

## Dance for Mother Lake on the Arid Tititaca Plateau: Observations from Fieldwork Seasons 1993–2005

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### Introduction

In the Andes Mountains' high Tititaca plateau in Peru and Bolivia, vast expanses of dry earth stretch to distant mountains punctuated only by *ichu*, a spiky bunch grass, and *t'ola*, shrubs like sagebrush. Yet a golden high altitude glow tinges everything, and close to the ground, cactus bloom in dayglow pink and orange. The high desert presents intense challenges, yet over the centuries Tititaca plateau farmers and herders developed diverse strategies of water engineering, hardy seeds and microclimates (Yampara 1992).

One characteristic Tititaca adaptation, I postulate, reveals a ritual relation with water highlighted by dance pilgrimages to Mother Lake, the life force in waters and lakes (Pan-Andean Gathering of the Uru People of Water, Iruhito, Bolivia, 2004). Fundamental desert routes are used by multiethnic pilgrims to her holy site of Lake Tititaca and modern large-scale celebrations in Copacabana, Bolivia, and Puno, Peru, and have potential parallels in the remains of earlier state-sponsored pilgrimages of the Inka and Tiwanaku civilisations and even earlier Chiripa community

gatherings (Bauer and Stanish 2001; Janusek 2008; Stanish 2003). Archaeological and ethnographic sources indicate that ritual activity involving the veneration of water has been important in this high desert plateau for millennia. In the renowned reciprocity of the Andes, many residents of the vast desert today unite, and may have united in the past, in large spiritual festivities to give art and dance pilgrimages to Mother Lake for her continued gift of life.

The dance processions and rituals to Mother Lake that motivate Andean spirituality are little addressed in the academic literature—particularly in Puno between Cusco to the north and Bolivia to the south. Studies document traditional Andean pilgrimages, for example, to the north at Mount Ausangate for *Quyllur Rit'i* (Allen 1997; Heckman 2003; Sallnow 1987) and to the south from Bolivia's Titiqaqa shores (MacCormack 1984; Maidana 2004) to Oruro (Delgado 1992; Pachaguayaya 2008; Pauwels 1999).

This paper will first describe how desertification and climate disruption have impacted the high plateau. Then the article will describe key elements of my ethnographic fieldwork in Copacabana and Puno that investigated modern Andean spiritual practices. Multiethnic pilgrims continue to fill Puno, Copacabana and other lake sites to give offerings and seek blessings from Mother Lake. Today's artists build on and enhance their ties to their heritages in music and dance (Rojas 2006: 120–158; Turino 1989; Vilca 2002), art (Maidana 2004; Palao 1995: 64) and archaeological temple remains (Alcaldía Municipal Jesús de Machaca 2010; Policarpio Flores, author's interview, Tiwanaku, 1999; Janusek 2008: 314–315).

Similarities, though not requirements, among the distinct dance pilgrimages to Mother Lake begin with desert conditions around a sacred high mountain lake regarded as Mother Lake. In a personal component, pilgrims may create art in a heartfelt ritual relation with Mother Lake. The art, music and dance are also displayed in multiethnic processions -public and collective acts of giving back to her. The whole, personal and collective, often seeks Mother Lake's blessings on new life and on new endeavours.

After desertification data and ethnographic observations, the article will review relevant highlights and parallels in archaeological sites of Copacabana and Titiqaqa lakeshores. Rich indications of ritual activity span millennia. Early Chiripa remains (Chávez 1988; Chávez 2004) -some as early as 1500 BCE (Hastorf 2007)- increased in complexity and monumental scale during the Tiwanaku (Browman 2004; Kolata 1993; Vranich 2006; Young-Sánchez 2004b) and Inka civilizations (Hyslop 1990; Stanish 2003).

### **Fieldwork and Methodology**

This discussion of contemporary dance pilgrimages draws from my ethnographic fieldwork during 12 years living in Quechua and Aymara communities around Lake Titiqaqa in Peru and Bolivia, particularly Quechua Taquile Island near Puno, and biennial return visits. From 1993 to 2005, I participated in and researched the February festivities in Puno and the region. Descriptions of festival events in Puno complement the work of ethnohistorians of Inka times and archaeologists of Tiwanaku and early Titiqaqa.

