

From Myth to Reality: Performing the Devil and Pachamama in the Carnival of Humahuaca

Abstract

The Carnival of Humahuaca, Jujuy, Argentina infuses indigenous customs and traditions with ecclesiastical practices and rhetoric. In this cultural performance the inhabitants project the devil from local myth to reality, and ask the mother earth goddess to sanctify the events with a ritualized ceremony of unearthing and burying. The structure of the Catholic Church provides an arena for the irony and inversion of transgressions, frustrations, and cultural expressions.

I address three reasons for the role of the devil and the earth mother in the Carnival of Humahuaca. First, the widespread myth of the devil and the earth mother transformed into lived reality; second, the ways the devil, projected from local myth to reality, manifests in the cultural performances of carnival; and third, how Andean and Spanish notions of land, god, and community become reflected and practiced in carnival. Moreover, it provides new insights, based on new observations, addressing carnival, religion, and syncretism in the Northwest of Argentina, and it enriches literature recognizing cultural performances, adding to the dearth of works addressing traditional customs and festivals in the Northwest of Argentina.

Even though, the Carnival of Humahuaca shares many salient similarities with the Carnival of Oruro, the differences are striking. Like Oruro, the mother earth goddess and the devil figure into carnivalesque rituals. Unlike Oruro, there is greater participation from all facets of society; people of all backgrounds, local and tourists, partake equally in the festivities by joining troupes.