

Qoyllur Rit'i - Peru's Ancient Festival of the Snow Star The largest native Indian celebration in the Americas.

The remote, ice-ringed Sinakara valley high in Peru's southern Andes, is usually a silent, lonely place inhabited only by alpacas. But, on the full moon before Corpus Christi (typically in early June) some 30,000 people gather upon the mountain slopes. Costumed dancers pirouette around a large concrete shrine housing a stone which in recent times was painted with the image of Christ. The air is filled with smoke and the music from dozens of bands, and the approaches to the shrine are lined with stalls selling hot food and religious trinkets. At the shrine's entrance, Qollas and Ukukus dance ritual combats, taking turns to whip each other's legs.

Each year thousands of pilgrims hike many miles to reach this valley at nearly 15,000-feet above sea level. A couple hundred foreign and national tourists make up the crowd but the majority are pilgrims who have come to pray for good health or fertility, a university degree or money to buy a truck. Some are here to plead for divine intercession in some personal injustice and others simply to beg for grace. It is believed that if you act out your dreams at Qoyllur Rit'i they will come true. Of course you must make the pilgrimage three consecutive years for this to bear true.

Pilgrims arrive in *naciones*, groups complete with a financial sponsor, ritual leader, dancers and a non-dancing entourage which includes the women for there are few dance roles available to women. Each *nacion* carries its own icon of the Senor de Qoyllur Rit'i which they bring to be blessed. There are hundreds of *naciones* and thousands of dancers. The majority are either *Qollas* or *Chunchos*, representing respectively the Aymara-speaking llama herders and traders of the high plains to the south, and the ancestors of the Quechua-speaking peoples of the Cusco region. There are also the mostly silent Q'eros, people from a deeply traditional mountain area nearby who claim to be the purest descendants of the Incas. They attend the festival but play little part until most others have left. Then they hold their own ancient ceremony on the cold slopes of Apu Qollqepunku where they believe the true presiding spirit of Qoyllur Rit'i resides.

Qollqepunku, the main peak of the Sinakara, is one of the three great mountain-spirits or apus of this region. To local villagers, this particular apu is the doctor that takes care of the people's health. Therefore its ice water is medicine. Thus one aspect of the festival involves retrieving huge hunks of ice from the glacier to share amongst the pilgrims.

Each *nacion* has at least one Ukuku, dancers in wool masks and shaggy tunics symbolizing the Andean bear. Although scores of different dance groups attend Qoyllur Rit'i, only the Ukuku accompanies nearly all groups and appears at no other festival. The Ukuku is a threshold being, a creature of dawn and dusk whose habitat is the precarious edge between two worlds. He is a clown, a trickster and a policeman. He is also half-human, savage and appallingly strong. In this festival of chaos, he is the lord of misrule. Yet it is the Ukuku who protects the pilgrims from the perils of the *condenados* or damned souls who wander the glaciers at night and menace the living. And it is he who brings down the healing powers of the Apu in the form of glacier ice. In the Quechua legend of the Ukuku, the bear earns his manhood by defeating a *condenado* and therefore becomes a model citizen. Thus the dancing of the Ukuku is traditionally a rite of passage performed by young males.

Official church history tells that the festival began in 1780 when a young native child was befriended in this valley by a mestizo boy who through a series of miracles eventually revealed himself to be Jesus Christ. This is the story that most people believe. Ethnologists believe that a late 18th-century propaganda effort designed to heal the divisions generated by the 1780 Indian uprising against Spanish rule while also displacing the native religion may have been a factor in the emergence of the festival on a grand scale.

The festival lasts 3 days. Dancers and musicians sleep little, devoted to their hypnotic circuits. The last morning sees the Ukukus gathered nearly 3,000 feet above the valley floor where they have kept a freezing, night-long vigil by the ice and as dawn glows orange behind Qollqepunku, they climb higher still to the heart of the glaciers where they light candles, pray and retrieve the crosses they placed there three days earlier. After this perilous ordeal, the Ukuku dancers break off huge chunks of ice and carry them down the mountain on their backs. Halfway down they are met by the other dancers and together they parade in sinuous lines down the steep mountainside. That night as the full moon rises, the dancers set off on a final ritual journey, an arduous all-night march across the mountains, finishing at dawn high above the village of Tayankani. At sunrise, the discordant bands all finally play the same tune together, an *alawaru* which accompanies the dancers as they leap down the mountainside. Order is restored and health assured and the festival has ended.