

# **Creating place-based Waldorf festivals**

## **An ethnographic study of festivals in two non-European Waldorf schools**

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**ABSTRACT.** Waldorf Schools, in their history started out as schools, located in European countries with a strong Christian heritage. However, almost one hundred years later there are schools in every inhabited continent of the world. These schools have mainly been founded with European support concerning finances, materials and curricular contents. In a considerable amount of cases those European Waldorf contents and Waldorf traditions have been exported to far away countries, often not only far away concerning space and nature but also concerning culture and religion. This ethnographic study investigates the processes that two schools in two continents have undergone in overcoming the influences of Eurocentric Waldorf festival traditions. It studies how they reconceptualised those traditions to then develop place based new forms of celebrating Waldorf annual festivals. The findings are related to literature from sociology, ritual theory, Indigenous Knowledge, Anthroposophy and to related studies in Waldorf contexts from the Middle East, Taiwan, South Africa, Germany and New Zealand. It offers profound insights into the school life and cultural surrounding of two quite different and unique Waldorf schools, Kusi Kawsay in Peru and Nairobi Waldorf School in Kenya.

*Keywords:* Waldorf festivals, eurocentrism, thinking with the cycle of the year, festival creation, nature observation.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG.** Waldorfschulen begannen einst als europäische Schulen mit stark christlichem Hintergrund. Hundert Jahre später gibt es Schulen in jedem bewohnten Gebiet der Erde. Sie sind oft gegründet worden hauptsächlich mit europäischer Unterstützung betreffend Finanzierung, Materialien und Lehrplaninhalten. In vielen Fällen sind diese europäischen Waldorfflehrplaninhalte und Waldorftraditionen in geographisch weit entfernte Länder gebracht worden, - oft weit entfernt nicht nur bezogen auf den geographischen Raum und die lokale Natur, sondern auch bezogen auf die lokale Kultur und Religion. Diese ethnographische Studie untersucht die Prozesse, wie zwei Schulen auf zwei Kontinenten die eurozentrischen Traditionen typischer Waldorfjahresfeste überwunden haben. Sie untersucht, wie diese Traditionen rekonzeptualisiert wurden, um neue, an den lokalen Gegebenheiten orientierte Waldorfjahresfeste zu entwickeln. Die Forschungsergebnisse sind in Bezug gesetzt worden zu Literatur aus Soziologie, Ritualtheorie, Indigenes Wissen, Anthroposophie und zu Studien im Waldorfkontext im mittleren Osten, Taiwan, Südafrika, Deutschland und Neuseeland. Die Studie zeigt dabei einen fundierten Einblick in das Schulleben und die kulturelle Umgebung der zwei sehr verschiedenen und einzigartigen Waldorfschulen Kusi Kawsay in Peru und Nairobi Waldorfschule in Kenia.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Jahresfeste in der Waldorfpädagogik, Eurozentrismus, Festgestaltung, Jahresrhythmen, Naturbeobachtung

## Introduction – The Area of Research

A discussion is taking place within the Waldorf academy concerning if and to what degree the international Waldorf movement has overcome an inherent danger of Eurocentrism (Boland, 2015). Almost 100 years ago, Waldorf Schools started out as schools with a strong Christian heritage, located in European countries. Today, there are schools on every inhabited continent of the world. Many of these schools were founded with European support concerning finances, materials, teacher training and curricular content. The latter also included Eurocentric Waldorf content and corresponding Waldorf traditions. These were often directly adopted rather than adapted or metamorphosed to match the local situation. In addition to traditional Waldorf content, this transfer also included traditional European Waldorf festivals, although local nature and seasons, as well as culture, often diverged considerably from those of their European origin.

In an ethnographic study, conducted as part of a master's thesis at the Rudolf Steiner University College in Oslo, I have explored the processes that two schools on two different continents underwent in order to overcome Eurocentric Waldorf festival traditions. In this paper, using some parts of my related texts, I will describe the reconceptualization of those festival traditions and the subsequent development of place-oriented new localized forms for the celebration of Waldorf festivals.

Both investigated schools are located south of the equator. One school – Kusi Kawsay – is situated in Pisac, in the Sacred Valley of Peru. It has an Indigenous Andean background. Its educational goals are geared towards raising indigenous childrens' knowledge and awareness, as well as their self-confidence, with regard to their history and culture. The other school, Nairobi Waldorf School – founded by Europeans – is situated in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. It serves a colourful multitude of children and their parents, from a widely diverse range of cultural and religious backgrounds, in a dedicated manner.

One important feature of an ethnographic study is the immersion of the research field in the social setting over a period of time. Thus, the researcher can thoroughly experience the social reality of the investigated community (Bryman, 2012). I was able to spend two weeks in Kusi Kawsay and three weeks in Nairobi Waldorf School. My immersion in the two schools had a considerable impact on me and on the outcome of my thesis. In this article I intend to share some vivid impressions of the everyday living conditions experienced in these two schools. I used the ethnographic tool of thick descriptions as „a vehicle for communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture“ (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.113). Besides observations in the field, I conducted qualitative interviews with experienced teachers in order to obtain answers to the research questions. A further goal of the study was to generate concepts for other non-European or religiously diverse Waldorf schools that might similarly aim at developing locally oriented annual festivals.

My findings suggest that the creation of new festivals in the schools took place within three areas, by way of a cultural, natural or traditional approach. The festivals in Nairobi Waldorf School were developed through the metamorphosis of traditional Waldorf festivals with a mainly Christian background by responding to the cultural needs of the multi-religious school community (cultural approach). The festivals in the kindergarten of Nairobi Waldorf School developed out of a process of close nature observation (nature-based approach). Kusi Kawsay festivals are new in relation to the types of festivals known in Western oriented or European Waldorf schools. However, in a true sense, they are ancient festivals drawing on archaic Andean wisdom and agricultural rituals, adapted to the possibilities and necessities of a contemporary indigenous school community and aiming at developing the indigenous students' self-esteem and free thinking (traditional approach). All three of these approaches offer possibilities for the development of place-oriented, locally contextualized Waldorf festivals.

