REALM OF THE ICE-CLOAKED MOUNTAIN GODS

high in the Andes hope is melting away

by CONSTANZA CERUTI

For centuries, if not millennia, people of the Andes have venerated their ice-capped mountains, which harbor within their glaciers the sacred waters upon which all life in the region is dependent. It is a tradition evident not only in the region's rich archaeological record, but one that continues today in the many communities that thrive in the shadows of the awe-inspiring peaks. Over the past decade, our team from Catholic University of Salta has recovered bundles of offerings and sacrifices left on Andean summits, which attest a profound devotion to the mountain gods–the highest found to date atop Llullaillaco, a 6,700-meter-high volcanic peak in northern Argentina. There, 500 years ago, three Inca children were sacrificed and buried along with textiles and amulets on this lofty mountain. As messengers to the realms of the gods, they would intercede for the good health of the Inca emperor and for a plentiful supply of water to ensure fertility of the llama herds and abundant crops.

Archaeologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Johan Reinhard and I could not believe our eyes when we first came across the face of the six-year-old girl after almost a month of archaeological fieldwork, enduring the cold and the extreme altitude of Llullaillaco's summit. In Quechua, the language of the Inca, Llullaillaco, means "that which lies about water, or which hides the water." It is a fitting moniker as Llullaillaco is the only mountain in the area to have a permanent ice field on its high slopes, which one might liken to a small hanging glacier. Yet this volcano feeds no streams or rivers that might quench the thirst of the Atacama Desert at its feet. Instead its waters are contained in a hidden lagoon, 1,000 meters down from its summit. Our sense of wonder would only grow stronger in the months that followed when we studied the mummified remains of a 15-year-old Inca maiden, and the seven-year-old boy back in our university laboratories; the CT scans showing all their organs, including the brains, in a near-perfect state of preservation.

Seven years have passed since we discovered the Llullaillaco ice mummies, and their presence among the living has contributed substantially to our knowledge of ancient Andean cultural heritage and the need to preserve it.

Looting has long been a major threat to the archaeological sites in South America, and the Inca mountaintop shrines are no exception. On a previous expedition to the 6,100-meter summit of nearby Mount Quehuar, we recovered a partly

destroyed mummy bundle that had been dynamited by treasure-hunters. But extraordinary sites such as these face a far greater foe in the form of global warming, a silent destroyer of Andean heritage and an ancient tradition of mountain god worship that continues to this day.

The retreating glaciers, brought on by ever-increasing summertime temperatures, are taking their toll on the religious life of the Andes. This became evident during a recent pilgrimage I observed while in the Vilcanota Range of the Andes in southern Peru.

The *Taytacha Qoyllur Ritti* (Festival of the Father of the Star of Snow) is one of the most important mountain pilgrimages in the Andean world. Every June, some 70,000 people gather at the glacier basin of Sinacara, the vast majority of pilgrims, merchants, and dancers coming from the Peruvian Sierra and the highlands of Bolivia. Some come from places as distant as northern Argentina and Chile, which, in the fifteenth century, were part of the greater Inca Empire.

Sinacara lies at an elevation of some 5,100 meters at the foot of the snow-capped Qolque Punku (the Silver Gate), not far from Ausangate, a sacred mountain revered by the ancient Inca and still invoked during initiation ceremonies and divination rituals. Today, however, the festivity is nominally dedicated to the worship of an image of Christ depicted on a sacred rock near the glacier, where, according to legend, Jesus is said to have miraculously appeared to a young indigenous peasant in the eighteenth century.

During the five-day festival, masked dancers don costumes representing the different ethnic groups of the Andes and dance day and night for hours. The *qhapaq chunchos*, adorned with feathered headdresses, incarnate the indomitable tribes of the Amazonian rainforest, on the lower slopes of the eastern Andes, while the *qhapaq collas* represent the wealthy Aymara herders of the Bolivian highlands. The physical endurance of the dancers is in itself an offering to the nearby mountain spirits or *Apus*, especially to *Apu Ausangate*.

During the climax of the festival, young "bear-men" known as *ukukus*, climb the glaciers that flow down from Qolque Punku. Acting as mediators between the pilgrims and the mountain spirits, the *ukukus* climb at night—braving freezing temperatures, bridging crevasses, and confronting the ghosts of condemned souls—to retrieve ice revered for its healing properties.

In years past, the *ukukus* would extract large chunks of ice—as big as they could carry on their backs—and return to their home communities, where it would be broken up and distributed among the villagers as blessings from the *Apus*. But sadly, things have begun to change and global warming is to blame. As the *ukukus* descended the glaciers of Qolque Punku, many now returned empty-handed.

In an attempt to halt the retreat of the glaciers, mountain police now forbid the extraction of ice. Pilgrims are only permitted to collect melt-water in small bottles to take back as relics.

One man I encountered brought a tiny effigy doll, representing a bear-man, on whose back he had placed a small handful of ice, hoping to be able to smuggle his precious cargo down the mountain, without catching the attention of the police. With a saddened heart, I could not help but admiring his strategy of resistance, and his fierce determination to honor the ancestral traditions, in spite of adversity.

As in ages past, pilgrims, including young children, climbed the lower reaches of the glaciers in daylight to light small candles on the ice. Bare footed and kneeling on the snow, they contemplated the flame in hopes of finding answers to their greatest concerns. Surely they would have preferred to use larger candles, of the kind that the Lord of the Star of Snow is said to like best. But these too are forbidden in another desperate attempt to stop the glacial retreat.

The Quechua fear that once the ice is gone, the Lord of the Star of Snow will no longer hear their prayers. In the heart of the Andes, the impact of global warming reaches beyond the imaginable.

BIOGRAPHY

A high-altitude archaeologist and the author of six books and numerous other publications, Constanza Ceruti is a scientific investigator for the National Council for the Scientific Research in Argentina and a professor of Inca archaeology at Catholic University of Salta. She has climbed more than 100 mountains above 5,000 meters. A recipient of the Gold Condor, the most important award given by the National Army of Argentina, Ceruti was named an Emerging Explorer of the National Geographic Society in 2005. In 2007 she received the Courage Award from the Wings Worldquest.