Flourishing horns and enchanted tubers: music and potatoes in highland Bolivia

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This paper examines the relationship between musical performance and the potato and its cultivation in a rural Andean hamlet. The potato, it emerges, is not viewed as a mundane staple, but is central to the structuring of musical expression. Unlike industrialised societies, musical performance is not abstracted away from everyday objects and activities. Rather, they provide the basis and inspiration for such expression, revealing a very different approach to ecology.

One of the central concerns of ethnomusicology is to discover the organizing principles and categories meaningful to the group in question. It should not be assumed that, for example, concepts of “harmony” or aspects of musical perception, structure or aesthetics can be directly translated between different groups (or even necessarily between individuals within these groups). Music is not the universal language that many people have often claimed it to be. This does not prevent us deriving great pleasure and inspiration from the musics of other cultures, but the structural principles, aesthetics and perceptual bases of our appreciation are likely to be radically different from those of the performers themselves.

My initial attempts to study the music of a Quechua-speaking subsistence farming community of Northern Potosí, in the high Andes, were full of frustrations. Innocently, I began by asking questions about musica only to be told about the brass bands of neighbouring towns.¹ Later, when people had eventually worked out that I meant their own local singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments our discussions started to get underway. But whenever we began to talk about these different forms of music the conversation always seemed to stray off into agriculture. I often struggled to get the discussion back to my idea of “music”, only to discover a few moments later that yet again we were talking about potatoes! It took me several months to begin to realize that it was entirely appropriate to talk about music in terms of agriculture: the two are intrinsically linked.

¹ The Spanish word musica (“music”) is used in this part of Northern Potosí to refer to either urban brass bands or sometimes sikura panpipe ensembles. Locally it is not a generic term for “music”.
Following this approach I also began to realize that my understanding of "music", and of the semantic space that this concept conveys in European languages, was radically different from that of my hosts. In Quechua and Aymara there are verbs to describe the actions of singing and dancing, and innumerable words which refer to different musical genres, instruments and qualities of sound. However, this broad range of activities and phenomena is neither encompassed nor separated from others by being categorized under such general concepts as "music" or "sound". Direct translations of these European terms simply do not exist in indigenous Andean languages. The nearest my hosts could come to a word which expressed such ideas was the Spanish loan word animu, which suggests the notion of animation as a property of living things.

Thus, for my hosts, distinct musical forms are not necessarily associated with one another as "music". Rather, musical performance is contextualized activity. Each form of song, instrumental music or dance is appropriate to a specific time or function in the endless cycle of life, death and regeneration: cycles which overlap and draw creatively from one another. One "life cycle" that has emerged as especially influential to my hosts and their "music" is that of the potato.

For many rural communities of the high Andes the potato is one of the most important staple crops. Its cultivation, storage, preparation, cooking and consumption dominates these people's lives, and their wellbeing depends directly upon a successful potato harvest. In this paper I shall demonstrate how, for my host hamlet, situated at an altitude of 1100m in ayllu Macha, Northern Potosí, Bolivia, music and the potato are inextricably linked. It would seem that certain forms of music are experienced, as well as structured, in the context of potato cultivation: the two directly motivate one another and are imbued with enchantment and heartfelt sentiment.

This account is based on conversations and participant observation in a single hamlet of ayllu Macha, and upon discussions with Alberto Camaque from ayllu Laymi, Northern Potosí. Whilst the potato is undoubtably influential to the musics of many other parts of the Southern Andes, its representation in music is likely to vary considerably. After all, local and regional variations in musical forms and styles remain among the most salient markers of identity and ethnicity.

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2 From a more global perspective, it is rare to find a general term that denotes so many different forms as does the the word "music" in European languages (cf. Seeger 1992:102).

3 This paper was originally written as a chapter for a book in Spanish, for publication in Bolivia, on anthropological approaches to potatoes. For this reason it concentrates on the relationship between potatoes and music to the exclusion of other influences upon musical performance.

Furthermore, in differing ecological zones, dominated by herding, for example, or the cultivation of maize or quinoa, musical performance is likely to be both influenced by and structured around these activities.

**Music and the seasons**

Nowhere is the association of distinct musical genres with specific times and contexts manifested more vividly than in the seasonal use of music—a practice common to many parts of the southern and central Andes. These seasonal alternations of musical genres, dances and instruments are in many cases directly linked with cycles of agricultural production.

