

# Cultural appropriation in the Peruvian Andes sparks discussion around Indigenous identity

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Pilgrims kneel at the Quyllurit'i shrine, with the Qulqipunku glacier rising in the background. Credit: [Zoila Mendoza](#)

Every year, more than 100,000 people travel to the Quyllurit'i glacier

shrine from many communities and towns throughout the Cusco region and beyond, all participating in the largest pilgrimage in the Peruvian Andes. In 2014, a regional political party appropriated one of the central figures of the pilgrimage, the pablito or ukuku—a move that the pilgrimage's organizing body opposed. A recent study by Guillermo Salas Carreño analyzes this moment and how the response reveals emerging conceptions of what it means to be Indigenous in the Peruvian Andes.

The Qoyllurrit'i shrine is located just over 43 miles from the major city of Cusco. At an altitude of nearly 16,000 feet above sea level, the shrine sits at the foot of the Qolqepunku glacier. With its roots in [both Andean religions and Catholicism](#), the pilgrimage honors Lord Quyllurit'i, the image of Christ on a rock. The pablito/ukuku dancers play a critical role in the pilgrimage, serving as the mediators between Lord Quyllurit'i and the sacred glacier. They circulate widely at the pilgrimage site, and they are the ones who ascend up to glacial ice at night, singing Quechua sounds in falsetto.

Cultural practices have long been appropriated and [commodified](#) in Peru with little to no pushback, but when in 2014 the pablito/ukuku was appropriated by the Kausachun Cusco Regional Political Movement, the Council of Pilgrim Nations— Quyllurit'i organizing body—resisted. The Council of Nations is composed of former pablito/ukuku dancers recommended by their community.

In 2004, the pilgrimage was declared part of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation by Peru's Ministry of Culture. Discourse around the pilgrimage began to evolve, with a new sentiment of national pride emerging among the public. In 2011, the pilgrimage was inscribed on the [UNESCO List of Intangible](#) Heritage of Humanity.

Zoila Mendoza, a Peruvian anthropologist at the University of California

Davis, explained that these [declarations of cultural and intangible heritage](#) in 2004 and 2011 set the stage for the political party appropriation in 2014. "All of this official attention to the site validated all of the images that are related to Quyllurit'i," she told [GlacierHub](#). Of all of the symbols of the pilgrimage, the pabito/ukuku dancer is the most evocative, Mendoza said, "because the ukuku/pablucha/pablito character is the central character of the pilgrimage—it represents... the coming together of the glacier with people. It became iconic."

In 2014, Carlos Moscoso, a [political candidate](#) and founder of the Movimiento Fuerza Cusco, [changed](#) the name of his group to Kausachun Cusco Regional Movement, an organization somewhat like a political party, though with [regional rather than national scope](#). He campaigned in the 2011 elections, drawing on pablito/ukuku imagery, ultimately coming in second to the winning candidate. The renaming of his political organization in 2014 represented a further attempt to associate with Quyllurit'i and appeal to regionalist sentiments ("kausachun" is a Quechua word that translates to "long live!"). In addition, the political organization continued to use pablito/ukuku dress and dance in its campaigning.

Beginning in 2013, the Council of Nations worked to prevent Kausachun from using the pablito/ukuku. Kausachun claimed both that it was not using the pablito but rather the ukuku image (both names for the same character, albeit with varying etymologies), and that the ukuku was part of the public domain. Finally, after a statement and demonstrations by the Council of Nations, and widespread local criticism, Kausachun changed its party symbol.



Musicians from the community of Pomacanchi. Credit: [Zoila Mendoza](#)

Though this incident is framed as cultural appropriation by a political party, problems arise when the conceptual frameworks around cultural appropriation in the United States are imposed on this incident. As

Mendoza points out, in the pilgrimage "there is not a dichotomy as far as Catholic and not-Catholic. It doesn't exist." Nor is there a dichotomy between being Indigenous and mestizo—a term that refers to having mixed Indigenous and European heritage. Bruce Mannheim, anthropologist at the University of Michigan, explained that the thinking around appropriation in the United States "has essentialized ethnicity in ways that it's not necessarily essentialized on the ground." The Quyllurit'i pilgrimage is composed of many mestizo participants, and though Western thought assumes Indigenous and mestizo identities to be mutually exclusive, the Council of Nations presented itself as an Indigenous organization in resisting the appropriation of the pablito/ukuku. Because historically there have not been strong claims to indigeneity—which has long been associated with lower social standing—in the Peruvian Andes, this response represents an emerging identity politics around indigeneity.

In addition, Mannheim explained to GlacierHub the significance of religious context in understanding the conflict over the appropriation of the pablito/ukuku dancers. "The ukukus have to be recruited through a religious brotherhood, and it requires devotion... a kind of year-round participation in activities, culminating in going to Quyllurit'i," he said. "A political party cannot use ukukus because they belong to the religious context. So the appropriation is from religion to politics."

It remains to be seen whether the Council of Nations and other regional organizations will begin to self-identify as Indigenous. Regardless, the events of 2014 altered the political landscape of Cusco and opened the door to new possibilities for Indigenous self-identification. As this identification continues to evolve, it is likely to continue drawing on the longstanding devotion to the shrines and glacier peaks of the region.

**More information:** Guillermo Salas Carreño. Intangible heritage and the indigenization of politics in the Peruvian Andes: the dispute over the

political party appropriation of the pablito/ukuku dancer, *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/17442222.2020.1796316](#)

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