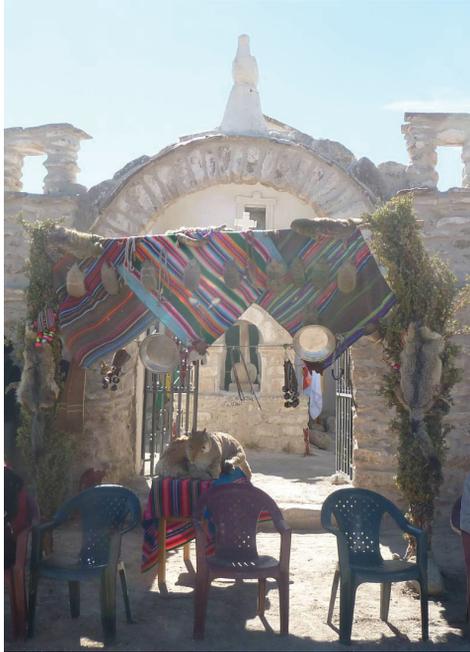


The second arch (Fig. 8) has a semicircular shape and is completely wrapped with *aguayos*. *Tupus* (needles shaped like spoons) and silver spoons stress its curve. A mirror is placed in its central axis, a bull figurine, a brass or silver processional cross, and two armadillos are arranged symmetrically at the sides. *Chuspas* are applied to the vertical bars.

The animals attached to the arches are native to the region. With the exception of the bull and the llama, which belong to the group of domesticated animals (*uywa*), all the others are wild animals – in Aymara, *sallqa*. (Grebe, 1984, pp. 337-338). The symmetrical positioning of the animals on the rectangular arch is striking. While domestic animals and human artifacts are arranged at the center, the two wild animals frame the ensemble at the sides. This arrangement connects domesticated and wild animals in a symmetric, complementary system.

The arch built for the same occasion in front of the church of Sajama (Fig. 9) is similar to those from Rosapata.

Figure 9: Festive *arku* in Sajama, Bolivia, 2013. Photo: A. Windus.



Three *aguayos* are draped over its horizontal bar. In the upper area, directly on the bar, hangs a *pututu*, and at each corner are animal skins attached (presumably wild cats/*titi*). Directly below the bar, to the right and left of the skins, are two small llama figures facing each other. Their shape is reminiscent of Inca figurines (*illa*) used as offerings in significant rituals (e.g., the sacrifice of children, *capacocha*). The ritual use of *illas*¹¹ is common among present-day Aymaras, especially for marking the llamas (*señalakuy*) in February (Lecoq; Fidel, 2003). They serve as lucky charms to encourage animal reproduction (Allen, 2016, p. 419); yet, they are more than symbols – they do not represent but present (Bugallo, 2022, p. 99). Inherent in them is the vital force (*enqa*) of the animals, which is a prerequisite for the health and fertility of the herd and thus for the prosperity of the people who live in a reciprocal relationship with their animals. The *enqa* must be constantly renewed through ritual practices. If the objects lose their generative power, they can turn against the owner and his animals (Lecoq; Fidel, 2003, p. 14). In addition, certain animals of the herd are also considered *illa*, because of their exceptional beauty and size or their particularly beautiful,

long wool. They have a special, sacralized status and may not be sold or slaughtered until their natural death (Bugallo, 2016, pp. 141-142).

Despite their formal similarity, the *illas* studied in the research literature differ from the figures on the *arkus*. Unlike the *illas* used in agricultural rituals, which are wrapped in woven cloth or *chuspas* (Bugallo, 2022), seen only by a few individuals, the llamas and bulls on the *arkus* from Rosapata are arranged for everyone to see. However, the *arku* fulfills a similar function as the *mesas* (“tables”) used in ritual offerings: they bring together a variety of significant and animated objects and substances activated by performative action, and thus renew the relationship of the human and non-human members of the ontological community. In this way, they guarantee luck and prosperity for all – an ideal deeply rooted in Andean ontology. This may apply to the knitted llama hung from the central cloth of Sajama’s arch, on which are sewn many armadillos (*quirquincho*). On a table below the arch are two stuffed animals: a puma and a vicuña. Furthermore, there are silver objects (spoons, plates, and two chalices), *chuspas*, a *pututu*, as well as several ropes attached, fundamental elements in the llama economy of Sajama.