In agricultural and musical terms the year is principally divided between the wet, growing season and the dry, cold season. In Northern Potosí, and several other parts of southern Bolivia, the end of the rainy or growing season symbolically coincides with the culmination of Carnival, when the first new fruits of the year may be eaten. The start of the rains is commonly stated to coincide with the feast of All Saints (Nov. 1) although *pinkillu* flutes may begin to be played a few months earlier “to call the rain”. All dry season instruments must be put away after All Saints, I was told, as their sounds would “freeze” the young potato plants.

Although in practice the rains do not necessarily start at All Saints and end at Carnival, these dates and the accompanying alternation of instruments are described in terms of an ideal. The *pinkillu* flutes and *kitarre* of the growing season are said to call the clouds and rain up from the valleys and to help the crops to grow. In turn the dry season *wauqu* and *siku* panpipes blow the clouds away causing clear skies and frosts. Similarly, the shrill sound of the *charango*.

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6 In many parts of La Paz department, the alternation between rainy and dry season instruments takes place at Easter (Buechler 1980:41).

7 In this region, *pinkillu* refers to duct flutes usually played in a consort of 4–6 sizes. These instruments closely resemble 16th century European recorders played in many churches during the Spanish colonial period. As there is no archaeological or historical evidence of such instruments in the Andes before the Spanish invasion it seems possible that *pinkillu* flutes are based on European models.

8 A local strummed guitar with metal and nylon strings arranged in five courses (sets, tuned in unison or at the octave).

9 *Wauqu* (or *jula-jula*) panpipes are played in hocket in 4- and 3- tube pairs, tuned to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. An ensemble typically consists of 30 to 50 players playing pairs of five sizes, tuned in octaves. *Siku* panpipes are also played in hocket with pairs of 8- and 7-tube (or 7- and 6-tube) instruments. Ensembles typically consist of 6–12 players accompanied by a bass drum (*bombo*).

10 A small strummed 4- or 5-course, metal string, mandolin-size guitar. The wooden body often resembles the shape of an armadillo.
attracts frosts, which are specified to be essential for freezing the potatoes to make *chuño* in the cold winter months of June and July.

When we examine the seasonal alternation of instruments in more detail, their relationship with potato cultivation is further emphasized. For example, *pinkillu* flutes and the *kitarra* begin to be played in earnest from the very moment that the seed potatoes are planted and begin to sprout in November. These instruments are then played continuously through the growing season until the end of Carnival when, in a special rite of farewell (*pinkillu kacharpaya*), they are hidden away and exchanged for the dry season *charango*. Following Carnival, I was told, the rains should cease, the potato plants die down and the tubers swell and mature ready for harvesting.

The associations between these rainy season instruments and potato plants are often most explicit. In the Sacaca region of Northern Potosí I have seen wooden *pinkillu* flutes carved with the images of potato plants. Also, throughout the region, many types of rainy season guitars (*kitarra, talachi, guitarilla*) are decorated with the image of growing plants, usually suggesting the form of a flowering potato plant.

During the dry season, when potato plants have died down and their tubers lie dormant, *pinkillu* flutes and the colourful rainy-season guitars are packed away, out of sight (often alongside foodcrops in storage huts). When, on several occasions, I asked what would happen if these instruments were played during

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11 Recordings and further illustrations of some of these instruments are given in Baumann (1982) and Flety/Martinez (1992). For further details of playing techniques and local approaches to these instruments see Stobart (1987, in press, and in prep.).

12 I use the Quechua spelling *kitarra*, for this traditional local strummed string instrument, in order to avoid confusion with the Spanish *guitarra*.
the dry season, a frequent answer was "the player would grow horns". These horns were sometimes further linked to the idea of "devils" (cf. Harris 1982). However, at a more immediate and practical level this explanation appears to refer to dormant potato tubers. It would clearly be inappropriate to play rainy season music (wayñu) associated with growing crops during the dry season as it would cause the tubers to sprout, like horns, and begin to grow at the wrong time of year\textsuperscript{13}. Musical sound thus orders the seasons and cycles of production.

The relationship between the performance of wayñu and the sprouting of potato (or oca\textsuperscript{14}) tubers is made explicit in the following wayñu verse of the rainy season from ayllu Macha.