The methodologies highlight the Andean worldview seen in ritual arts and oral prayers and narratives (Belenky et al. 1986; Smith 1999; Turner 2009). I observed subsistence farmers and fishers undertaking ancestral rituals to Mother Lake, organizing village activities according to a traditional ceremonial calendar and celebrating the year's largest festivals in February. This heeding of Andean ways of knowing reveals Andean principles not always found in written texts and religious institutions. To emphasise this alternative worldview, I forego the hispanicised spelling of Titicaca to use the Andean spelling of Titiqaqa with the Aymara/Quechua alphabet enacted in Bolivia (1984) and Peru (1985) that follows the Quechua and Aymara pronunciation audible in farmers' speech.

Archaeologists have requested the inclusion of Andean spirituality to better understand the past (Hastorf 2007: 77; Kolata 2000: 591), even though today's practices may not mimic the precedents exactly and are separated by long time spans. While the ethnographic features may shed light on activities in the archaeological remains, the details in this paper

clearly demonstrate that today's dynamic and changing celebrations are not precisely the same as the likewise shifting activities of past centuries and millennia.

This direct historical approach works back from the multiple forms of observable activities in the present -processions, ritual offerings, musical instruments, ceremonial shrines- in the same continuously occupied region (see Klein 2001: 376; Smith 2012: 5). Among the changes, multiple and diverse threads of human interest can be detected in the lakeside rituals on the Tititaca plateau. Parallels and potential linkages exist between the Tititaca examples occurring on the shores of the lake that has long been spiritually significant. Indeed, the variety of local details amplifies the impact of the dance pilgrimages.

Analysis of dance pilgrimages to Mother Lake deepens modern understanding of Andean spirituality and applies to research results in diverse areas. For example, the strong spirituality influences Andean development values and social organisation today (Apffel-Marglin 2011; Genge 2003; Huanacuni 2010) and Andean interpretations of the remains of the past (e.g. Niles 1988; Scarborough 2008). Furthermore, these skills of community building and spiritual bonding illuminate the ways in which humans can adapt and thrive among sparse desert shrubs.

### **Background: High Desert Lakes**

Desertification over millennia reduced the two great Paleolithic lakes that covered much of the Tititaca plateau: in the north Lake Tititaca is the great remnant lake and in the drier Bolivian south small remnant lakes persist along with two main salt flats (fig. 1; Sáenz 2006: 38). Uyuni shimmers today as the largest salt flats in the world. The salty sandy land north of the Coipasa salt flats provides a home to Uru-Chipaya people. Describing themselves as ancient People of Water, the Chipaya devised a labour-intensive method of desalinating soils through a hydraulic system of canals, dykes and reservoirs (De la Zerda 1993: 113–114). Using the variable Rio Lauca, farmers flood certain areas to provide fodder for livestock as well as organic humus for the soil. In rotation, these lands are then dried to cultivate drought-tolerant quinoa and bitter potatoes

(De la Zerda 1993: 113–114). Efficient farming techniques are only the beginning of agricultural practice as ritual offerings are necessary for a good harvest. Chipayas venerate water: during February carnival Chipayas don coloured streamers and kneel by the Rio Lauca to offer libations and music (Ruiz 1997).

Just north, Lake Poopó was Bolivia's second largest lake after Titqaqa, though suffering from increasingly long droughts. Suddenly in November 2014, millions of fish and birds died, victims of climate change, the loss of water from diminished glaciers and mining pollution. By late 2015, Lake Poopó dried completely (Blair 2018). While the Uru–Murato people remembered casting sweets into Lake Poopó as Carnival offerings (Blair 2018) and caring for the lake and its flamingos (Acosta 1997), now former

