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**THE *QUINCEAÑERA*:**  
**TOWARDS AN INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE FIFTEENTH BIRTHDAY**  
**CELEBRATION FOR YOUNG PERUVIAN GIRLS**

Robin CAVAGNOUD<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract* – For young Peruvian girls, the celebration of the fifteenth birthday is a seminal event culturally meaning the end of childhood. In its traditional staging, mainly among popular classes, the role of nuclear and extended family is fundamental. This rite of passage announces marriage and marks the introduction into womanhood. On the contrary, its contemporary forms put emphasis on peers' participation to the detriment of family and relatives. Current recreations of this celebration, particularly through juvenile parties, trips abroad and plastic surgery, highlight a greater individualization in the girls' projects, socialization and in their relation to the body.

*Keywords* – Childhood, Rite of Passage, Gender, Family, Individual, Youth, Peru

*Résumé* – La quinceañera : vers une individualisation de la célébration du quinzième anniversaire pour les jeunes filles péruviennes

Pour les jeunes filles péruviennes, la célébration du quinzième anniversaire est un événement central qui signifie culturellement la fin de l'enfance. Dans ses formes traditionnelles, majoritaires dans les classes populaires, ce rite de passage met en avant la famille nucléaire et élargie. Il annonce le mariage et marque une entrée dans l'âge adulte féminin. Au contraire, ses formes contemporaines mettent l'accent sur la participation du groupe de pairs au détriment de la famille et de la parenté. Les récréations actuelles de cette célébration, en particulier à travers les fêtes entre jeunes, les voyages à l'étranger et les opérations esthétiques soulignent une plus grande individualisation dans le projet des filles, leur socialisation et leur rapport au corps.

*Mots-clés* – Enfance, rite de passage, genre, famille, individu, jeunesse, Pérou

## INTRODUCTION

In the international legal framework codified by the International Convention of Children's Rights, childhood officially ends at 18, the age of majority (ONU and UNICEF 1989). This formal approach sets childhood limits only through the age criterion. In Peru and in Latin America in general, the age of majority is also 18. However, the Child and Adolescent Code makes a distinction in its first article between childhood and adolescence: "Any human being from birth to the age of 12 should be considered child while an adolescent is any human being between the age of 12 and 18" (Congreso de la República 1992). These chronological definitions

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included in the legal framework on childhood are generally inadequate for those branches of social science - particularly ethnology, anthropology and sociology - which consider childhood as a social and cultural construction (James & Prout 1997). The variety of childhood's meaning and limits between social and cultural contexts is reflected in the expression "childhood plurality" (Jenks 1996). As a consequence, social sciences have to refer to criteria other than age to be able to identify the beginning and the end of childhood relevant in every society and culture.

In the case of Peru, an important rite symbolizes the end of childhood for girls: the fifteenth birthday ceremony called *quinceañera* or *fiesta quinceañera*. This event is celebrated in most Latin America countries, nearly all social and cultural backgrounds and even among Latin American migrants living in the United States (Álvarez 2007; Lestage 2011). This birthday is more important than others in the course of life of young girls as it stages a rite of passage into womanhood (Steenbeek 1995; Davalos 1996). It introduces as such the transition between two feminine life stages, which "strengthens the role of women in gender relations and intergenerational relations" (Lestage 2011: 279) and establishes gender identity (Napolitano 1997). Commonly considered as an official presentation to society, it is a more striking event than communion or celebration of college promotion (Olthoff 2006).

In a previous article, I distinguished both traditional and modern forms of *quinceañera* to demonstrate the emergence of youth as an unclear life stage between childhood and adulthood (Cavagnoud, 2012). This article will more specifically focus on the analyses of the girls' individualization through the contemporary evolutions of *quinceañera*, which highlight the greater autonomy that they enjoy within some sectors of Peruvian society. Social life in Peru, and in Lima in particular, is characterized by outstanding cultural heterogeneity. This is reflected for example in the celebration of rites that might either maintain traditions or create new festive forms rooted in the growing importance of individuality. The purpose of this article is to show how the *quinceañera* practice reveals new projects and forms of socialization of girls as well as a changing relation to their own bodies. In this sense, the analysis will integrate three dimensions of body typical of modernity: the support of identity, the target of subject's action, and the expression of individuality and injunction of autonomy (Le Breton 1991; Lachance 2012: 6).