## Festivals and Festival Creation – Aspects from Ritual Theory, Indigenous Knowledge and Anthroposophy

The reconceptualization of festivals and their subsequent realization posed theoretical questions. They ranged around the general background of festivals, the occasions in which they are celebrated, their components and

elements. For the question of components and elements of festivals, in addition to their possible effects on participants, I found some beneficial aspects in Ritual Theory.

Overcoming Eurocentric influences has been of concern in research areas where Western knowledge systems met with more holistic indigenous knowledge systems. It is a central issue in the field of indigenous knowledge.

The foundation of Waldorf education is anthroposophy. In search of an extended understanding of the subject, I studied Rudolf Steiner's perspectives related to festivals and festival creation. I concentrated mainly on a cycle of lectures where he presents a transreligious and global approach.

### ***Ritual Theory***

Ritual theory points out to rituals as possible elements of celebrating festivals. Many authors even consider rituals as being the main constituent elements of festivals (Bell, 1997; Durkheim, 2013; Quantz, 1999; Van Gennep, 1960). Recent scholars, like Bell (1997) and Grimes (2014), hold that it can be a legitimate and socially important process to develop new rituals in accordance with circumstances of individual place, time and needs. It can add up to a conscious elevation of human acts and interaction and can create esthetic and transforming orders of ritual elements (Grimes, 2014). Such rituals can culminate in an experience of superior meaning, especially when symbols, as carriers of values, are integrated in ritualistic performances, „thereby embedding values in webs of significance“ (Grimes, 2014, p. 319). They can create such strong feelings that participants might even label them as sacred, religious or spiritual (Grimes, 2014). Rappaport (2013) describes three levels of meaning in rituals, where he indicates *distinction* for low-order meaning, *similarity* for middle-order meaning and *unification* for high-order meaning. His description of the latter is especially interesting.

High-order meaning is grounded ... in the radical identification or unification of self with other. It is not ... intellectual but is, rather, experiential. ... High-order meaning seems to be experienced in intensities ranging from the mere imitation of being emotionally moved in ... the course of a ritual to those deep numinous experiences called 'mystical'. Those who have known it in its more intense forms may refer to it by ... phrases as 'The Experience of Being' (p.71).

The medium for experiencing high-order meaning, which can include even the cosmos and the divine, is participation. Rappaport's highest level of meaning indicates that ritual creation could represent a significant part of the development of new festivals in Waldorf schools, since one of the intentions in a Waldorf education is to recognize the spiritual aspects of life.

Further questions emerged in relation to the festivals celebrated in Kusi Kawsay. How can I gain cognitive as well as emotional access to those ancient festivals that, at first sight, seem so very different to our western consciousness? Is it possible to reach Rappaport's quoted level of high-order meaning of unification, or at least something similar in relation to these ancient festivals? To answer this question, I found helpful aspects in the concepts of indigenous knowledge.

### ***Indigenous Knowledge***

From the 1960s to the 1970s, a critical discussion evolved within many development aid projects, about the negative impact of development aid on the independence of the local populations (Schimpf-Herken, 1979). The western helpers, their academic counterparts and also the indigenous peoples, themselves, became aware of possibly negative aspects of development aid projects, destructive to the communities' mental, social and economic independence and to their ancient wisdom systems. This growing consciousness and discussion eventually led to extensive research in the field of indigenous knowledge (Hart, 2010; Huaman & Valdiviezo, 2014; Morrow, 2009).

One of the central notions critically scrutinised in the context of indigenous knowledge is the concept of Eurocentrism. The academic suppression of the indigenous peoples' knowledge had previously occurred in

all continents, where the white race had invaded and taken over the land and ways of life of the local peoples. Today, scholars with indigenous roots emphasize the heavy weight of dominating western knowledge systems and their reductionist pose of only accepting certain aspects of logic, reason and research as valuable scientific criteria, thus denying broader local ways of knowing (Dei, 2010; Maurial, 1999).

These broader ways of knowing are a typical feature of indigenous knowledge. They are related to individual locations or geographical spaces and their unique circumstances of climate and landscape, where specific human cultures have developed with encompassing knowledge systems (Dei, 2010; Hart, 2010). These comprehensive ways of knowing are characterized by a mutual connectedness between all visible and invisible beings of the specific place (Hart, 2010; Kawano, 2011). Some of their features are also described by using the concept of spirituality (Dei, 2010; Hart, 2010). Hart characterizes social reciprocity as one of the central values of indigenous knowledge, indicating an honouring of all parts of the universe and a giving-back to all forms of life. Reciprocity is a quality that indigenous people especially address via ceremonies and rituals (Hart, 2010). Coming from ritual theory, Bell (1997) explains that newly developed rituals always appropriate old and familiar elements and patterns from former rituals, adapting them to new purposes with possibly holistic objectives.

These rituals (and) celebrations ... not only express a concern for respecting and safeguarding the earth but also attempt to redefine the human and natural worlds as one interrelated community for whom recognition of its interdependence is intrinsic to the health of the whole (p. 237).

Bell is thus describing a quality which has belonged to indigenous societies ever since and which is also a concern of Waldorf education. Boland (2015) is aware of the importance of such an approach for the future of the endangered ecosystems of the earth. Coming from Waldorf education, he has performed a study with a group of Indigenous Maori students in New Zealand, intending to raise awareness for the possibilities of dialogical synergies between indigenous people and Waldorf education. Within the context of a real transformation of Eurocentric Waldorf contents and traditions, Boland (2014) uses the picture of „sticking wings on a caterpillar and calling it a butterfly“ (p.1). He touches the question of whether related changes are profound or superficial without the contents having gone through a real metamorphosis.

### ***Rudolf Steiner: Thinking with the cycle of the year***

In *The Cycle of the Year as Breathing Process of the Earth*, Steiner (1985) views annual festivals less in a Christian religious setting and more in a seasonal and global context. He describes how inner motives of the annual festivals in the northern hemisphere are coinciding with seasonal experiences. For example ‚resurrection‘, as part of Easter, coincides with the blossoming in spring after a cold winter. In these lectures, he also compares the earth’s rhythmical life with human physiological processes: on the one hand with those of sleeping and waking, and on the other with those of breathing. „It is not a breathing of air of which we speak, but the breathing in-and-out of forces, of which we can get a partial idea if we contemplate the plant-growth during the course of the year“ (Steiner, 1985, p.12). Furthermore, Steiner interrelates these two different areas of the earth’s breathing and wake-sleep processes. He later links those forces with the cosmic Christ-being, which has united with the fate of the earth in the Mystery of Golgatha in a global and transreligious sense. Steiner (1985) describes Christ as being an inseparable part of the inhalation/waking (autumn-winter) and exhalation/sleeping (spring-summer) processes of the earth.