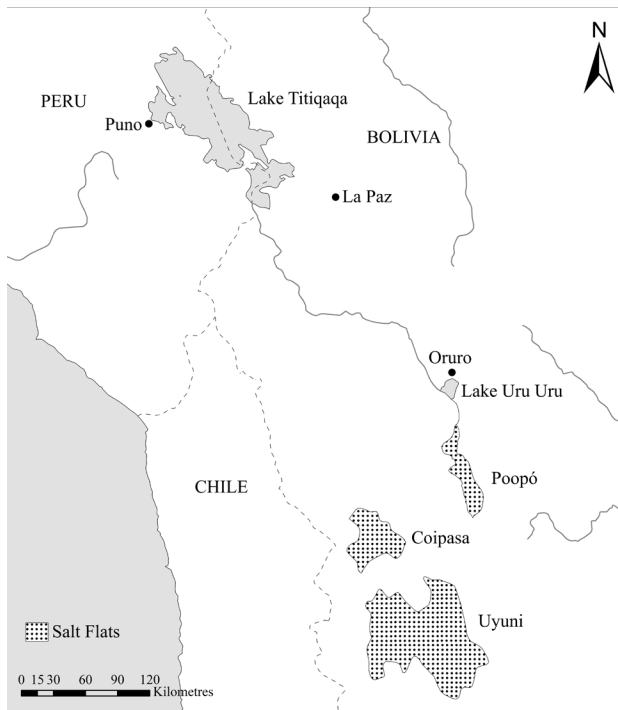


Fig. 1. Map of the Titqaqa Basin (after Orlove 2002: xvii digitalized by Emma Brownlee).

fisher folk explore new subsistence in Uyuni, urban areas or as dry land farmers. The accelerated relocation may hasten the vanishing of Poopó's remaining 800 Uru-Muratos, one of the oldest societies in the Americas (Blair 2018; Sáenz 2006).

Further north, Lake Tititaca's far-reaching influence comes from being the Andes' and the Earth's highest navigable lake (Isbell and Silverman 2002: 189). High mountain lakes are especially sacred (e.g. Bolivia, Bastien 1985: 86; Smith 2018; Peru, Heckman 2003: 98; Apffel-Marglin 2011: 79; Ecuador, Sarmiento and Frolich 2017; Colombia, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978: 24) and Tititaca is the largest high lake. In *physical* geography, Tititaca lies at an altitude of 3800m, and measures roughly 160 by 50km. Crops struggle with high altitude solar rays and winds in addition to droughts and over 250 nights of frost per year (Murra 1984: 120). Yet, the polities with the densest populations in the past and today were centered at altitudes above 3200m and used Andean anti-frost and anti-famine techniques (Murra 1984: 124).

The people of the Tititaca basin have long utilized ecological techniques, such as for example, *waruwaru*-raised beds that collect rainwater in the troughs between them. Some raised bed remains date to the first millennium BCE (Janusek 2008: 188; Sáenz 2006: 40). Roots soak up water to protect against frosts and drought and to gain nutrients from the fish droppings and fertile muck in the warm shallows. These cultivation methods produce larger, more reliable harvests despite the variable climate of these high deserts.

However, rational, efficient steps are not enough. Agricultural success requires a permanent dialogue with plants and unseen beings to complement the technological skills (e.g. Alanoca 2018; Apffel-Marglin 2011; Arnold and Yapita 1996; De la Cadena 2015; Yampara 1992). Andean farmers nurture a continual relation with Mother Lake—*Mama Qucha* in Quechua, *Mama Quta* in Aymara. In the sacred geography of the seemingly barren plains, the high altitude Lake Tititaca has long been considered the holy site of Mother Lake by different Andean peoples today and in the past (fig. 2 and fig. 3). One major focus of the lake's holiness