This article firstly describes the fifteenth birthday celebration of young Peruvian girls in its traditional<sup>2</sup> way as a step out of childhood and announcement of womanhood in which the body can be seen as a reflect of family and community identity. Secondly it will focus on recent reinventions of this event, mostly observed in the middle class family of Lima, which point out new forms of individualization. Through these innovative practices, the evolution of this rite will

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<sup>2</sup> The term "traditional" refers to forms of *quinceañera* experienced by mothers of girls interviewed in this survey (about 20 to 40 years ago).

be explained in relation to the process of acquisition of a greater personal autonomy of young people vis-à-vis parents and relatives. A link will be established with the changes in girls' status in the Peruvian society in a context of modernization and progressive gender equality. Finally, I will use this case study to provide some insight on the specific relationship between ethnology and sociology as two constituent social science disciplines.

This article considers childhood as one of the major life period, as well as adulthood or old age. The transition from childhood to adulthood is socially and culturally constructed according to rules and values determining the child and adult's status in each society and culture (Lachance 2012: 31). Adolescence and youth correspond to intermediate stages and "times of uncertainty" in the passage between these two ages. The methodology used in this investigation was participant observation to this rite at various occasions in Lima from 2006 to 2012. I also collected about thirty testimonials of Peruvian adults (in the majority from Lima), students and mothers from 15 to 45 years old, who lived this celebration marking the end of their childhood for family and society<sup>3</sup>.

#### **PRESENTATION TO SOCIETY AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF MARRIAGE IN TRADITIONAL FORMS OF QUINCEAÑERA**

In its traditional forms, the *quinceañera* ceremony usually takes place at the girl's home or in a dining room rented by her parents. A band or a disc jockey is also provided by the family to ensure a music service along celebration and during the party. Festivities start with the entry of the young girl, tidy haired and made up carefully. She wears a smart dress, generally white, bought especially for the occasion, and her father accompanies her on a slow music. Both dance the first *valse* which marks the official beginnings of ceremony and gives a solemn tone to the event. Female peers, friends and family members are also dressed very elegantly. But the color of their dress must be different from the *quinceañera* one (for example green or blue versus white or pale shades dress for the *quinceañera*, who has to be the only one wearing these colors, symbol of purity). Like the father, boys are dressed with a mostly black suit and sometimes matching tie. Formality is essential and also indicates the exceptional nature of the celebration. After the first dancing with her father, the girl dances a *valse* with her godfather and then with each male member of the family, from closest to farthest one in relationship: brothers, uncles, grandparents, etc. After this first dancing session, in the most carefully prepared ceremonies, best friends dance choreography on the notes of several fashion songs with the *quinceañera* at the center of the scene. The room

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<sup>3</sup> Results of this research were obtained from the following questions: 1. How did you celebrate your fifteenth birthday? 2. Did you enjoy it and do you think it was an important moment of your life? 3. Did you feel a change in your life after this celebration? 4. Do you think that *quinceañera* is less celebrated nowadays or that it is celebrated differently, that is to say, with a change in customs?

where the party takes place is decorated with balloons whose color usually matches with the girl's dress. It is surrounded by many tables and chairs as well as buffets where all guests will have diner after the first dancing and the toast.



Figure 1: Carla dancing the first valse with her father (Lima, 07/14/2013, © Diana Flores)

In some Catholic families, celebration may be preceded by a thanksgiving mass at church. The young girl arrives in her festive dress, accompanied by closest family members (parents, uncles, grandparents) and younger bridesmaids (nieces or cousins). After mass and before leaving church, the girl has to leave her bouquet in honor of the Virgin Mary. These very unusual procedures in the Peruvian context shows this rite has no Catholic connotation as important as communion or marriage as observed in Mexican context (Davalos 1996; Lestage 2011). In Peru, only girls of Jewish confession or those having a family crisis do not celebrate the rite of the fifteenth birthday by not being able to devote time and/or money to organize the ceremony.

