

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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La Paz, BOLIVIA

Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

One windy afternoon late in October, I was bucking along the brutal course of an Altiplano road when my Bolivian friend driving the jeep shook me out of our silent reflection to direct my gaze to the horizon. There across the broad plain, two nearly transparent tornadoes were swirling in nearly symmetrical cones, whipping round the dry topsoil of the barren Altiplano seemingly all the way to the low hanging cirrus clouds above. And then, just as suddenly as the twin tornadoes had appeared, they vanished with an eerie calm.

Those apparitions recall to me the Aymara celebration of the Spring Equinox that I witnessed on 21 September. That morning I awoke at 3:30 a.m. to meet my colleagues at the Institute of Aymara Language and Culture and hitch a ride with them out to the Pre-Columbian ruins of the Altiplano city known as Tihuanaku. Aymaras were gathering at the ruins to mark the arrival of Spring in the southern hemisphere. The Aymara reverence and respect for the "Inti Jalsu", or eastern dawn, on the Altiplano rarely receives as much publicity as the celebration of the "Inti Raymi", during the Winter solstice (21-23 June) among the Quechua of Cusco, Peru. Nonetheless, stone cuttings found among the monoliths of Tihuanaku indicate that the Aymara considered that date sacred, as well as each equinox that accompanies the coming of Spring and Fall (corresponding to the days 21-23 September and 20-21 March). During either equinox, the North and South Poles find themselves equidistant from the sun and the duration of both day and night match up perfectly.

The Aymara and Quechua are nominally Roman Catholic, and travelling through the Aymara villages of the Altiplano, I frequently happen upon aging cathedrals or chapels built by Spain's first missionaries to the New World. As Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits poured into the Andes to complete the work of civilization begun by the Conquistadores, they brought the Holy Cross and Bible to replace the pagan cults and chants of the Inca dominion. And yet, hundreds of years and Catholic masses later, the Aymara indigenous faith that holds holier than Christ the "Pachamama", or Earth God, refuses to be stilled.

We arrived at the ruins just as dawn began to break. While I waited in the chilly air for the sun's rays to align themselves with the

purposeful geometry of the "Inti Punku", or sacred Door of the Sun, Aymara women lit small fires of incense called "insinsu misa" in an offering to the Pachamama. In Aymara, they whispered prayers of penance for past wrongs and begged the "achachila" mountain deities living in the granite faces and ice glaciers of the Cordillera Real peaks Illampu and Illimani to bless the growing season with plentiful rain and good fortune. Candy, coins, and even coca leaves were among the many trinkets thrown into the sacrificial burnings. Though I did not observe it at Tihuanaku, sometimes these insinsu misas are piled high with "sullus", or dead animal fetuses, in order to placate the anachilas or ward off future evil. And through the wisps of smoke brought on by the incense, a young Aymara woman danced among her elders, representing the Virgin of the Sun that no doubt played a central role in the original Spring rite.

Ten minutes later, the ceremony was over. The sun had risen above the distant mountains to the east, and its light had passed through the Inti Punku. Few words can equal the spectacle of that September dawn. So I will leave you with these photographs.

As ever,
W.L. Melvin

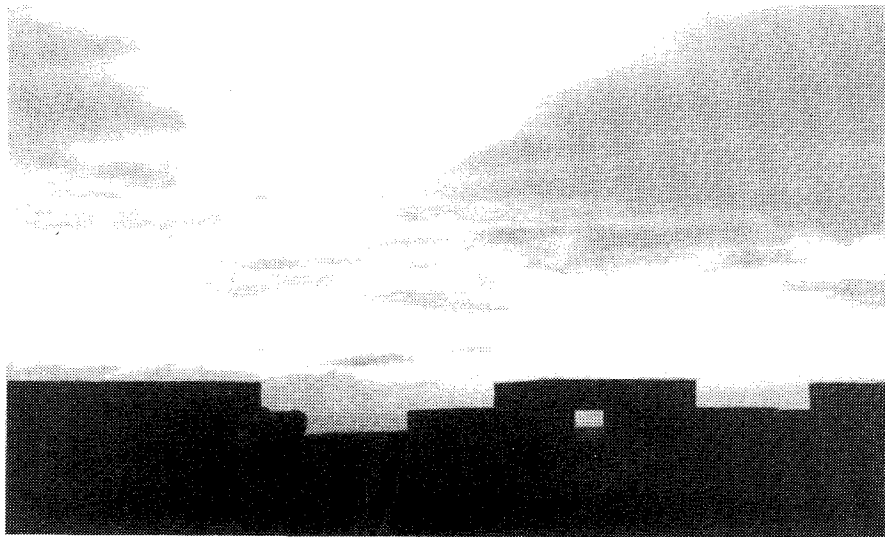
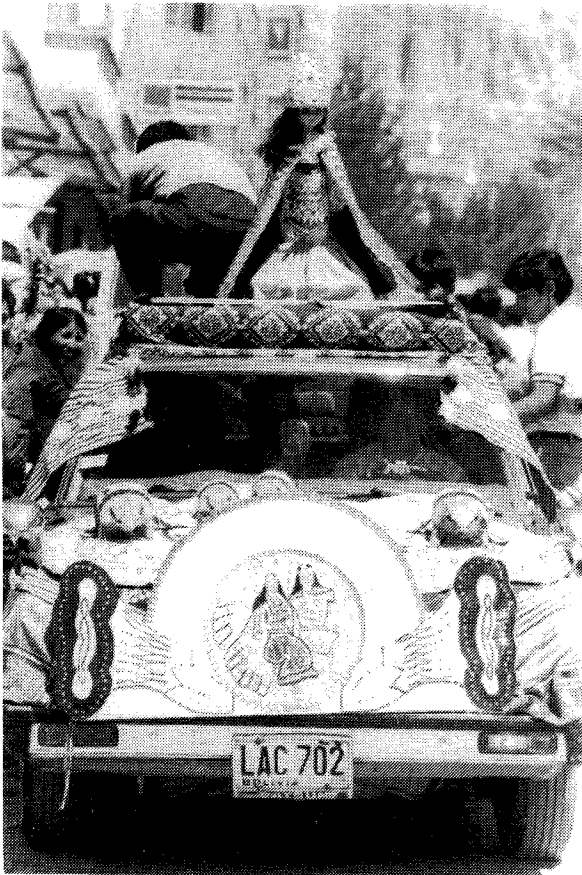