He extends his perception to the metaphor of these forces wandering through the earth like a comet tail.

... while in the north the Earth-soul goes outward to the stars, and - so to speak - shows itself for spiritual perception like a comet-tail, reaching out to the sky, the Earth-soul at the same time in the other hemisphere is retiring into earth *and it is Christmas*. And vice versa, in the time when the Earth-soul retires into the earth here, on the other side the comet-tail is reaching out into the cosmos. This is occurring at the same time (Steiner, 1988, p. 107) [emphasis added].

Steiner is stating here that a cosmic connection between winter and Christmas exists. This can be interpreted in such a way that Christmas in the southern hemisphere does not coincide with Christmas in the northern

hemisphere, a possibility which has been a debated topic in anthroposophical circles for some decades (Anderson, 1993; Majoros, 2009; Suwelack, 1975). This question, of course, is an important issue for festival creation in Waldorf schools in the southern hemisphere (Majoros, 2009). Steiner (1985) further describes how people in ancient times lived with a different consciousness than today. They did not yet know our type of logical thinking but experienced nature in a dream-like holistic awareness. With regard to the process of festival creation, Steiner (1985) goes even further and suggests that contemporary festivals should be created out of a dynamic understanding of nature. He denominates this dynamic process „thinking with the cycle of the year“ (p. 40). In another moment, Steiner (1980a) uses a striking metaphor: „We have to learn to overcome the abstract perception of nature and reach a tangible cognition of nature. Our Christianity has to be broadened by being infused [...] with a sound paganism“ (Steiner, 1980a, p. 89). Paganism (German: Heidentum) in Steiner's time was a concept similar to the contemporary term 'indigenous knowledge'. Steiner's indication also points to the possibility of a dialogue with mutual benefit between the anthroposophic academy and indigenous knowledge.

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All translations from German were done by the author

### Processes of investigation

For this ethnographic study, I spent two weeks in the field in Kusi Kawsay and three in Nairobi Waldorf School. I took over professional tasks in the schools during my visits and became involved in the schools' life from the outset. I was included into the teachers' communities as a welcome colleague. These circumstances enhanced the immersion, a central feature of ethnographic participant observation (Murchison, 2010). In my study, I used thick descriptions as an ethnographic method for conveying to the reader a vivid and interesting picture of the ethnographic field (Geertz, 1973; Bryman, 2012). „Thick description is a vehicle for communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture“ (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.113). However, the largest share of the specific findings in both schools was acquired via semi-structured interviews. In Kusi Kawsay, I participated in a festival on the first morning of my arrival, and directly afterwards I was informally but extensively explained details of the world view and background of the Andean Cosmovision. Both experiences laid the foundation for a fruitful and dense research process during the two weeks.

In Nairobi Waldorf School, my three week stay also offered broad experiences and relevant findings. I was invited to visit each kindergarten group and primary class and assist in teacher mentoring. The final experience of those three weeks was the school's most central annual festival, which enabled me to participate in the whole process of its planning and performance.

I was quite overwhelmed by the social injustices prevailing in the Peruvian and Kenyan societies and their strong influence on the life of my Waldorf colleagues in both schools. They live under difficult life circumstances, with little comfort, and it took me some effort to maintain an adequate researcher's attitude, to be open and empathetic but still not get too involved with the teachers' difficulties, keeping the purpose of my stay in mind. This is a common challenge with participant observation in ethnographic research (Murchison, 2010). One advantage for ethnographic research in the international Waldorf field was that I have thorough knowledge of anthroposophy and have worked in Waldorf education in Germany, Switzerland and Spain for many years. Another bonus was that I speak both official local languages fluently, Spanish and English. Therefore, I was always able to communicate with people without the aid of a translator. These personal advantages presented yet another specific researcher's perspective, similar to the above related problem of closeness and distance in an ethnographic research process: as an experienced Waldorf teacher, I was an insider and experiencing the schools' and local Waldorf teachers' very different cultural backgrounds I was an outsider. Baak (2016) describes this configuration as an „inside-out/outside-in researcher“ (p.31) who is in a continual process of shifting between these two positions. In both schools, I interviewed three teachers who had been part of the founding process of the school and/or part of the process of festival transformation. In Nairobi Waldorf School, the teachers of the two kindergartens and the teachers of primary school had undergone different processes in the development of new forms of festivals, while in Kusi Kawsay, school and kindergarten are celebrating the same festivals. Therefore, in Nairobi Waldorf School, one of the interviewees

was an experienced kindergarten teacher. This facilitated access to valuable information of the specific kindergarten festivals that, later, turned out to be important for the scope of my findings.

In the analysis of my empirical material I transcribed, coded and categorised the semi-structured interviews inspired by Grounded Theory methods (Bryman, 2012) with the goal of providing insight into the processes of festival creation in both schools; its conditions as well as its outcome.

## **Kusi Kawsay**

### **History and everyday living conditions**

#### ***Kusi Kawsay's history***

The Kusi Kawsay Waldorf school (Quechua for Happy Life) in Pisac, Peru was established in 2007. The initiative grew out of a group of Indigenous Andean musicians who had been working together for 19 years. They had studied and recognized the devastating influence that Spanish colonialism, and thereafter the Catholic Church, had exerted on the Andean culture; an influence that resulted in very low self-esteem and a severe loss of dignity and culture within the local Indigenous population. Self-esteem and dignity, explained one teacher: „...around here are no common concepts, because many people don't even know they should have something like dignity“. Until today indigenous children and adults have been facing strong racism in contemporary Andean public schools and society. According to the interviewees, everything related to the Indigenous Andean culture is still being defamed. The founding of the school was in response to these negative cultural conditions. The founders felt that an appropriate pedagogy would be found in Waldorf education and thus based the school on its principles. Today, Kusi Kawsay's classes range from kindergarten to 9th grade with mainly indigenous children but also some non-indigenous and international children are enrolled.