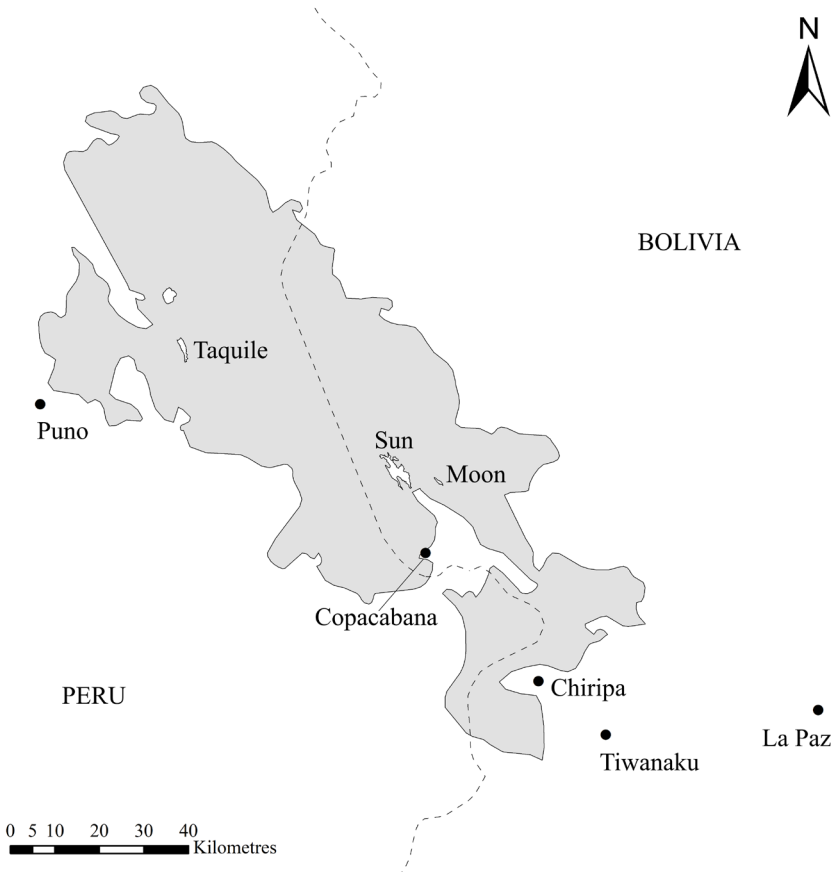


Fig. 2. Map of Lake Titicaca (after Stanish 2003: Map 1.3 digitalized by Emma Brownlee).

is the village of Copacabana on its southern Bolivian shores—a sacrosanct pilgrimage destination.

### **Festivals of Copacabana**

Copacabana emerges on the landscape after a lengthy journey across the top-of-the-world dry hills with rust and red-purple boulders—nestled on a cobalt Titicaca bay ringed by a crescent white sand beach. Pilgrims of



Fig. 3. Lake Titicaca from the Copacabana peninsula, Bolivia (photograph by Mary Louise Stone).

Aymaras, Quechuas, South American Catholics and world tourists fill the streets and abundant lodgings. The Virgin of Copacabana bears the Quechua name used when the Spanish arrived (Ramos [1621] 1886), meaning ‘blue vision’ (Lara 2001: 201, 214), combined with the Catholic Mother recently arrived in the late 1500s (MacCormack 1984).

While the local people of Copacabana created a space for the newcomers, in the 1970s Peruvian and international researchers concurred that Andean spiritual festivals mixed Andean with Catholic forms on the surface - but did not syncretise their contents. The great pilgrimages that attracted thousands of Andeans, such as Copacabana, *Quyllur Rit'i* and Huanca followed their Andean roots (Gow 1974: 87–88; Sallnow 1974: 139; Urbano 1974: 44–46). Andean people continue to agree that beneath the surface Catholic dates and images, Andean spiritual festivals follow their root Andean purposes and activities (e.g. Van den Berg 1992; Van Kessel 1992; author’s interviews with professor and artist Edwin Loza, Puno, 1997; with Aymara sociologist Simón Yampara, Copacabana, 1995).



In a slow but modern and motorised procession, as just one characteristic example, international vehicles covered with profuse art snaked up the road to the Sanctuary. Garlands of red trumpet-like *kantuta* flowers adorned the windshield of a city bus; a basket of white roses hung on the radiator grill. On an oversized Volvo truck, streamers wafted in the breeze over multi-coloured crocheted hearts and on the dashboard an older form of mobility was placed: a small reed boat. Promptly at two in the afternoon, the Catholic priest came forth to ritually bless with holy water the recently-acquired vehicles to launch their new working lives. These rituals to Mother Lake and to the modern Virgin of Copacabana sought blessings on the beginning of life ventures.

Creating and displaying the art in Copacabana is the ritual relation with Mother Lake. Crafting and/or decorating beautiful objects with prayers of intent and devotion, affection and intimacy generates the relationship with the unseen and co-creates the new beginnings in life (for art in Andean spirituality, also Allen 1997). Furthermore, a collective display offers the art in a continual remembrance (for reciprocity in Andean spirituality, also Mamani 2000: 32–36; for scientific explanation, Lyon 2016). Copacabana's uniqueness includes the year-round outpouring of multi-faith ceremonies that seek the blessings of Mother Lake to begin major life changes.