The variety of materials in which animals are present in all three arches is conspicuous. They appear as clay, wool, and metal miniatures, and as dried, skinned, stuffed, or otherwise preserved animal bodies. On the arches, they undoubtedly occupy a prominent position, which we believe is related to their role in Aymara ontology. We already mentioned that animals are not essentially different from humans but are in a relationship with them as subjects. Oral culture tells us that *sallqa* in an earlier age were still “people,” which means they could speak and were equal to humans (Arnold; Yapita, 2014, p. 178; Jemio, 2011, p. 43 ff.). This is also true of the high mountains that wandered around in mythological times and are still revered today as the most powerful deified entities (Jemio, 2009, pp. 153-155). Humans, natural elements, and animals were part of a wide range of beings, some of them considered as sacred or tutelary beings that interact with each other from their own perspectives (Bugallo, 2022). In this coexistence, the boundaries and transitions between humans, animals, and substances are fluent, and transmutations between them are possible – for example, from animal to human and vice versa (Dean, 2014, pp. 299, 303).

Iconography shows that this inclusion of humans and animals in one all-encompassing category of being can be traced back in the southern Andean region to the early cultural centers of the region, such as Tiwanaku (ca. 500 to 1100 A.D.) (Villanueva 2022). Some of the displayed animals are associated

until today to particular areas of Andean ontology, usually related to agricultural and fertility rites. Stuffed wild cats are important for pastoral rituals because they connect humans with the almighty spirits of the mountains (*mallku*) and are the guardians of wildlife. They are given offerings of coca leaves, liquor, and sugar (Grebe, 1989-1990, pp. 42-43). Dried wild cats that are draped on textiles in ritual contexts (e.g., fertility rites for livestock) are called *Qullqi Jaesiri* or “llamador de plata” (“silver caller”) (Van den Berg, 1985, p. 159). The armadillo, which is very common in the area, is associated with Mother Earth (*Pachamama*) because it dwells underground. It is linked with reciprocity and economic exchange, considered a good luck bringer in selling, buying, and bartering (Grebe, 1989-1990, pp. 44-45; Horta et al., 2023, pp. 20-21).

Another essential group of objects displayed on Aymara *arkus* are silver artifacts. In early Andean cultures, silver had important ritual functions and symbolic meanings. The substance belonged to the feminine sphere and was associated with the moon, Mother Earth, and the waters of lakes and lagoons (Morssink, 1999, p. 49). It was and still is a symbol of abundance, prosperity, and good fortune that refers to the elevated social and economic status of its owner. Among the Incas, only the ruler and the deities were allowed to adorn themselves with silver objects. Here we find a parallel to Christian-European material hierarchies, in which silver represented power, wealth, and the “splendor of God” (Nicklisch, 2013, p. 183 ff.).

Of particular interest among silver objects are *tupus* and spoons. The morphological similarity between them suggests that spoons substituted *tupus* – just as chinaware plates replaced silver plates when these were not available. In addition to their function as pins to hold women’s shoulder cloths (*lliclla*), *tupus* already had a ritual significance among the Inca, used as offerings to ancestors, gods, and *wakas*. *Tupus* are considered a symbol of femininity. However, in two of the three *arkus* here analyzed (Figs. 7 and 9), they are arranged in pairs, expressing the Andean principle of duality *yanantin*.

Compared to the *arkus* from Rosapata and Sajama, Indigenous festival arches in urban contexts are dominated by silver objects. On important religious feasts, such as Carnival in Oruro, San Bartolomé in Potosí, or Virgen de Guadalupe in Sucre, silver objects are displayed in exuberant quantities on arches and on *cargamentos* (vehicles covered with textiles to which objects are attached) – to the glory and honor of the saints, the owners who provide these objects for the procession, and the brotherhoods that make these arrangements. Even in a regional center like Santiago de Andamarca (Carangas), silver objects can dominate the *arkus*, such as for the patronal feast for Santiago

Apóstol (Tata Santiago) (Fig. 4). Can we conclude from this significant absence of other ritual objects that urban arches are to be understood less as offerings and more as representational structures? Or rather does this exhibit differences of access to materials in rural and urban contexts? A more detailed study of urban *arkus* could provide more answers, but what is certain is that the *arkus*' ritual, symbolic, and representative functions vary in different settings, directly influenced by their materialities. Thus, it is common in present-day feasts to decorate festive cars and arches with toy animals, which might offer modern aesthetic decisions within continual transcultural processes.