#### ***The way to school in Pisac***

Pisac is situated 3216 m above sea level and requires great physical effort from unaccustomed foreigners. I pass small lanes with stone and adobe buildings, built in traditional Andean style. The sight of dark interiors hints at the poverty hidden within. Closer to the centre of town, there are more signs of tourism. Pisac is a favourite destination of esoteric tourism because of its proximity to the sacred places of the ancient Incas. I draw closer to the plaza where the famous market takes place. From there, I start to ascend the stairs to the school. It is situated in an archaeological park, which hosts a holy Inca sanctuary 1000 meters higher. I see children and youngsters hiking and parents guiding their young children on the steep path up to the school grounds. I enjoy the tremendous view across the town of Pisac and part of the Sacred Valley.

#### ***The school grounds of Kusi Kawsay***

Entering through the massive wooden gates, my view suddenly falls to the grounds of the school beneath. It lies there, nestled into the mountainside with an extensive view over the surrounding mountain landscape. The little cabins with thatched roofs, built traditionally with adobe, together with the ascending rocks of the mountains almost form a circle. It looks cosy and I feel invited to come down the wide stairs, made from natural stone. Every primary class is hosted in this circle and has a little cabin of its own. Secondary classes and the kindergarten are a little secluded.

## **Reconceptualization of Waldorf festivals in Kusi Kawsay – Traditional approach**

### ***General impulse for and process of festival development***

The school's developmental process led to a growing awareness, among the founders, that some of the traditional Waldorf elements were quite Eurocentric. Not all of them complied with the Andean Cosmivision and life circumstances. According to the interviewees, it was hard for the experienced Waldorf founding teacher from far away to include the Andean contents into the curriculum. Moreover, they felt that it was difficult for this teacher to convey the principles of Waldorf education in such a way that the teachers could have used them as a basis for the development of an Andean curriculum: „She showed us the fish but didn't teach us how to do the fishing“. Therefore, the association had to start the difficult and tedious work themselves. They began to develop a specific Andean curriculum, based on Waldorf principles, especially the celebration of annual festivals that had previously been strongly oriented in European Christian festivals. Since festivals are central to the Andean Cosmivision, they had to be totally reconceptualised and renewed. A very special role in this process occupied the Andean agricultural calendar.

### ***The Andean agricultural calendar as the basis of Kusi Kawsay festivals***

One interviewee described how, in the process of colonisation, great parts of the rich agricultural traditions in the Andes had been destroyed: the original diversity of edible plants had been wiped out to be replaced by commercial monocultures, serving a globalized agricultural industry. In addition, the attitude of deep reverence towards Pachamama (universe), with all its related rituals throughout the year, had been attacked by the church, depicting them as heresy. As a consequence, one of the goals of the Kusi Kawsay founders was to restore their people's relationship with Mother Earth (Alpamama) and the Universe (Pachamama). They went to the indigenous communities, further up in the heights of the surrounding mountains (over 4000 m), that had not yet been wholly influenced by the church and contemporary society. Talking to the old people there, the school's founders collected and reactivated the traditional agricultural festivals and rituals that were connected to the year's seasons. Those they were able to revive belonged to a solar-oriented agricultural calendar. „For us it was a strong goal to activate and practice the calendar as a little community, while taking away all the colonial varnish, taking away the saints, calling the festivals by their ancient names.“ Afterwards they had to adapt the festivals in a pedagogical way.

Initially, they celebrated the festivals outside the school only with the adults. Then they would come to the school and celebrate the same festival in a pedagogically appropriate way with the children. The teachers prepare the festival during the weeks prior to the festival. They dedicate one part of the classes to the upcoming festival, reciting, singing and practising rhythmical exercises that help the children to connect with the specific festival. At the festival itself, the teachers select a central motive or value of the festival and talk to the children about it in an age-appropriate manner. One interviewee specifies: „Deepening the festivals, we had to go through a process to adapt these dates to a pedagogical language, to a pedagogical function.“

There are seven festivals/rituals being celebrated over twelve months, related to the agricultural activities and natural conditions of the respective ancestral periods or seasons. According to the interviewees, there are two seasons in the Andes of Peru: the season with rain (November – March) and the season without rain (April – October).

### ***The celebrations and their main elements***

The main elements of the celebrations are food, music and dance. Those elements vary in type and intensity according to the season and occasion. For example, there are typical instruments used for the season in which the wind is the focus of people's consciousness. Other important features of some festivals are specific traditional clothes or a bonfire. All festivals are enriched by presentations from the adults for the children (and parents) or vice versa.

- Pukllay:** celebrated towards the end of the rain time (March), the main motive is the abundance and fertility of all beings in nature: one of the very important and beloved festivals that continues for days.
- Cosecha:** - harvest, celebrated in April in the period of fall. The children harvest what they have grown in their garden patches, accompanied by adults playing music.
- Chakana:** - celebration of the constellation of the Southern Cross on the 3rd of May. It is also the date of the school's birthday. It represents a good example of the school community trying to return original significance to a festival, since this date, long ago, had been taken over by the church as the 'Day of the Cross'.
- Inti Raimy:** - midwinter festival between 19<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, dedicated to nourishing the sun. Indigenous people from other local and far away American communities are invited to share this important festival. In the local understanding, the sun is now far away, small and weak and the 'little sun, the baby sun' has to be nurtured and warmed with the heat of extensive communal dancing and a bonfire. It also is the beginning of the Andean New Year.
- Ofrenda a la Alpamama:** - The Offering to Mother Earth in August (see description below)
- Tarpuy:** - sowing, celebrated in September, beginning of spring. Old people from the communities come down to the school and bless the seeds, which the children then put into the prepared ground with the help of the adults.
- Las Machulas:** - a November celebration of and for the ancients, their own ancestors as well as the first mythological mankind, who lived in the light of the moon in Andean mythology. The ancients are responsible for the rains, now supposed to develop to their full capacity.