### **Festivals of Puno**

The 2nd of February unifies the arid Titqaqa plateau, established by Spanish Catholics during the colonial period. In the south, on the small remnant lake of Uru Uru, the mining city of Oruro, Bolivia, celebrates the 2nd of February Virgin of the Socavón or Mine Tunnel, though she is fêted during movable Catholic carnival dates (fig. 1; see Pauwels 1999). Oruro is today's center for the Uru People of Water who provide a unifying thread across the high desert plateau as one of the oldest populations around its lakes and salt flats from Uyuni to Puno (De la Zerda 1993; Nación Originaria Uru 2001; Rojas 2006; Wachtel 2001). Alongside the Catholic dates, ancient shrines connected with natural rock outcroppings continue in use today (Delgado 1992), oral narratives maintain the ancient history of the territory (Pachaguayaya 2008:71–76) and archaeological remains

have been explored by many specialists (Guerra 1995; Janusek 2008: 20, 69–72; Sáenz 2006).

On Lake Tititaca's Bolivian shores, the Virgin of Copacabana's date is the 2nd of February when celebrations punctuate the year-round pilgrim rituals and where archaeological remains remind of millennia of heritage (Kolata 1993: 63). On Tititaca's Peruvian shores, Puno's Virgin of Candelaria or Candlemas is also honoured on the 2nd of February with festivities for weeks. Recognising the greatest spiritual festivals in Peru and Bolivia, UNESCO designated the February dance offerings in Oruro (2001) and Puno (2014) as Cultural Heritages of Humanity (UNESCO 1995–2012a; UNESCO 1995–2012b).

While today Copacabana showcases rituals that seek Mother Lake's blessings to begin ventures and that parallel an emphasis on origin at the largescale ancient sites, Puno and Oruro especially demonstrate costumed dance procession venerating the Mother of the Lake. To give a flavour of urban Puno's overlapping ritual festivities, I share 1996 observations from the indigenous procession and the urbanised veneration.

As the statue of the Virgin of Candelaria processed through Puno streets to bestow blessings on the 2nd of February, approximately 70 community groups of rural pilgrims followed behind to dance their offerings (fig. 4). Quechua herders guided their llamas adorned with textiles. Aymara pilgrims sought protection for their herds with condor skirts. Farmers from the lower and warmer valleys danced with flowered headdresses and mountain dancers showed off intricate wool textiles. Wooden and cane flute groups alternated with the twirling dancers of Tititaca's ancestral communal panpipers (Aymaras, Turino 1989; Quechuas, Vilca 2002).

One week later, approximately 70 large city groups closed the streets. As the veneration procession passed before the Sanctuary -reputed to be built over an Andean shrine- each group paused to offer homage to the Mother. The Virgin of the Lake stood in a reed boat, a *balsa*, like those used by the Uru in Puno for lake transport and harvesting. The oarsmen/archangels were dressed in the distinctive clothing of Taquile Island with knit hat and finely woven red belt. Thousands of devotees kneeled before the statue



Fig. 4. Dancers from Santiago de Pupuja, Azángaro, in Puno, Peru, for February 2nd indigenous dances in the Candelaria festivities (photograph by Mary Louise Stone).

with incense or danced special choreography, made tearful vows and left flowers at her feet. Padre Inocencio sprinkled the dancers with holy water square on the face. City streets filled again with dancers in ‘costumes of lights’ or *traje de luces*. Sequins and gold paints glinted in the sun. The driving beat of the brass bands of the *morenada* lake dance bonded agile youth with stately elders bedecked in gleaming capes (Maidana 2004). Tens of thousands of dancers, devotees and spectators filled Puno.