Stone carving found on the Inti Punku depicting an Aymara priest during the flourish of Tihuanaku society. The priest's headress is adorned with condors. (Illustration taken from: Dick Edgar Ibarra Grasso, Ciencia en Tihuanaku y el Incario, La Paz, 1982, page 246).

Except as otherwise noted, all photographs were taken by W.L. Melvin.



PHOTO 1: The La Merced Cathedral in central La Paz exemplifies the fine religious architecture employed by Spain's early missionaries to the New World. After Simon Bolívar secured the independence of the Andes from Spanish Royalists at the Battle of Ayacucho in Peru in 1825, he was asked by Bolivian statesman to draft the country's first republican constitution. The Liberator argued for religious freedom and tolerance, omitting any clause from his draft that would make Roman Catholicism the official state religion. Influenced by the European Enlightenment, he wrote, "In a political constitution no religion should be prescribed ... according to the best doctrines on fundamental laws, these are the guarantees of political and civil rights ... religion does not pertain to either of these rights, it is of an indefinable nature in the social order" Bolivian legislators did not agree, however, and inserted their own clause ensuring Catholicism's continued official support. It was not until Bolivians rewrote their constitution in 1961 that the right to practice other faiths was guaranteed by law.



PHOTOS 2-4: (clockwise from upper left) The indigenous spirit mixes with Catholicism as mestizos in La Paz prepare to commemorate a Holy day in early September; Carlos Palenque, owner of Radio Metropolitana and TV Channel 4 in La Paz, takes advantage of the crowd who came to see the Spring Equinox in order to launch his presidential campaign; the Inti Jalsu illuminates the eastern horizon and the ruins of Tihuanaku.



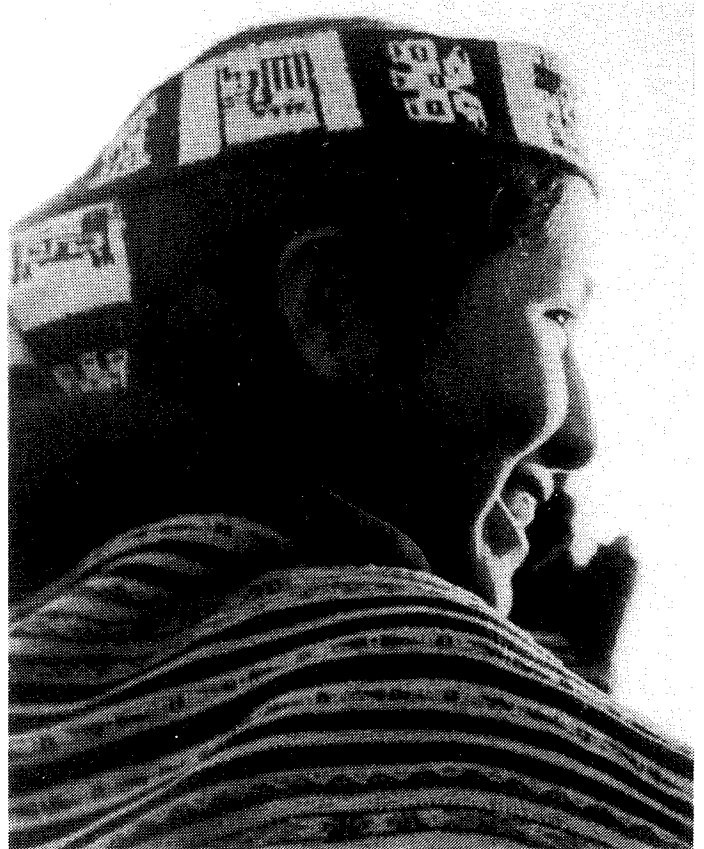
PHOTOS 5-7: (clockwise from upper left) The offering to the Pachamama begins, set in the subterranean temple of Tihuanaku. The huge monolith in the background is known simply as "Number 10"; Aymara believers toss coca leaves into the insinsu misa; Aymara elders praying during the ceremony.

NOTE: Photos 5 & 7 were taken by Norberto Copana Gonzalez, Institute of Aymara Language and Culture, La Paz.



PHOTOS 8-12: (top to bottom) As the Virgin of the Sun dances, bows, and prays, her Aymara elders hold up the insinsu misa to the coming of Spring. With their prayers and dance, they acknowledge the benevolent supremacy of the Pachamama.





PHOTOS 13-15: (clockwise from upper left) A young Aymara woman contemplates the morning sun as it tops the outer wall of Tihuanaku; moments later she smiles as the ceremony draws to a close; Aymara arms raised in one final salute to the Inti Jalstu of the Spring Equinox.