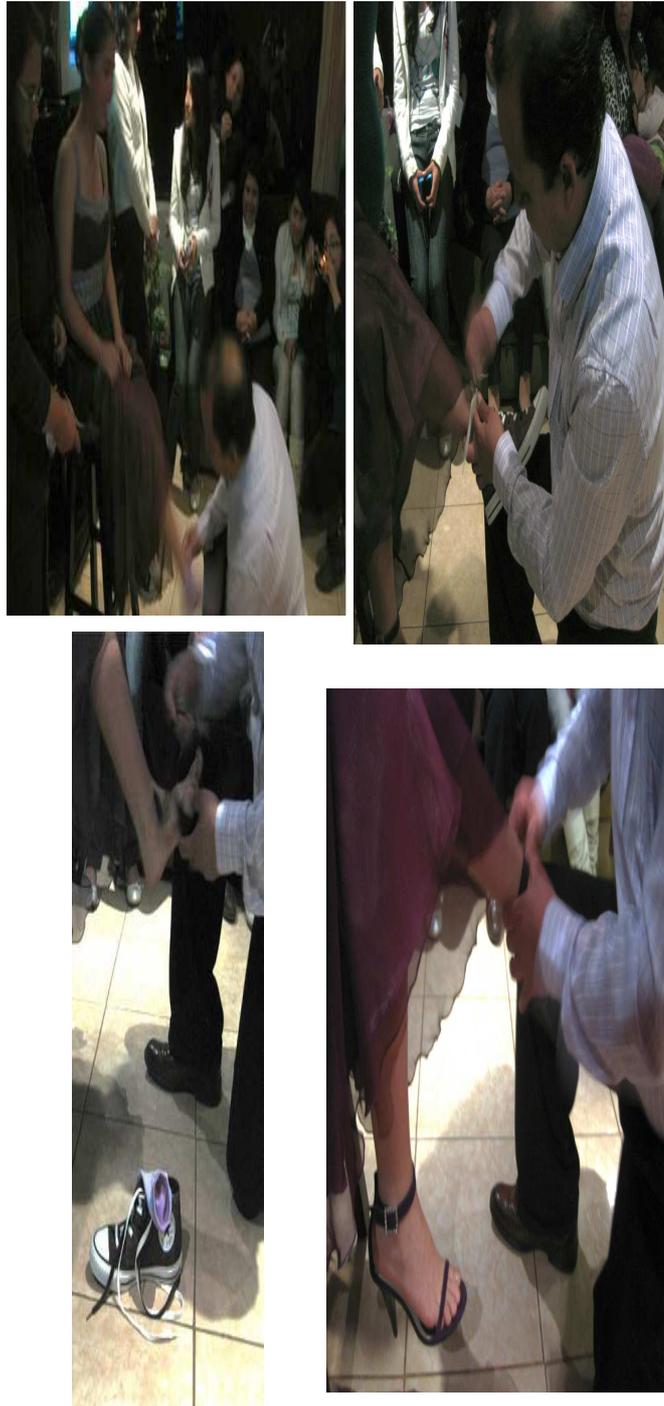
After the first dancing, each family member gives a brief speech to express his/her happiness in taking part to the celebration. Firstly the father has the floor, followed by the mother, brothers and sisters, uncles and grandparents. Young girl's friends may also be encouraged to talk, especially her girlfriends. This moment is the opportunity to publicly declare affection for the *quinceañera*, the family's pride of seeing her reaching this important step in her life. Following this sequence of speeches, that is also the chance to strengthen cohesion, solidarity and hierarchy within the family, everybody drinks a toast in the girl's honor. Then people starts eating, usually a typical homemade Peruvian course or a buffet service installed at the same place. Families normally hire catering services at home to avoid wasting time in the preparation and distribution of food. This choice depends on their economic resources but many of them do not hesitate to invest large amounts of money (hundreds or thousands of dollars) to pay for food, drinks, room rental,

clothes, etc.<sup>4</sup>. This investment aims at ensuring the success of the celebration not only in the eyes of family members but also of extended family and friends. After dinner, participants are invited to carry on with more dances (salsa, hip hop, rock), less formal than the first part of the celebration. This is the most festive part of the event. Adults usually consume alcohol (whisky, rum, beer, wine) as well as adolescents under their parents' supervision. Most of the *quinceañera* parties follow the structure described above. However, families often made some adaptations depending on the number of guests and the venue. The *quinceañera* represents the most traditional and common form of celebration in Peru, as well as the most shared across different social groups, although it remains particularly important among popular sectors.