### ***Description of a festival: Ofrenda a la Alpamama/ The Offering to Mother Earth***

It is August and winter in Peru. The campesinos (peasants) are contemplating the coming time of sowing. With deep empathy, they sense what they experience as the neediness of Alpamama (Mother Earth), who gave so many gifts to them during the last year: fruits, vegetables and other gifts. They sense to what extent Alpamama has thus given away its strength and vital energy. The sun seems to have gone far away from Alpamama and cannot warm it. So the people feel they have to help the weak earth to prepare for the next sowing and growing period. This is what they strive for with that old ritual, called Ofrenda a la Alpamama. It is an example of the main Andean value of reciprocity.

An old abuelo (grandfather) is sitting on the ground in the central place between the cabins. The school community is sitting on the ascending stone stairs in front of him, looking and listening in silence. The old man puts a wooden cloth on the ground in front of him and folds it in a ritualistic manner, from all four directions. He then holds the folded cloth in front of his face. With reverence, he breathes into it three times. Now the cloth is passed from person to person. Each individual consciously breathes into it three times. Each breath is connected with good wishes and thoughts for Alpamama and the school Kusi Kawsay.

After the cloth has returned to the abuelo, he unfolds it. The four corners are now pointing into four directions. On one side of the cloth is a pile of leaves from the traditional healing plant of the Inka, the coca. On the other side is a big heap of small parcels, wrapped in colourful paper.

Each participant silently walks up to the coca leaves, chooses the three most beautiful, arranges them fan-shaped in both hands and proceeds over to the other side of the old man. Again, the participant breathes three good wishes for Alpamama into the leaves. The old man now arranges them, with great care, onto the cloth. Everyone participates in this ritual. Repeatedly, the abuelo opens one of the small packages and arranges the contents carefully onto the leaves. In this way, an increasingly complex half-mandala slowly

appears with ingredients that have directly or indirectly been derived from Mother Earth; seeds and grains, noodles, fruits, flowers, wool, threads, dyes, stones and minerals and more.

In the end, the cloth is folded carefully and tied with a special ribbon. The children are told that now the grandfather will go to a secret place in the mountains to burn the wrapped offering. Its content with its manifold good thoughts and wishes will go to Alpamama. Smoke and ashes will transmit the gifts of the ceremony to her, so that she can develop new strength for the upcoming agricultural season.

### ***From ,celebrating the Agricultural Calendar‘ to ,freedom of thinking‘***

It is central to the teachers of Kusi Kawsay not to educate the students to be followers but to be curious and interested in exploring the world and to develop the capacity of free thinking. They pursue this goal via two paths. Being raised in an atmosphere of respect and dignity is one of them. An interviewee expressed his expectations of the students' development:

As a result of having learned to know personal respect in school, they will experience a very strong centre of dignity within themselves - in a society in which they basically are not respected. They will not accept being denied respect in their life. I don't really know what they will do, but I know that they will be free thinkers.

On the other hand, the Kusi Kawsay teachers see a great potential for developing free thinking in the universality and neutrality of the Agricultural Calendar itself:

The Andean is universal, like the Celts or the indigenous peoples in Australia or South Africa. Those are the same things: they are talking about the same. So we are not promoting an Andean religion. We only say: observe everything in nature!

They go one step further and describe how they understand nature observation to foster free thinking. Love and caring for the earth includes getting close to its phenomena by careful observation. The observation of natural phenomena leads the students to „what really is“ and thus – at least partially – on a direct path to free thinking. This conviction has been guiding the school founders and teachers in the investigation and revival of ancestral festivals.

## **Nairobi Waldorf School**

### **History and everyday living conditions**

#### ***Nairobi Waldorf School's history***

Nairobi Waldorf School is an offspring of its precursor, Rudolf Steiner School, in Mbagathi, Nairobi, founded by Germans for the Massai children living in this area of the capital of Kenya. Nairobi Waldorf School is located in Karen, a wealthy quarter of Nairobi and includes a kindergarten on campus and another outside the campus. Parents and students of the Nairobi Waldorf School reflect the many different cultures that live in Nairobi: families from all continents, with four different world religions and members of 15 of the 42 Kenyan tribes. All possible shades and colours of skin are represented in what one teacher called a rainbow school. Today, the school includes seven kindergarten groups and the primary school teaches from first to seventh grade. East Africa still does not have a Waldorf upper secondary school.

#### ***The way to school in Nairobi***

Travelling in the car, belonging to the Kenyan family with whom I am staying, we have passed several gates and barriers, fragile hindrances set up against possible terrorist attacks. Soon, bigger streets are bringing us closer to the school. There is dense traffic, the main streets obstructed by the crowded van-like small public transportation buses, honking. At the roadside there is no asphalt but ditches to collect the rain. In between are small dirt paths, trodden by hundreds of passers-by. Some are dressed in business attire; others wear

colourful African robes. Then there are Massai herdsmen, wrapped in red cloths, walking slowly behind their bony cows. When we approach the school, we enter one of the most luxurious quarters of Nairobi with shiny mansions in park-like flourishing surroundings.

In front of the school grounds, big iron barrels are lined up in a double curve shielding the massive iron-gate; one of the measurements taken after credible terrorist threats. Passing through the barrels' pathway to the gate, we are greeted by two friendly guards who check every car. Later I am told that, not having permission to carry firearms, they have bows and poisonous arrows in a little cabin at the side of the entrance. This is just one example of Nairobi Waldorf School's specific living conditions.

### ***The school grounds of Nairobi Waldorf School***

The first impression is its depth and breadth: lawns with green elephant grass, childrens' tall swings and hidden among trees and bushes, the little cabins for the kindergarten and primary classes. Towards the end of the school grounds, a big, formerly white tent - now dyed by wind and weather - attracts the eye. This is where daily lunch is taken and it is also the space where the school gatherings and the festivals take place, substituting that which, in richer schools, would be the canteen and the assembly hall. The kitchen is a small, modest building where several cooks are preparing lunch. A large quantity of the food and the water for washing the dishes is being prepared outside on an open fireplace, a favourite meeting space for the many maintenance helpers and guards of the school.