With art offerings similar to Copacabana, the activities of fashioning the costume art, offering collective music and choreography and hosting the dancers generate the ritual relation with Mother Lake -as my interviews in Puno illustrated. Puno’s then-Bishop Jesús Calderón (1996) explained, “In Puno, to be joyful is a form of prayer”. Dancer Hector (1996) asserted, “With my dance, I show my faith”. Offering one’s art requests Mother Lake to nurture her children and bless their undertakings. In the festivities of

Our *Mamacha* (a Quechua diminutive of affection like Mom), “No one is an orphan”, remarked Puno historian Enrique Bravo (1996; also Mamani 2000: 30–31; Stone 2011; for music and dance in Andean spirituality, also Arnold and Yapita 1998; Stobart 1996; Stone 2012, 2013). Though partying and imbibing alcohol thrived outside the ritual settings, a long-time Catholic priest in Puno, Padre Pepe Loits (author’s interview, Puno, 1997) added perspective on the festivities to the Quechua *Mamacha* or Mama: “I challenge you to mount this whole festivity without *Mamacha*”.

Puno’s uniqueness stems from the scale and quantity of dancing. In 2018, over 100 indigenous groups and over 80 *traje de luz* city groups danced (Vive Candelaria 2018). Participants often explain, “We dance because this is what our grandparents did”. In the Titiqaqa region, the ‘grandparents’ stretch back in time through the Inka, Tiwanaku and Chiripa cultures.

### **Archaeology of Lake Titiqaqa: Inka, Tiwanaku, Chiripa**

Lake Titiqaqa was revered as the origin site for all life in Inka times as well and the Inka founders themselves emerged from Titiqaqa (Sherbondy 1992: 56). History and archaeology record the state pilgrimage route to Copacabana built during the Inkas’ 1438–1532 expansion (e.g. Bauer and Stanish 2001). Of the famous Inka sanctuaries, Copacabana received the most visitors, according to the Spanish priest Alonso Ramos ([1621] 1886: 36). In 1590, the friar Martin de Murúa denounced Copacabana as holding “the greatest idolatry in all of Peru, where entire villages came—Indians of Cañares [Ecuador], Chachapoyas [northern Peru], from all the peoples, nations, and regions” (Murúa 1590, quoted in Montes 1999: 125, translated by the author). As multiethnic pilgrims arrive in Copacabana today, the Great Inka Road system provided travelers with a network of tambo lodges with provisions (Murra 1984: 122).

From Copacabana, visitors sailed to the Island of the Sun, climbed the wide entry stairway still extant and trekked to the northern end (Hyslop 1990: 301). The pilgrims may have approached with exuberant dance like we see today. At the island’s end, a red and yellow outcropping juts out from the Titiqaqa bedrock, the Sacred Rock regarded as the sacrosanct point of the origin of life. The finest Inka textiles covered the convex side

of the Sacred Rock facing the lake and gold plaques adorned the concave inner side of the altar. Barefoot pilgrims offered libations, called *ch'allas* today, and buried gold figurines and pottery vessels in the plaza before the Sacred Rock (Hyslop 1990: 77–78). Inka figurines, pottery and gold offerings were also discovered on an underwater ridge just north of the island (Reinhard 1992). In this holy area, the faithful may have accompanied their art offerings with prayers to Mother Lake for blessings on new life ventures, as they do today.

Following the pattern, the finest art was offered on the Sacred Rock and in the figurines. Likewise on the Island of the Moon, a gold and silver statue of Mother Titicaca, mother of the Inkas (Bernabé Cobo in 1653, cited in Silverblatt 1976: 332), stood in a large temple that displayed the only fine Cusco-style masonry in the entire lake sanctuary (Hyslop 1990: 286).

Earlier still, the Tiwanaku civilisation of the first millennium CE established the earliest state-sponsored pilgrimage route to Copacabana (Stanish 2003: 200–201) for the cultures that it unified from the Atacama Desert on the Pacific Ocean to the Amazon headwaters (Stanish 2003: Map 1.7). The first state temple in Copacabana was erected near the Sacred Rock of origin (Stanish 2003: 201) where offering remains of the fine art of ritual drinking cups and well-crafted objects of gold, silver, copper and bronze were discovered (Kolata 2004: 104).