In some families, an important part of the ritual is when the father takes his daughter's juvenile shoes off to immediately replace them with heels as symbols of womanhood.

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<sup>4</sup> The ritual cannot be postponed if the family does not have enough money. The date of the fifteenth birthday is scrupulously respected to celebrate this event. If the family has less money at that time, she is used to organize a smaller party.



*Figures 2 to 5: Alison and her father during the sequence of shoe change (Lima, 10/31/2011, © Robin Cavagnoud)*

This act of separation from the child status by removing the shoes is immediately followed by an act of aggregation (Van Gennep 1981) symbolizing the

loss of childhood cultural attributes to acquire those of womanhood (high heels and body stature are associated to adult maturity). This practice is also common in Venezuela (Finol 2001). It expresses the boundary crossing towards a new stage of life and as such a “generational transition”. In this sequence of the rite and in the others described above, the body control is perfectly codified by the family. Parents make sure to confirm the young girl’s membership to family community but at the same time they implicitly announce she is ready for marriage. From now on life as a mother and wife becomes culturally possible. In the case of Mexico, Steenbeck (1995: 128) sees this celebration as a stage where “the years of childhood are definitively over and the girl now has to start behaving like a decent woman”. This symbolic recognition is important for the family and the broader social network including close friends gathered for the occasion. In the most traditional forms, the *quinceañera* ceremony is characterized by rigorous sequences and symbols controlled by family and elders. In this context, the young girl’s body (choice of dress, color, gesture, behavior, peers relationships) is culturally shaped according to social norms and values shared and promoted by the family circle.

#### **CHANGE OF STATUS AND EMPHASIS ON FEMININE IDENTITY**

The *quinceañera* celebration is an event planned by the girl and her family. It is often prepared several weeks or even months in advance, especially when school friends are in charge of setting up an ad hoc choreography. By performing this ritual, a status change is shown for the main protagonist who receives a new role in society. The traditional celebration of *quinceañera* obeys to a set of ritualized sequences, codes and customs, whereby the family is staging a young girl’s presentation to society. Also the organization and participation to the ceremony provide the opportunity for the close and extended members of the family as well as for the circle of friends to gather. As a consequence, the rite strengthens the girl’s affiliation to her family and to a group that transcends family ties. For this reason, this ceremony can be primarily interpreted as a rite of identity and belonging confirmation. This aspect is reinforced by the choice of the place where the ceremony will be held. In most cases this coincides with the parental home. In this way, the presence of people who are not part of the family but who are bound to the parents by affinity ties marks the adolescent’s entry into a wider community. As such, the function of the ritual is also to build a bigger social network beyond the restricted or extended family, which is considered essential to find a future husband for the girl. In this respect, the white or pale colors dress of the *quinceañera* subtly announces her upcoming wedding. Symbolically, she is entering in a life stage that gives her a marriage status and an access to “matrimonial market”. To reinforce these allegories, the ceremony is usually imbued of highly emotional and suspense moments, as for example the waiting for the arrival of the girls accompanied by her father and the girl’s emphatic speeches.



Figure 6: Alison and her parents during the speaking sequence (Lima, 10/31/2011, © Robin Cavagnoud)

Finally, during the ceremony and party, it is common to observe a continuous use of cameras and video recording by family members, friends or by a professional photographer hired for this occasion. This systematic use of technological devices underpins the celebration with a dimension of exceptionality. It integrates ritual in a longer and indefinite period which overcomes the specific moment of the festivity. It may frequently be watched and even posted on the web by *quinceañeras*.