## **Reconceptualization of Waldorf Festivals in Nairobi Waldorf School – Cultural approach in the primary school**

### ***General impulse for and process of festival development***

In the process of growth, German founders gradually left and more Kenyan teachers started to teach. A transition process began, initiated by teachers and by parents. The starting point was an insight regarding the cultural and religious diversity of the school community and the concern of making all these different people feel well integrated in the school. One teacher spoke about the process:

...very diverse group of people, who came in with a lot of different traditions, a lot of different cultural practices, a lot of different religious beliefs. We had to find a way to accommodate all of these people and still not lose the identity of a Waldorf school.

The identity of a Waldorf school was one concern but the socially integrative aspect was even more of a focus: „What is it that is going to bring us together? What one thing can we do as a school to make us feel united and bring a feeling of togetherness?“

The concept of togetherness can be seen as an imaginative description for the central impulse of Nairobi Waldorf (primary) School's community for the development of celebrating new annual festivals which, until that point, were thoroughly oriented towards the typical central European Waldorf festivals with an explicit Christian background.

### ***The Development of the Festival of Light – In search of togetherness***

In search of a true motive for a festival that would unite the multi-religious school community (also including atheists) in an experience of togetherness, the teachers investigated the central festivals of the four main religions (Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity). They discovered *light* as an encompassing motive of these four religions' most important annual festivals: Divali, Eid al-Fitr, Hannukkah, and Christmas and chose it as the motive for a new central annual festival. They called it the Festival of Light. From then on, the teachers looked anew, every year, for a multicultural or transreligious story line representing a path from

darkness to light. The story should enable the teachers to artistically include elements of all main religions and cultural traditions in a theatrical presentation of all classes.

### ***The celebration of the Festival of Light in December 2014***

It is the evening of the Festival of Light and the last day of school before the long summer holidays start and the season of the short rains with cooler weather.

People, guided by little lanterns, are streaming to the festive tent. The rains have stopped for the moment. The tent is beautifully decorated with white veils and handmade foil stars, swaying from the tent's roof in the light evening breeze. This year, the teachers have decided on an Irish story line.

The presentations start late, due to the heavy traffic congestion in Nairobi's streets. Finally, one class after the other quietly enters the festive tent, starting with the upper 7<sup>th</sup> grade and ending with class 1. Students and teachers are dressed in clothes from one of the cultures, tribes or religions of the school's parent body. We see the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in Indian clothes, the 6<sup>th</sup> mirroring British attire, the 5<sup>th</sup> in Muslim clothes and the lower grades in various African robes. The story of this year's Festival of Light unfolds, told by a story-teller who is a teacher at the school. In between the various parts of the legend, each class does a presentation, highlighting the story with dancing, music, singing and recitations, touching various aspects of Jewish and Asian religions, as well as Christian and African. Almost at the end of the presentation, all students and teachers together perform a Muslim song, conducted by a Muslim teacher. At the end of the whole event, a buffet is waiting outside in the dark and the night ends with chatting.

### ***Further central festivals and their main elements in Nairobi Waldorf (primary) School***

Two other important festivals in Nairobi Waldorf School were developed by transforming the Christian motives of Easter and Michaelmas. The festivals' all-embracing humane motives are accentuated. Both festivals are geared towards the children and not towards the parents.

#### ***Easter Brunch:***

During the week prior to the festival in April, the children are experiencing a lesser form of fasting with only small break snacks. The school kitchen is cooking little and modest food. The money thus saved is donated to a big refugee camp. On the day of the celebration itself, each class is preparing a beautiful table with homemade food for another class. Children, teachers and all of the many school helpers are having brunch together. This festival is an example of the ongoing development of the festivals in the school community: it took some years until consciousness had grown to also invite all the janitors, the cleaning women and the uniformed guards. Renouncement and ensuing giving, sharing a meal and passing the candlelight to one another are universal metaphors to which atheists can also relate.

#### ***Festival of Courage***

The Festival of Courage is celebrated in September. It still shows considerable similarity with the way Michaelmas is celebrated in European Waldorf schools. The story of George and the Dragon is being told, with emphasis on the universal virtue of courage. In the extensive school grounds, the teachers have prepared challenging tasks for the pupils. The children find various activities that make them struggle with feelings of reluctance and possibly even anxiety. They have to activate their individual willpower to overcome those inner hindrances. From year to year, they manage to succeed in more challenging tasks, thus experiencing their own personal growth and expanding self-confidence.

## **Transformation creates togetherness – cultural approach to festival creation**

Nairobi Waldorf School's teachers main motive for festival transformation was the integration of the multicultural parenthood to a strong community with which everybody could identify. Festivals were to be occasions where awkwardness related to colour of skin and religion should yield to experiences of connectedness. They have reached this goal via the transformation of the festivals' Christian motives and emphasizing transreligious all-encompassing motives of humanity.

## **Reconceptualization of Waldorf Festivals in Nairobi Waldorf School – Nature-based approach in the kindergarten**

### *General impulse for and process of development*

In Nairobi Waldorf School kindergarten, the development to overcome Eurocentric festivals was initiated by an Australian mentor who experienced an inconsistency in the way the Nairobi kindergarten teachers were celebrating the festivals. Sensing a pedagogical need to align the young child's seasonal nature experiences with their kindergarten festival experiences, she initiated the process of developing new festivals together with the local kindergarten teachers. For two years, without any further intentions, the teachers performed nature observations and wrote them down in a diary. Every week, in the conference, they exchanged their experiences. After two years, the mentor asked for possible motives in these nature observations, relevant for creating new festivals. One of the teachers described what then happened, with regard to the Easter time in April:

And now when it came to taking it from looking and writing to the next step: - what can we do with that in terms of the children and something to celebrate? –it was like a magic, it was really jumping out of the page.

During January, February and parts of March, everybody suffers from the exhausting heat of a long period of extremely hot weather. Even business goes down. Then, mid-March, the time of the long rains begins. The stinging sun now hides behind clouds and pouring rain, with lots of shadow, characterises this season. The sun comes out only for short moments but then colourful rainbows are visible. „In this time, because there's so much shadow, as soon as the sun appears with the water then rainbows! Immediately! So many rainbows with this heavy rain!“ the teacher described. During this period, no rays of sun can be perceived without the presence of these colourful rainbows. So, emanating from observation, rainbows naturally appeared as a motive for a festival in the beginning of March.