A final comment regarding textiles is fundamental because of their importance both in triumphal arches of European origin and of Indigenous manufacture. In the first, as we saw with Arzáns, the “precious fabrics, expensive embroidery and rich silks” would adorn the structure, framing or replacing painted images, expressing the efforts and expenses of the feast. In the latter, textiles served as a fundamental vehicle for the expression of complex ideas. As we appreciate in contemporary *arkus*, *aguayo*-cloths include a specific and highly valued colored pattern, called *k'isa*. It consists of a group of three to six woven lines in a “sweet” or “soft” (which are the etymological meanings of the word *k'isa*) continuity of shades, with the central strip as the darkest or lightest of the pattern (Cereceda, 1987, p. 188). This technique of gradual chromaticity has been the subject of anthropological research since the 1970s, starting with Cereceda's work on the semiology of Andean textiles of Isluga (northern Chile), where her informants cite the merging color tones of the rainbow as their model (1987, pp. 187-188, 212-215). Some years later, Dransart invokes Isluga weavers who refer to rising and falling tonal sequences as inspiration, understanding the *k'isa* as a “textile equivalent to what, in musical terms, would be called a ‘microtonal rising’” (Dransart, 2016). Arnold and Espejo, on the other hand, cite weavers from the Lake Titicaca region who emphasize the connection between *k'isa* and the reflections of color and light on the surface of the lake (2012, p. 254). We do not want to discuss these different interpretations in detail; rather, we highlight the ontological significance of *aguayos* and their designs, which all four authors emphasize.

But not only the design of the *aguayos* is significant; it is also the way the cloths are used in the manufacture of the *arkus*. They serve as a base for attaching objects – a function that corresponds to that of the ritual cloths (*unkhuña*) used by Aymara religious specialists (*yatiri*) as *mesas*, or altars (Lecoq; Fidel, 2003, p. 33). Textiles act here as mediators and interfaces between the objects, their properties, materiality, and related ontological concepts (Phipps, 2017, p.

168), a purpose fulfilled by textiles since pre-Hispanic times, as has been documented by archaeological and ethno-historical research.

Textiles also play a central role in the aforementioned *señalakuy*, e.g., in the ritual of “dressing” llamas with colored pompons, ribbons, etc. (Lecoq; Fidel, 2003, p. 19). It is one of a set of practices by which the subject status of animals and the relationship between the animal and its owner or family is established (Bugallo, 2022). Other textiles such as *q'epis*, large woven cloths often passed within families from father to progenitor, are also used during the *señalakuy* as bundles (*bultos*), for storing all the necessary ritual objects (Lecoq; Fidel, 2003, p. 18; Bugallo, 2022, p. 97). The technique of wrapping, enclosing, and storing is not only due to practical reasons but is also embedded in Andean logics of mutual creation and reproduction. The concept of the *bulto* establishes a relationship between the wrapping and the contents, each of which is attributed spiritual power in order to promote breeding spaces (Bugallo, 2022, p. 99).

A similar function is observed in the *chuspas*, a last group of important textile objects to be mentioned. These pouches, primarily used to store coca leaves, are an indispensable part of rituals and ceremonies and have been documented in the Andean region as far back as pre-Incan times (Sharratt, 2014). They are worn by men and have been part of the prescribed clothing of Indigenous authorities in the Carangas region up to the present. Besides coca leaves, they can also contain *illas* or animal substances such as wool or pieces of the ears, which play a role in the rituals of the *señalakuy* (Bugallo, 2022, p. 99). Thus, they are also part of the network of ontological relationships between entities and substances.

From these concepts, which we unfortunately cannot elaborate here, it can be concluded that the wrapping of the *arku* with woven textiles cannot be reduced to aesthetic criteria. It is a practice applied in ritual contexts and serves to relate the various objects arranged together in the *arkus*. These ephemeral arches are therefore analogous to Andean offerings, whose construction “involves a careful choreography of meaningful and animate materials” and whose components “are brought together from a wide range of environments and contexts in order to influence the animate forces of the material world” (Sillar, 2016, pp. 448-450). Offerings such as *mesas* and *arkus* are part of the rituals to ensure the mutual creation and renewal of the vital forces of all human and non-human beings on Earth, and thus the prosperity of the entire ontological community.