\textit{Uqa llura, papa llura (misturas t'iikita)}

Oca sprouts, potato sprouts (confetti flowers)

\textit{Maytauq chay wayñu mayura? (misturas t'iikita)}

Where is the wayñu master? (confetti flowers)

Although the seasonal variation of musical forms, instruments and dances was surprisingly strictly observed within my host hamlet, in many other parts of

\textsuperscript{13} This relationship between flourishing greenery and horns is emphasized in many rituals. Pairs of long \textit{liria} (Iris) leaves or green \textit{molle} (pepper tree) twigs are handed to each person in turn and placed in their hatbands, both resembling and being termed \textit{astas} or "horns".

\textsuperscript{14} A sweet tuber cultivated widely in the Andes (\textit{Oxalis tuberosa}).
Northern Potosí and the Bolivian highlands these traditions are disappearing. Older men complained to me that today the young men or mozos living near the town of Macha play their charangos throughout the rainy season and for that reason the weather has become mixed up and harvests poor over recent years. The state education system, rural development agencies, and even local radio stations, broadcasting in Quechua and Aymara, rarely (if ever) respect this essentially Andean method of ordering time and way of life.

**Pinkillu flutes as potatoes**

The analogy between potatoes and the instruments of the rains also appears to be paralleled in instrument construction. My hosts and Alberto Camaque from ayllu Laymi both treated the wind instruments of the rainy and dry seasons as seasonal equivalents, drawing attention to the differences in their construction. It was maintained that the wooden pinkillu flutes of the rains are “alive” because they have many “holes”. In this context, the word “holes” was used specifically to refer to the fingerholes that a player stops and unstops to give life and form to a melody. These nodes or points of transition which prescribe the alternating pitches and rhythmic form of a melody would appear to be analogous to the “eyes” of a potato. Significantly, potatoes with many eyes are reserved as seed for the following year whilst those without eyes are unable to grow or regenerate.
In contrast, it was stated that the wauqu and siku panpipes of the dry season do not have “holes” (i.e. fingerholes). They are thus “dead” (wañusqa) and, like potatoes without eyes, are unable to regenerate. Furthermore they were compared to chuñu (freeze-dried potatoes) and said to be fragile. Both these types of cane panpipes usually only last a single season and must be purchased new each year. Unlike the panpipes of the dry season, the wooden pinkillu flutes of the rains are specified to be “strong” (resisten) and are expected to last for several years; thus they have the regenerative associations of seed potatoes with many eyes.

Pinkillu flutes are brought back to life each year at the start of the rains. Like seed potatoes, they are wetted or “made to drink”. At first, when they are brought out of storage, the sound of these dried out instruments is weak but after continued playing and wetting with chicha (aqha) or water during performance their sound becomes rich and vibrant. As Alberto Camaque, from ayllu Laymi, put it: pinkillu flutes are “like a plant” or “like greening”. The vibrance of plant life, during the rainy, growing season is most vividly reflected and motivated by both the form of the instruments and the “lively” sounds of pinkillu flutes.
The strong association between pinkillu flutes and potatoes would appear to be emphasized once again in the performance of the qhata dance.15 For this circle dance which is performed at major feasts during the rains, the pinkillu (or kitarra) players are enclosed by a ring of dancers. The circle comprises both unmarried men and women16 but it is the women’s presence and voices that dominate. They sing in response to the men’s pinkillu flutes which are enclosed within the ring. This sense of the male pinkillu flute players being “trapped”, by the essentially feminine dance circle, was emphasized in several conversations.

Alberto Camaque explained that the Aymara word qhata, from which the dance derives its name, refers to the plaiting together of between 10 and 20 lengths of thread (q’aytu) to form a strong cord, such as the type used for women’s hair braiding (tullma) or for tying a belt (chumpi). Such a cord, it was specified, is strong (resisten) and cannot be broken easily. Similarly the dancers braid themselves together securely, holding alternate hands so that their arms are crossed and the pinkillu flute or kitarra player(s) cannot escape. The image of enclosure and imprisonment in this dance was also related to the walls built around fields during the rains and to llama corrals.

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15 See also Arnold 1992 for discussion of a similar dance in nearby Qaqachaka.
16 Married people may also join in the qhata dancing at Carnival.
When I discussed this dance with Alberto Camaque, he directly compared the *pinkillu* players in the centre of the dance circle to "growing plants". According to this analogy it would seem that the dancers represent the soil or mother earth which protects, but also imprisons and ultimately destroys the parent seed potato when it has given birth to the next generation. Such an interpretation would seem to be paralleled by the translations for the word *cahuatha* from Bertonio's Aymara dictionary of 1612, which refers to both the actions of ridging potatoes and dancing in a circle whilst holding hands.