On the mainland some 20km from the lakeshores, visitors entered the Tiwanaku capital. The temple of Puma Punku welcomed throngs with its wide, well-worn stairway and entry gateway. The city displayed “festival architecture” (Vranich 2006: 133–134) designed to create experiences of spiritual awe in pilgrims moving through enclosed plazas to open platforms and viewpoints, textiles and sculpted monuments. While the fine art of textiles, gold, turquoise, ceramics, stone, and wood is preserved (Young-Sánchez 2004a), the courtly art style described (Couture 2004), the panpipe music studied (Pérez 2004) and procession indicated (Vranich 2006), we can imagine the dances that may have filled these processions. Archaeologists called Tiwanaku’s holy city “a much more religious phenomenon than previously argued” (Browman 2004: 312) and “the place of human emergence” (Kolata 2004: 100) that offered “the

spiritual sources of life and regeneration for all” (Janusek 2008: 298)-the essence of Mother Lake’s blessings of origin and beginnings. In the semi-subterranean temple, ceremonies feasting the ancestors most likely continued in similar fashion to earlier cultures (Chávez 2004: 74).

Prior to Tiwanaku, early Titiqaqa cultures flourished. Despite their antiquity, many cultural practices today credit ancestral legacy. In the arts of Puno, cultural heritage influences the Quechua town of Pukara’s renowned miniature art (Palao 1995: 64) and Titiqaqa’s traditional communal panpipe groups (Aymara, Turino 1989; Quechua, Vilca 2002), and in Bolivia, Taraco’s (near Chiripa) fame in elaborate costumes for the *morenada* lake dance (Maidana 2004; Rojas 2006: 120–158). In architecture, the sunken court at the heart of Titiqaqa temples (Janusek 2005: 172) often hosts today’s ritual festivals and political statements (Qhunqhu Wankane, Alcaldía Municipal Jesús de Machaca 2010; Tiwanaku, Janusek 2008: 314–315; Kolata 1993: 302). Rituals celebrate monoliths (Scarborough 2008) and dedicate archaeological excavations (Hastorf 2007: 89–90; Alexei Vranich, author’s interview, Tiwanaku, 2002).

Titiqaqa celebration precedents arose in the Chiripa culture from around 1500 to 200 BCE (Chávez 2004: 73). Lake overlooks such as Copacabana’s Sacred Rock of origin formed important social and ritual landscapes (Janusek 2008: 76) and Chiripa habitations were discovered beneath the Tiwanaku temple complex there (Kolata 2004: 104). At Chiripa’s namesake site on lake shores farther south, temples displayed the beauty of red and yellow clay floors and double jamb doors (Chávez 1988: 18–19). Origin was celebrated through ancestor curation amidst the art offering fragments of ceramic trumpets and incense burners, drinking cups and pitchers, textiles and carved rocks (Hastorf 2007: 91–92). The trumpets may have rivaled Puno’s brass bands. Courts could hold community gatherings and archaeologist Christine Hastorf (2007) envisioned “music and song as people processed into the walled space” (Hastorf 2007: 91–92) and rituals with “the life-giving forces of the dead” (Hastorf 2007: 97). Around 1500 BCE, grandmothers were the central figures of burials, amid feasting remains (Hastorf 2007: 91). Still overlooking Mother Lake but in simpler temples than the Inkas’ gold statue of their Mother Titiqaqa,

Chiripa people celebrated their human grandmothers with feasts and perhaps with (fast-decaying) reed instruments.

## Conclusion

On a high arid plateau where water is the source of life, many Andean residents today cultivate a ritual relationship with Mother Lake. Unified by environment and attitude, numerous Andean inhabitants across the Titiqaqa plateau offer Mother Lake their arts and stamina in UNESCO-recognised dance processions. Today's multiethnic pilgrimages trek to Puno, Peru, and to Copacabana and Oruro in Bolivia, particularly during February. Insight into the spiritual and ritual festivities of the indigenous people of the Titiqaqa plateau today can perhaps provide insight into the ritual activities associated with the archaeological remains of the past. With distinct ancestral details across more than three millennia, the Inka, Tiwanaku and earlier Chiripa cultures gathered in Titiqaqa lake temples and overlooks and left valuable offerings to honour Mother Lake. These celebrations illustrate the nature and persistence of the desert strategies of dance pilgrimages to the Lake Mother on the Titiqaqa plateau. Residents built their lives in an extreme and arid environment with the blessings of Mother Lake, and apparently, they periodically gave thanks for these blessings through festivals and ritual offerings in the ancient past to the present.

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