Moreover, it is obvious that this rite of passage is an experience reserved for girls, showing a strict sexual differentiation within society. In this sense, it “makes gender” and “a girl into woman”, “[embedding] within people’s ideas appropriate gender roles” (Davalos 1996: 104). The girl’s dress, her conventional hairstyle (long haired, etc.), the impeccable makeup defined by beauty criterions, measured walk, highlighted silhouette and jewelry put emphasis on the girl’s feminine identity (Napolitano, 1997). The use of these tools as a way of attracting public attention through culturally feminine symbols confirms the step out from childhood and the girls’ entry into womanhood maturity.

“In my case, it was very traditional: I had a long dress, designed by myself and made-to-measure. I was haired very elegantly, with light makeup. Even if I played basket at this time and that is not a very feminine sport, I had THE most feminine celebration possible corresponding to what it had to be done.” (Sandra, 24 years old).

The 15 years old is also the age when sexual identities are reinforced between boys and girls. This rite of passage comes along young girl’s biological changes and it implicitly means the leaving of puberty. In the case of Mexico, Davalos explains that this event “leads girls to discover and experience themselves as women and adults” (1996: 114). As a consequence, the entry into womanhood implies her possibility to be an active sexual being and as such to have children (even if control

on girl's virginity is still the rule). This fact is related to the tacit wedding announcement mentioned above and is part of a physical placement of girl's body into heterosexuality norms and identity. By making visible the change of status from girlhood to womanhood, the ceremony indicates the beginning of a long phase of marriage preparation and a process of sexual awareness. In this sense, the rite covers a separating function from the biological point of view by marking a threshold of no return in relation to pre-pubescent female characteristics.

Finally, the collective dimension of the fifteenth birthday involves the presence of peer boys including, in some cases, *quinceañera's* boyfriend (when the family has accepted him). They participate in staged and choreographed dances. We will see later that the boys' participation is less usual in modern forms of *quinceañera*. In the traditional ceremony the girls' body is strongly controlled by the family authority. This ritual has the function to impose on girl's body codes and norms, the use of a series of objects and specific clothing meant to organize power relationships between men and women.



Figure 7: Leslie and her best friends (Callao, 10/20/2012, © Robin Cavagnoud)

## THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE AND “MODERN” FORMS OF QUINCEAÑERA CELEBRATION

In parallel to traditional ceremonies, new and diverse ways of celebrating the event chosen by girls in consultation with their parents are emerging:

“I traveled to Europe for a month to celebrate my fifteenth birthday. I was delighted. It seemed much better to travel than to celebrate the traditional *quinceañera*. Obviously, it was an important moment of my life, not because I felt more feminine but for all the things I experienced during this trip.” (Andrea, 25 years old).

“For my fifteenth birthday, I didn’t have a great ceremony as it is traditionally done in Lima. I had a little party with my closest friends. We drank alcohol, we ate appetizers and when we were a little drunk, they made me dance like in a traditional ceremony. It was really funny.” (Diana, 24 years old).

“I celebrated in a club but it was not flashy at all. My dress and those of my girlfriends had no laces and were much shorter and modern. The boys were dressed with pants and a shirt. There was no protocol like the girl entrance with her father and all the family. It was more like a party between young people.” (Arlette, 33 years old).

These stories collected among women in their early 20s illustrate new forms of celebrating the fifteenth birthday for an increasing number of girls in Lima. This is not a de-ritualization of the fifteenth birthday celebration but a recreation of the rite according to girls’ new expectations and their search for originality based on contemporary fashion and trends. In this sense, travels to the United States or Europe, also observed by Lestage in middle-class Mexican families (2011: 289) appear to be the most popular projects. Other forms include plastic surgeries of breast, face or nose that are increasingly chosen by girls as a gift for the occasion.