*Cahuatha: Baylar una rueda de gente tomándose de las manos.*

[To dance in a circle of people holding hands]

*Cahuatha: Allegar la tierra a las matos de las papas para que crescan.*

[To pile earth up to potato plants so that they grow]

(Bertonio 1612, II: 32)

However, during the rites of "farewell to the *pinkillu* flutes" (*pinkillu karcharpaya*) at Carnival, the circle of *qhata* dancers was dramatically broken, releasing the enclosed flute players. For the dry season *wayli* dance, which immediately follows the "farewell" to Carnival, hands are not held and each person dances separately. This way of dancing singly was referred to using the verb stem *sapa-*, which in both Quechua and Aymara\(^\text{17}\) suggests the idea of "standing alone", where each person must fend for him- or herself. Accordingly, the *wayli* dance is said to be especially linked with harvest, when the new potatoes are uncovered and separated one by one from the earth.

**Weeping potatoes**

Over the many months I stayed in my host hamlet, I was constantly impressed by the way in which nothing was wasted; a sharp contrast to wastefulness of most industrialised societies. There was an ash pile (in which the llamas loved to roll) beside each house, but no other form of rubbish heap. Any old packets or tins were swiftly appropriated. A little later they would reappear transformed into a children’s toy, incorporated into a game or set to some other practical use.

Similarly, any vegetable waste, such as potato peelings or bean husks, was put to practical use, even if this meant carrying it for several hours to do so. As my host’s mother put it: “peelings just left strewn around on the mountain peaks, or elsewhere, would be lonely and weep like a deserted child. They would not

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\(^{17}\) Approximately 20% of the vocabularies of Quechua and Aymara are identical or similar (Mannheim 1991:40). According to accounts from older people, Aymara was widely spoken in my host hamlet in the last century. Although today much ritual language and local place names are Aymara, the inhabitants are essentially monolingual Quechua speakers (incorporating many loan words from Spanish).
serve any use.” In this realistic approach to ecology she attributed animate associations to plant life and in particular the ability to make sound.

Plant life, like that of humans and animals, is understood in terms of cycles of life and death. Food crops must be treated appropriately as they pass from the world of the living to that of the dead in the same way as humankind. Humans who die having transgressed the boundaries of social order roam between the puna (highlands) and valleys weeping and wailing as condenados (“condemned ones”). It would seem that plant life is categorized in a similar manner. Significantly, the Quechua word waqay which my host’s mother used to refer to the “weeping” of vegetable waste or children, and often describes the sounds of condenado, is also the common word for the sounds of musical instruments.

The animate aspect of food crops emerges again in the ritual language used in ceremonies. For example, the potato is called ch’askañawi, a reference to its many eyes (ñawi) as “starry” or “bushy” (ch’aska). In everyday language ch’askañawi can simply mean “eyebrows”, which are an important consideration in assessing the beauty of a girl, but in the context of song, my hosts explained that it refers to a “lover”.18

From our various discussions it became clear that when the local girls sing these songs the idea of “lover” was not restricted to the world of humans. For my hosts, at least, there was a strong sense that potatoes must be treasured, loved and cared for in the same way as humans. As living things they are also animated and nurtured by love and sentiment. Thus, the lives of humans and potatoes overlap and are sometimes compared with one another, as in the following song verses from the Feast of the Holy Cross (May 3):

a)  
Imilla papita  muraru sunkitu
Imilla19 potato with a purple heart

Chika jovencita  vibora sunkitu
Young girl with a snake heart

b)  
Imilla papata  pilar atiwaqchu?
Could you peel an imilla potato?

Chulata Indiata  fisti atiwaqchu?
Could you dress an Indian girl?20

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18 The refrains of many songs include lines such as Linda cholita chaskañawi (“Beautiful girl with the eyebrows”).
19 Imilla is the Quechua word for both “girl” and a variety of potato.
20 I am grateful to Denise Arnold for her suggested interpretation of fisti as vestir (Spanish “to dress”) and to Rosaleen Howard-Malverde for her help on the grammar of these verses.
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Siren voices

In my host hamlet I was told that all music comes from the sirinu. These are demonic and enchanting beings which live in gullies, waterfalls, springs or rocks. Should you chance upon these creatures during the nights of Carnival, it is said, they will undoubtedly be dancing qhata and singing to the music of pinkillu flutes. Their music is so beautiful and dancing so enjoyable that you might easily be charmed away; possibly to your doom. Other people specify that if you hear the sirinu at, for example, a waterfall, they sound just like pinkillu flutes. More than any other instrument, the sirinu are especially associated with the pinkillu flute.