### *Further central festivals and their main elements in Nairobi Waldorf kindergartens*

**Rainbow Festival:** - Beginning of April (see above)

**Lantern Festival:** - June (winter), celebrated similarly to the European Lantern Walk in November

**Shambani Festival:** - Beginning of July, at the end of the long rains, the gardens are abundant with fruit and vegetables. Shambani means garden in Kishwaheli. It is a festival of harvest in a double sense: one day there is a celebration for the children who will enter primary school. They harvest what they have learned so far. The next day, the vegetables in the gardens are harvested and cooked into a collective meal.

**Flower Festival:** - Beginning of October, when the short rains begin (springtime). Flowers are blossoming, especially the violet Jacaranda trees shedding carpets of flowers onto the school ground. The festival is celebrated inside and outside.

**Festival Of Light:** - Celebrated at the beginning of December, before the long summer holidays. It is celebrated similarly to the way in which primary school is celebrating the festival (see the description above).

### ***Transcending nature observation – natural approach to festival creation***

One interviewee related the ‘big relief’ for all living beings after the hot summer period, which the arrival of the long rains in April signifies. It sounded like an experience of a type of physical and inner rebirth: „So it’s again a different kind of death and resurrection. I mean everything has died with the sun and then the rains come and life appears.“ She depicted the rainbow colours as a symbol for this experience. I asked her if, in the process of finding motives for the festivals in kindergarten, the teachers’ Christian bias affected this process and if they had in mind „the more overarching motives of the festivals like the birth of the light, like death and ascension?“ She spontaneously answered: “No, it just came out of nature.“ However, she then specified that it only happened when the teachers started to *reflect* on the observed natural phenomena. I asked her if she saw „some spiritual, some transformational aspect“ in her nature experiences. After a long, thoughtful pause, she pondered:

„What nature is experiencing is mirrored in us. So this thirst and heat and dryness, we have it also; we can relate to it in a spiritual way. We can take it to a higher level. It takes the will of a person to want to transform it. With the human will and awareness, we can lift it to these other levels where we can find things that connect us.“

In this interviewee’s opinion, the colours in the rainbows served as a metaphor for uniting all different strengths and weaknesses in an integrative community in which nobody should feel excluded. She explained that, in this context, spirituality reaches beyond religion, tribes and „all these physical differences“. It is uniting people, transiting everything, as she substantiated, but she did not want to use the word God for it, so as not to exclude atheists.

What the interviewee thus described was an evolution, which is possible in a nature-based approach to festival creation. It can develop from nature observations and nature experiences to experiencing related personal dispositions. Then, in a last step, the reflective meta-process of searching for images, concepts or metaphors within these observations can culminate in numinous experiences of all-encompassing connectedness and wholeness.

### **Dialogue and interconnectedness - touching the sacred in festivals and their creation**

Looking at a deeper level beyond the researched processes of the schools’ festival renewal, a concept emerges, permeating all three approaches towards festival creation: the concept of dialogue.

The founders and teachers of Kusi Kawsay entered into a process of dialogue with the elders in the very high Andean mountains where some of the last Andean cultural treasures have been preserved. The dialogue was twofold: the reestablishment of the agricultural calendar and subsequent nature observation processes, as well as the festive rituals themselves. Both resulted in a close receiving and giving dialogue with nature and Pachamama (universe), which is represented in the encompassing Andean concept of reciprocity between visible and invisible living beings.

The dialogue of Nairobi Waldorf (primary) School teachers moved on a social level by awareness of and listening to the subtle needs of their multicultural parenthood. Parents were included in the process of creation and performance, especially of the Festival of Light. The example of the ongoing development of the participants of the Easter Brunch shows that this dialogue in the social realm of Nairobi Waldorf School is a continual process.

In the Nairobi Waldorf School kindergarten, the close nature observation process led to new experiences for the teachers: „I had lived there all my life but I had never known what really happened in nature“ (interviewee). The nature observation processes depicted the quality of close questioning and listening. The response came when the question about suitable motives for creation of new kindergarten festivals was posed. The motives „just jumped out of the pages“.

Nairobi Waldorf School kindergarten depicts an inner connection to Rappaport's (2013) classification of levels of meaning: nature observation in a first step signifies classifying tangible phenomena and describing them. So for two years, the teachers moved in the level of low-order meaning (distinction).

In the second step, when the question about possible motives for the development of locally adequate festivals was raised, the motives 'jumped out'. The process of reflecting the phenomena with the colleagues led to the level where a sensation of inner meaningful connection was rising, related to what Rappaport describes as middle-order meaning (similarity).

The third stage of Rappaport's levels of meaning (unification) was reached when the experience of *rainbow* and the motive of *colour*, which had meaningfully 'jumped out', was transformed by one interviewee to an experience of oneness and connectedness of universal character; features of a high-order meaning experience of identification and numinous union.

Rappaport is not alone in establishing a connection between rituals, festivals and festival creation on the one hand and a type of numinous experience on the other. Grimes (2014) characterizes one aspect of the process of festival creation as (by way of including values) a formation of webs of meaningfulness. He claims that it can lead to the same quality of encompassing experiences, which participants might label as sacred, religious or spiritual. The creation and celebration of the Festival of Light in the Nairobi Waldorf (primary) School offered that possibility. One interviewee depicted experiences with relation to this festival:

And that was beyond any religion, but you see the light in it, because the children, - the innocence they have, the ability to experience things in the present so much, is really the light we would like for a better world. [...] It creates light for a better world. So that was [...] very cosmic - cosmic is the word I'd like to use.

Both authors, Rappaport (2013) and Grimes (2014) expressed experiences of an elevated level of consciousness that might also be called interconnectedness. Their reflections, in addition to the interviewee's quotation above, seem to reach into a state that Durkheim (2013) called 'the sacred'. Apparently, ritual, festival creation and their performances, as well as experiences within indigenous knowledge systems, can inspire a state of connectedness, which the interviewee above did not want to call 'God' out of respect for the atheists. However, if festival creation in non-European Waldorf schools can link into this sphere, it will gain access to a spiritual dimension, which - although Schieren (2014) calls it a „touchy subject“ - is still a relevant dimension of Waldorf education.