These kinds of celebration are significantly different from those defined by traditional norms and increasingly popular among adolescents. Interestingly, there is no sense of transgression associated with the girls’ choice of not following the ordinary *quinceañera* celebration. Their parents’ consent plays an important role in this sense. While they still consider the passage of the fifteenth birthday as a pivotal age symbolizing the end of childhood, many parents prefer their daughters to take advantage of this event in a more profitable way, including for example trips to the United States in order to improve their English level. All this highlights the current injunctions and skills required to young women in their process of autonomization (traveling away from home, school performances by mastering English, peer socialization, etc.). In several accounts, a double celebration of the rite is also observed, a traditional and a modern one:

“My parents organized two lunches: a family one in my grandmother’s home where they invited all my uncles and cousins. It was a great party with a big top and a buffet. The second was a lunch with my best friends from High School in a restaurant.” (Cristel, 22 years old).

The rite of celebration of 15 years old is thus reinvented becoming more heterogeneous and overcoming the ceremonial sequence attached to the Catholic culture (long dress, *valse*) as well as the prominent role of family. There are also websites to hire “best men’s services” (the famous chamberlains) whose rates vary according to charm and beauty. Other girls choose to replace traditional *valse* with themed party in which participants play roles (medieval, horror, hip hop dance group). *Quinceañera* party can go on until late at night and some services also include breakfast service to participants before returning home. In these cases, parents are not invited to the party and girls do not follow the rules applied to the traditional

ceremony. They prefer to go clubbing with their girlfriends and mates or to organize an informal party without parental supervision.

### **AN EMANCIPATION FROM THE FAMILY FOR A GREATER INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY**

Parties with friends are the most common new forms of celebrating the fifteenth birthday according adolescents. They usually take place at the girl's or at one of her friends' houses, but parents can also opt for renting a room with a music group or a disc jockey. This increasingly popular way of celebrating mainly occurs in middle-class families. Family ceremony is hence replaced by a party with friends of the same age (sometimes with presence of boys), discarding relatives and the extended family in favor of elective non-relational siblings, based on horizontal gender affinities. Traveling abroad or within the country is the most current alternative way to celebrate the *quinceañera*. In these cases, the family does not necessarily accompany girls during the trip. Parents fund the travel but they won't participate. Other friends generally accompany girls who make of these trips their first autonomous experience away from home.

"I travelled several days with my girlfriend to the Paracas Peninsula in Southern Peru. This was my first trip alone, that is to say, without my family. It was fun because we were alone and even if we have not done a big party, we enjoy being independent for a few days." (Carla, 24 years old).

In these examples, the *quinceañera* is mainly conceived as a separator act. Girls opting for a trip with friends are for the first time experiencing a physical separation from their families and learn to manage themselves independently. In this sense, this kind of celebration consists in a rite of initiation that marks the girl's change of status; she will demonstrate that by supporting herself autonomously for the duration of the trip. This can be linked to other contemporary rites of passage such as the first menstruation described by Michael Houseman (2010), which also implies a stronger individualization of girls. Compared to traditional expressions in which all members of the extended family are gathered at the ceremony, these cases reveal a weakening and decline of the kinship role. Ultimately, the *quinceañera* ritual managed to survive over time but has been transformed and reinvented through new, more individual and juvenile practices. Its contemporary manifestations are more frequent in the middle and upper classes and indicate that family environment is losing its grip on this event in favor of peer groups.

"Some traditions of the celebration are lost. For example, before, the young girl's dance with her father and the boy she liked was inevitable, but now a group choreography prepared by friends and practiced in advance has replaced that. Moreover, it is no longer a very solemn party, as clothing demonstrates: dresses are not so long or "princess" kind of style anymore, but short and fashion. In addition, in the traditional celebrations, there were adult guests like uncles and friends'

relatives, but now parties are almost exclusively young people events.” (Cristel, 22 years old).

Jacobijn Olthoff didn’t notice these modern reinterpretations of the *quinceañera* ritual. This is probably due to the fact that his ethnographic work focused on the girls’ lives in poor neighborhoods of Lima, where the rite tends to stick to its traditional dimensions (Olthoff 2006).