New pinkillu melodies or wayñu, I was told, must be collected every year. Today, few people in my host hamlet have the knowledge to make the dangerous journey to the sirinu to collect these new tunes, although new wayñu may just fall under men’s fingers as they play their flutes, “put there by the sirinu”. From the feast of San Sebastian (20 Jan) new wayñu begin to be collected, imitated from other communities who still know how to listen to the sirinu at waterfalls, or even copied from commercial recordings. No matter where or how these tunes are collected, they are said always to have ultimately come from the sirinu. San Sebastian, I was told, is the patron saint of the sirinu and on his nameday they begin to come out of the earth—“just like plants”. Similarly, another neighbour explained that new wayñu tunes come “out of the fields”.

This emergence or birth, between the time of San Sebastian and Carnival, does not refer to green plants coming out of the earth but to the new baby potato tubers which begin to form beneath the soil at this time. As the new potatoes form on the root system of the parent plant, each developing its own individual identity and shape, so also do the new pinkillu melodies surface with the sirinu. Accordingly, each melody also has its own individual shape and form. These new tunes, collected between San Sebastian (20 January) and Carnival (February/March) are played day and night throughout Carnival, saturating the soundscape. But then, with the end of Carnival, the pinkillu flutes are dramatically hushed and hidden away for the dry season.

Pinkillu flutes are not heard again until the following November when these same tunes, from the previous Carnival, are played once more. At this time the seed potatoes born in the previous rainy season are planted, and start to sprout horns and grow, encouraged by the wayñu melodies dating from their birth.

22 Wiriasmanta lluqsin.
23 This takes place during the pinkillu kacharpaya, mentioned above, when simultaneously the qhata dance circle is broken and the pinkillu flute players released.
24 In practice a few other new tunes were also played at this time and in other regions new tunes are collected for this feast. However, my hosts and Alberto Kamaqui specified that the tunes from the previous Carnival should be played at All Saints (1 November).
Fig. 6: Cycle of pinkillu tunes\textsuperscript{25} (wayñu)

These tunes thereby act as an emblem which marks the identity of that generation of potatoes.

Later in the rainy season, at the feast of San Sebastian (20 January), new baby potatoes begin to develop beneath the earth and the new melodies (year 2) which surface with the emergence of the sirinu are collected. Meanwhile the parent potato becomes rotten (ismu) and disintegrates beneath the soil. The old melodies, of this dying generation of potatoes (year 1), are now said to be out of date (pasasqaña) and insipid or tasteless (q’ayma), contrasting with the new generation which are specified to be sweet or tasty (misk’i)—words that are also used to describe the flavour of potatoes.

Conclusion

Most vividly, pinkillu tunes and their renewal each year may be seen to represent the cycle of potato cultivation that is so central to my hosts’ survival and worldview. The creation and animation of the potato, which parallels and perhaps forms a model for other forms of life, is expressed and motivated by music. Music symbolizes animu or life. These melodies, representing the life cycle

\textsuperscript{25} Also see Arnold (1992:31) who notes that, for the nearby Qaqachakas, the cycling of tunes is linguistically correlated with both the progressive forgetting or desocialisation of the dead and with cloth which gradually becomes ragged and worn-out.
of each generation of potatoes, are especially linked with pinkillu flutes. They are taken up by women’s voices, who encircle the male flute players in the qhata dance. In this uterine embrace the flutes become like seed potatoes enclosed in the soil; protected, revived, regenerated but also destroyed.

The wooden pinkillu flutes themselves would seem to be understood as a metaphor for the seed potato, which alternates each year between dormancy and revitalisation. Their fragile dry-season counterpart, the panpipes, are associated with chuñu, freeze-dried potatoes, which are frozen and trampled in the cold winter months.

For my hosts the potato is no mundane staple, but is an enchanting and magical being whose life is seen in many ways to parallel and enable their own. Potatoes must be loved and cared for, just like human children. This sentiment is expressed through music, song, poetry and dance which, in turn, are some of the ultimate expressions of human feeling. For the people of this highland hamlet, at least, it would seem that the potato must count among the most important organizing principles of musical performance. Or rather, might it be more accurate to say that music is one of the primary expressions of the potato?

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This paper is dedicated to my brother John, in happy memory of the Bach Two-Part Inventions and other duets for horn and tuba that we played in our youth.

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