However, besides transcendent aspects within the development of new Waldorf festivals, quite mundane prerequisites are relevant, related to overcoming the original implementation of traditional European Waldorf festivals.

## Overcoming Waldorf Eurocentrism – concepts from indigenous knowledge

In the past, in many cases, the founding processes of Waldorf schools, situated far away from Europe, were strongly influenced by the central-European Waldorf movement, as well as related content-wise to the traditional Waldorf contents and festivals. Those influences had been necessary for transmitting basics of Waldorf education. However, they also contained an inherent ambivalence, since they often did not relate to the non-European local conditions. Boland (2015, p. 199) refers to a hidden curriculum and asks: „Is there a tension between the hidden curriculum of 'traditional Waldorf' content and the child's lived experience in her environment?“ Those European oriented influences did not contribute to ignite the will and capabilities of the local professionals to develop locally-shaped Waldorf forms and adapt the contents to local living conditions. On the part of the teachers, a conscious attitude of liberation in search of transformation is required to start such processes. Concepts taken from the field of indigenous knowledge are helpful to understand the qualities of the researched schools' different liberating processes in the creation of new Waldorf festivals. Morrow (2009) characterizes Eurocentrism, in general, as the demand for universal validity of western understanding of philosophy, values and science. Can we speak of Waldorf Eurocentrism? Is there a validity being claimed for the universally applicable mode of all contents and forms of Waldorf

education everywhere in the world? Boland (2014) thinks so and adds a further sensitive issue claiming that some of the transformations that have taken place in non-European Waldorf schools might only be a type of „sticking wings on a caterpillar and calling it a butterfly“, instead of a true metamorphosis of contents and forms. The processes of festival creation in Nairobi Waldorf (primary) School, especially in the case of the Festival of Light, were characterized by such a process of metamorphosis: light, as a common motive of the most central annual festivals of four world religions, was taken as an all-inclusive concept to be celebrated in the place of the former Christmas celebration.

Wiredu (1995) and Dei (2010) use the notion of ‘conceptual decolonization’ for freeing concepts from their Western anchor and way of interpreting the world. The Kusi Kawsay teachers performed this conceptual decolonization in their festival creation processes. They freed themselves from traditional Waldorf festival concepts by searching and restoring ancient, almost lost, culturally valuable Andean festival traditions.

„Careful local contextualization and ... respect for local life worlds“ are concepts that Morrow (2009, p.72) believes to be important for overcoming Eurocentrism. In the long process of close nature observation, the Nairobi Waldorf School kindergarten teachers developed consciousness about details in - and respect for - the surrounding nature. Then – out of pedagogical insight – they contextualized these observations into the developmental needs of a small child and carefully established locally contextualized festivals.

### **Summarizing experiences**

Creation of new Waldorf festivals in accordance with local conditions needs a school community’s liberating attitude to free them from the weight of European influences. Entering into a dialogical approach, it offers access to various levels of relevant experiences, which move from a mundane level up to a transcendent interconnected level. The related processes signify a valuable step for Waldorf communities in gaining individual access to the essence of Waldorf education: „The observant listening to that which the world is demanding is the attitude in which Waldorf teachers want to kindle their feeling of responsibility“ (Steiner, 1980b, p.111).

### **Conclusion**

This article gives insight into a study conducted by an internationally experienced and engaged Waldorf teacher as part of a master’s thesis at the Rudolf Steiner University College in Oslo, Norway. The purpose of the study was to investigate the processes that two non-European Waldorf schools, Kusi Kawsay in Peru and Nairobi Waldorf School in Kenya, had gone through to transform or replace the traditional European Waldorf festivals, thus aiming at contributing ideas and knowledge for other schools in similar situations. Three approaches to the creation of new festivals in the two Waldorf schools emerged in the course of the ethnographic study. They might offer some guidelines for other non-European Waldorf schools, which - within their school community - have decided on a reconceptualization of their annual festivals.

### **Traditional approach – using tradition for development of free thinking**

The founders and teachers of the Indigenous Kusi Kawsay Waldorf school investigated their local ancient traditions and implemented the agricultural Inca sun calendar as the basis of their festival celebrations, centred around a close and reciprocal relationship with nature. Returning to the valuable sources of their own culture increases the often suppressed self-esteem of the indigenous children. The teachers’ intention was to use the close connection of the ancient festivals with nature processes, as well as related exact nature observation processes to develop growing independent judgement in the young people and ultimately the capability of free thinking.

## **Cultural approach – integrating diversity**

The goal of the festival transformation process in Nairobi Waldorf School was the conscious integration of all multi-cultural and religiously diverse members of the school community into common celebrations with which everybody could identify. They searched for the more all-encompassing motives in the existing European Christian festivals and in the religious traditions of the four world religions represented in the school community. That way, they developed celebrations with which atheist parents can also identify but still include transcendent and soul-nourishing forms and rituals. In an ongoing dialogue within the school community, they maintain the awareness for improvement.

## **Nature-based approach – thinking with the cycle of the year**

Nairobi Waldorf School kindergarten's approach to festival creation was using nature observation as a focus. The teachers performed the process of close *nature observation* for at least two years. This process coincides with what Rudolf Steiner (1985, p. 40) claimed to be a necessary path of the contemporary renovation of festivals, calling it *thinking with the cycle of the year*. The phase of nature observation was followed by the search for related motives that might serve for festivals created out of careful local contextualization.

All three concepts need an attitude that can be referred to as a dialogical approach, either with nature or with the school community. I suggest that this dialogical approach is a central prerequisite for and the basis of each successful process of festival creation or transformation in Waldorf schools.

## **Limitations and further research**

This study provides insight and knowledge as to how two schools have proceeded with festival creation. Experiences of other schools with different possible ways of festival creation would enhance the picture and knowledge about the inquired topic.

Further research could be related to the topic of Waldorf education being a Christian education. Festivals can be, and in Waldorf schools often have been, an expression of Christian orientation. Where does this concept originate? In what sense does it have to be understood? What has Rudolf Steiner really stated and in which connection?

Last but not least, one important question that emerged from this study and offers possibilities for further research should be mentioned: in a search for overcoming Waldorf Eurocentrism, what would be the possibilities for mutual dialogue and enrichment between the Waldorf and the indigenous knowledge movement?

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