My own empirical research shows girls choosing to celebrate their 15 years old by a trip or parties with friends generally belong to higher socio-economic classes. A trip abroad implies an investment of several hundreds or even thousands of dollars that only few households in Peru are able to afford. Therefore, the choice for this kind of celebration expresses the access to a form of socioeconomic elite. It aims to formalize a social status for the girl and her family within the highly unequal and hierarchical Peruvian society. *Quinceañera* travels are also a way to show to the young girl’s circle that herself and her family can enjoy international mobility and integration in the global world, which in Lima is reserved only to well-off social sectors. Alongside with traveling abroad, trendy celebrations are also the way for young girls to share lifestyles and cultural experiences typical to the Western countries and mainly of the United States.

“Some parties for the fifteenth birthday have recently acquired a particular importance, far removed from its traditional features. There is no more *valse* with the father, nor galan choice. Now, there are parties where everything has to be bigger and more ostentatious. More than anything else they look like MTV<sup>5</sup>.” (María, 23 years old).

These innovative practices to celebrate the passage to the 15 years old tend to stand out from the traditional *quinceañera* mass culture still dominant among popular classes in Peru as well as in the other Latin American countries. Its can also be interpreted as a rejection of popular culture from a tiny fringe of Lima population, who prefers to borrow cultural experiences from elsewhere. Preference for these “modern” forms of celebration is a way for girls and their family of displaying their membership to a social class that differs from the vast majority of the Peruvian society. “The ability to produce classifiable practices (...) and the ability to appreciate these practices” (Bourdieu, 1979: 190) help to define one’s own style of life and to affirm a status reflecting a high position in Lima’s social structure. The initiatory rite of the fifteenth birthday remains an event symbolizing the end of childhood. Yet these new forms of celebration do not include any longer a ceremony formalizing the entry into womanhood and the path towards marriage.

These new manifestations of *quinceañera* denote a body control by girls independently from family’s domination. Especially in plastic surgery, travels and parties with friends, these options match primarily with personal preferences. Girls

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<sup>5</sup> MTV (Music Television) is an American television channel that presents a program called “My Super Sweet Sixteen” about lives of wealthy teenagers preparing and celebrating their golden age birthday (16 years old in the United States) with big parties.

from urban middle classes take on new gendered codes typical of modernity, which allow the individual to choose her close friends and adopt her own norms (Fellous 2001). Although parental consent is still needed in this kind of decision, adolescents perform a control of their bodies as expression of individual identity (Le Breton 2011). Body self-control beside traditional family norms shows to domestic and intimate circles the young girls' wish of empowerment, i.e. their desire for greater independence from parents. In these recent manifestations, the *quinceañera* is an event integrated in girls' life courses. In this sense, it is not anymore a rite of passage, as it can still be seen in other traditional forms of rituals occurring at this age and symbolizing a change of status (Le Breton 2013: 11). The new relationship to the body and the acquisition and shaping of a feminine identity observed in recent forms of the ritual implies the lengthening of the process of transition to adulthood in Peru. The autonomous control of the body, in particular through surgeries, demonstrates the girls' willingness to take their lives in hand.

### AN EVENT WITHIN INDIVIDUAL LIFE COURSES

Despite the transformations that it has undergone, the *quinceañera* ritual has not lost its importance in recent years. This celebration has been adapted to modern forms in order to survive. For women of thirty, forty or fifty years old, stories related to this event are usually filled with emotion and nostalgia. Likewise, this celebration is still central in the lives of young girls. Whether in its traditional or modern forms, girls always identify this event as an important time of their life accompanying biological and statutory changes. Like many other rituals, the most critical aspect is certainly not the celebration itself, but the memory of it, the footprint left in the girl's life, mainly consisting in the feeling of having shared with peers a common experience structuring their feminine identity.

“I haven't felt a big change in my life after my quinceañera celebration. On the other hand, I remember that afterwards I could always talk about it with my friends.” (Consuelo, 24 years old).