CONCLUSION

Our journey through the history of ephemeral festive arches in pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary southern Andes illustrates that these objects have undergone transcultural appropriations in a variety of ways. This is likely due to the fact that the arch, as a motif embedded in performative practices, was highly symbolic in both European and Indigenous ontologies. In early modern Europe as well as in Andean cultures, arches not only represented the power, glory, and prestige of religious and secular dignitaries, but also, in the act of walking through them, those authorized to do so also affirmed and renewed their status. While European arches, as depicted in the images of the Corpus Christi series and in Pérez Holguín's Entry of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo, as well as in Arzáns' chronicle, developed their effect primarily through the principle of representation, which is so powerful in European thought, their function in Andean contexts is more complex.

Iconographic analysis shows that the arch motif was rooted in Andean mythology. The depictions of the rainbow on archaeological remains, *qeros*, and Inca ruler insignia provide information about the complex relationships of humans to all the other, non-human entities that populated the earth in mythological times. The co-existence of all these "persons" had to be secured through rituals and certain behaviors to guarantee the well-being and prosperity of the whole ontological community. At the same time, the rainbow's inclusion in *qeros* and ruler's headdresses during the colonial period shows that the Indigenous elites, established as a powerful group within viceregal society, appropriated the European principle of representation and harnessed it for their own purposes.

Arzáns describes two distinct types of arches which held what seems to be a differentiated ontological status: the ones of European origin offered a material basis for iconographical ideas, while those manufactured exclusively by the Indigenous population were just visually attractive. These were, in fact, not represented in the images of the time. The connections we have followed in order to study the pre-Hispanic history of these architectural elements show that they served as objects of memory, allowing continuities of Andean symbolic meanings of the arch motif.

The case studies of festive arches from Carangas show that these continue to exist to the present day. They appropriate the motif by using local materials rooted in the culture of the llama economy of the Andean highlands, whose ritual character has few similarities with the representational function of

European festive arches. Rather, the arrangements resemble ritual offerings that aspire to the mutual creation, renewal, and reproduction of all human and non-human beings – a major feature of Andean ontology. The leap to the present and the ethnographic analysis of the objects allow us to retrospectively disrupt the hegemony of images and texts shaped by European patterns of thought and to open up new perspectives on these transcultural objects. The example also shows that transculturation is an extremely heterogeneous process and always involves the simultaneity of different appropriations.

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NOTES

¹ The arches “se fabricaron con indecible presteza aunque grandísima fatiga por la brevedad del tiempo, que no lo dio más de a suplir la falta de pincel para fingir los jaspes y mármoles, el oro y colores, con vestirlos de preciosas telas, costosos bordados y ricas sedas.”

² “[...] fábricas de las indias fruteras y tenderas que quisieron recibir a su excelencia ilustrísima con ellos, y como estaban todos cubiertos de tanta variedad de piezas de plata, cintas y ricas telas, formaban muy agradable vista.”

³ “Cubrióse el suelo por todo el espacio que había de andar la procesión de ricas mantas de

lana y algodón que dieron los indios afectuosamente, y de más de 30 y 40 leguas trajo su devoción en breves días infinidad de varias flores y yerbas olorosas para cubrir aquellas alfombras para que la natural hermosura del campo supliese la falta que hicieron las manos en su obra...”

⁴ “[...] en que para su buena disposición, concurrió la buena diligencia y esmero de sus curas, caciques, alcaldes y la demás nobleza Indiana.”

⁵ “Las indias tenderas y gateras pusieron en toda la distancia arcos de plata labrada, estrechándolos de modo que causó admiración ver la infinidad de marcos de este rico metal que se manifestaban.”

⁶ The mountain referred to is Huanacauri, an important sanctuary (*wak'a*) outside Cuzco (Cummins, 2002, p. 263).

⁷ Personal communication with the anthropologist Gabriela Behoteguy, January 11th, 2023.

⁸ Juchuzuma, Lerco, Rosapata, Lagunas, Sajama and Tomarapi.

⁹ Personal communication with the architect Mariano Iriarte, November 19th, 2010.

¹⁰ Nevertheless, Arzáns has no description of animals, which might be because throughout the centuries there was a special concern by the Spanish authorities to prevent the depiction of animals in religious and ritual contexts. They were considered a feature of the so-called idolatry beliefs and practices.

¹¹ Other terms for miniatures made of stone, metal, wood, or clay are *enqaychu* and *conopa*. We cannot go into the characteristics of the individual object groups, which, incidentally, cannot always be clearly distinguished. For the purpose of simplicity, we summarize figures of this type under the term *illa*.

