

When COVID-19 quarantines ancestral Andean rituals

June 24 2020, by Alix Trébaol



Apu Ausangate. A reduced number of participants were authorized to hike up to the glacier on June 7. Credit: [Stefanos Nikologianis](#)

In Cusco, the old capital of the Inca Empire located in the Peruvian Andes, June is a month of celebration. Although Catholicism is the [majority](#) religion in Peru, indigenous and other communities have continued holding Inca rituals to honor the Earth, the sun, and the region's glacier-capped mountains. In 2020, Cusco will celebrate these

ancestral traditions virtually due to [COVID-19](#). Staying true to the hashtag [#LaMagiaDeCuscoEnCasa](#) (Cusco's magic at home), the municipality has planned a wide range of virtual activities. These include [Tik Tok](#) competitions in traditional costumes, guides to making a local festive dish, [chiriuchu](#), at home, and a roundtable with international participants like GlacierHub's editor-in-chief Ben Orlove.

Though recognizing Christ, the Virgin Mary, and numerous saints, many Peruvians also commemorate local and natural deities. These include the Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the Apus, which are sacred glacier capped-peaks that protect villages in the region. Andean celebrations like the Qoyllur Rit'i [festival](#) and the Catholic Corpus Christi celebrations lead up to the most important ceremony, called Inti Raymi. It honors the sun and occurs on June 24th to celebrate the winter solstice of the Southern Hemisphere.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly elected mayor of Cusco, Ricardo Valderrama Fernández, an anthropologist, reaffirmed the importance of celebrating the city's Inca roots. "We are inheritors of a culture that has resisted and overcome difficulties and tragedies. We will not feel sorry about ourselves," he said in a [speech](#) introducing the virtual festivities on May 24th.

Like any important social event in Inca culture, festivities started with a ceremony of offerings to the Pachamama and the sacred Apus. "It is tradition to give some kind of payment to mark the beginning of a social event, whether it is huge or as minimal as building a house," Zoila Mendoza, an anthropologist in the Department of Native American studies at the University of California Davis, explained to GlacierHub. On June 1st, a reduced number of participants including the mayor gave offerings to Mother Earth to renovate the pact between the people of the region with nature. This year, the event, which was broadcasted on TV, presented a special request. Between masks and social distancing, the

reduced number of participants asked the deities to [put an end](#) to COVID-19.

After the ceremony of offerings came the [festival](#) of Qoyllur Rit'i, or "snow star" in Quechua. This five-day long celebration begins with a pilgrimage. Participants reach the sanctuary at the foothills of Mount Sinakara, which is located some 90 kilometers (56 miles) east of Cusco. Ukukus, costumed dancers who represent mythological Andean beings, then hike another six hours up on the glacier. They pay respect to a cross placed 1,700 meters (5,500 feet) high on the sacred Apu Ausangate.

Qoyllur Rit'i typically attracts 100,000 participants, the majority Indigenous peasants from the Cusco region, with many others from all over Peru and abroad. Held on June 6-10, this year's festival was the first in centuries without a large celebration. "Only a few dispersed groups participated. They were able to hold a closed-door mass," Carmen Escalante, an anthropologist at the Universidad San Antonio Abad del Cusco, told GlacierHub. Qoyllur Rit'i, like many other virtual celebrations, was broadcasted by Cusco's municipal TV station.

With the help of technology, Cusco can maintain its traditions amidst COVID-19. However, "broadcasting Inti Raymi on TV is not a revolution," Richard Burger, an Andean archeologist at Yale, explained to GlacierHub. Such celebrations have long been showcased as they have grown into major tourist attractions. In the 1940s, centuries after the Catholic church officially suppressed Indigenous religions in 1572, a new interest in representing Inca rituals arose. "First, they created the Cusco week. In the 1970s, it turned into a whole month," Zoila Mendoza told GlacierHub. "It is much like Seville's Easter Week," she added, as most festivities attract thousands of local and international tourists today.

Although this push is incentivized by economic interest, "tourists help legitimize Inca rituals" according to Richard Burger. These ceremonies

are known to be [historically accurate](#) and are a way for Cusqueños to proudly affirm their Inca ancestry. They propose a definition of Peruvian identity that is much more connected to its Inca roots than in Lima, which has lost much of its connection to Quechua language and Indigenous traditions.

The Peruvian government is currently examining a motion to move the Ministry of Culture from Lima to Cusco. "This would recognize our country's roots and would be a huge force for Indigenous communities," Lucy Salazar, a Peruvian anthropologist at Yale, told GlacierHub. Such actions, combined with holding the festivities in spite of the pandemic, emphasize that Andean communities continue to deeply esteem the Earth and glacier-covered peaks.

COVID-19 has revealed that tradition can help people cope with a crisis. In Peru, it has encouraged a fuller awareness of the nation's cultural roots in the highlands of the Andes.

This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University
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Provided by Earth Institute at Columbia University

Citation: When COVID-19 quarantines ancestral Andean rituals (2020, June 24) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-covid-quarantines-ancestral-andean-rituals.html>

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