The trip that has replaced more traditional forms serves the same purpose. The trip experience and the degree of autonomy from the family rather than the journey itself is what more importantly contribute to lead the girl towards the end of childhood. The internalization of this experience contributes to a gradual change of status and constitutes an important biographical event in the girls' “private calendar” (Leclerc-Olive 2010). In this respect, any event has an objective face – “what happens in a particular way in a given situation” (a party with friends, a trip abroad) – and a subjective face – “what remains and stresses in the subjective and inter-subjective world” (memories between friends) – which is the only one to give a meaning to the rite and to this current change of status (Negroni 2010). Both in the traditional or modern forms, the celebration of the fifteenth birthday does not depreciate the ritual dimension. In its contemporary manifestations, however, it

turns to a greater individualization and does not symbolize anymore the formal entry into womanhood.

Diversity in celebrations indicates that the young girls' biography is becoming more complex. The transition to adulthood gradually ceases to be pre-determined and synchronized with the ceremony of the fifteenth birthday especially in its most recent forms. Girls who are single, living at their parents' home and plan to start studying after high school, enter a phase of transition between childhood and adulthood: youth. This emerges in Peru as a pivotal period in the young girls' life. Peer groups, high school and university replace the extended family as the main space of socialization. Recent evolutions of *quinceañera* celebration for girls converge towards this trend. They indicate an extension of the period of transition between childhood and adult status as well as the consequent emergence of youth, primarily in the Peruvian cities. This phenomenon is not exclusive of Peru and can be observed in other Latin American countries. Talking about the *quinceañera* celebration in Mexico in the 1990s, Steenbeck already observed that the adolescent is "neither a girl, nor a woman and both at the same time" (Steenbeck 1995: 93).

*Quinceañera* remains a milestone and symbolic expression of the end of childhood, but it is insufficiently relevant to interpret the girls' entry into adulthood. This finding sheds light on the category of youth, a phase of life whose definition varies across societies and cultures. The emergence of 'youth' in Peru is concomitant with the reorganization of the rites of passage, the extension of higher education, the report of professional transitions and the time preceding family formation (which tend to postpone the access to full adulthood age). Each girl chooses her own *quinceañera* celebration and this event represents now a gradual transition to adulthood. Weakness of the rite in its traditional version suggests an increasing individuation of girls in their process of transition to adulthood. It also shows how the Peruvian society, and in particular Lima, is moving towards modernity and democratic individualism. This also highlights a greater similarity with Western societies, where no rite of passage or specific event marks a change of status that would give "to young people the feeling to leave adolescence and become a man or a woman" (Le Breton 2013: 72). Plastic surgery of breast could be an exception in this sense since it is an event implying both a biological and statutory change (the perception of breast as a typical form of femininity). Girls who make this choice prove to her intimate and domestic circles the grip on herself and her life as an adult woman. They carry on their body an act of empowerment and separation of children age. This act of emancipation can also be read as a hypermodern representation of the body, since girls manage to control physical limits and to release themselves from physical constraints imposed to subjects. This form of self-control by girls is also a way of taking possession of their body (usually a scary issue for many female adolescents) and a way of approaching socially constructed standards of beauty, imposed on younger girls as an assertive femininity injunction in a society still deeply marked by a dominant *machismo*.

## CONCLUSION

In Peru, the girls' fifteenth birthday is still a traditional celebration. Yet important changes are ongoing especially among middle and upper classes, especially concerning the progressive undermining of the role of the family and the rise of new options such as trips abroad and informal parties with peers. This diversification of ritual forms however does not imply the "de-ritualization" of society. Phenomena of recreation are at the origin of new kinds of celebration which reflect broader social and cultural changes.

This article mainly relies on a sociological approach to the study of the rite of *quinceañera*. The longitudinal empirical analysis also involves an ethnographic perspective to this practice and to Peruvian society in general. In this sense, ethnography is far from being a single tool for sociology (Sirota 2012). This discipline recognized as such in the social sciences with regard to its long history represents a specific scientific mode of approach oriented to exchange and horizontal human relationships. "Field work is essential, it involves an encounter with the actors, the construction of a methodology, always qualitative, made of observations and interviews" (Levy 2004: 80). Ethnographic working methods consist in a particular construction of the object through a relationship based on trust and otherness developed over time. An intimate relationship with people is established based on the sharing of every detail of daily life.

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