

**INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS**

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La Paz, BOLIVIA

Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
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Dear Peter,

The Chipaya hunter named Dionysio gingerly waded his way through the ice-filled Altiplano marsh. Keeping both eyes to the northern sky, he crouched low and readied his "liwi skhonni", a sling-like device used to fell the wild fowl that inhabit Chipaya tribal lands around the Río Lauca in the Oruro Department of Bolivia. Further into the marsh, another Chipaya whistled to scare up tawny, split-tailed Andean ducks from their feeding grounds. When the V-formations of the split-tails crossed overhead, Dionysio sprang from the water, wound his arm, and let fly the liwi skhonni. One unlucky duck seemed to stop in mid-air, its wings tangled in the woolen twine and leaden balls of the sling. Elated, Dionysio wasted no time in recovering the still thrashing game that then plunged earthward.



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Ankle-deep in water that covers the northernmost reaches of the Coipasa salt flat, Dionysio takes aim at a formation of split-tails.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

In the right hands, a deadly weapon: the Chipaya "liwi skhonni".

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Dionysio revelled in his triumph and took a moment to explain the tactics of duck hunting. "It's important to stay down in the water so that the birds lose your shape in the glare. When they come close, you have to throw the liwi skhonni quickly. The ducks are smart and will swerve to avoid the kill. It is a matter of good aim, a lot of patience, and a little luck. The best hour to hunt is around 10 a.m., because the ducks fly southward when the ice melts. You can try in the afternoon when the ducks return north to roost, but the wind picks up as the sun begins to set and it gets uncomfortable."

Like all young Chipaya boys around the age of 10, Dionysio was tutored in the ways of the hunt by his father, who in turn learned from his grandfather. The hunt is an integral part of the oral history tradition that has bound together the Chipaya for thousands of years. Dionysio's father taught him how to braid the llama wool fiber for the three cords that make up the liwi skhonni. His father showed him how to handcraft the crude dyes needed to cast the small leaden balls that give weight and lend accuracy to the sling. And perhaps just as crucial, his father made sure Dionysio knew to attach a cactus wood float to the sling so that if Dionysio missed the duck, he could find the sling in the marsh. Dionysio admits that he needed a good bit of practice before downing his first duck. "It was difficult in the beginning. Some of the 'ancianos' in the community have brought down 10 ducks in a single day. But the most I have ever hunted is three."

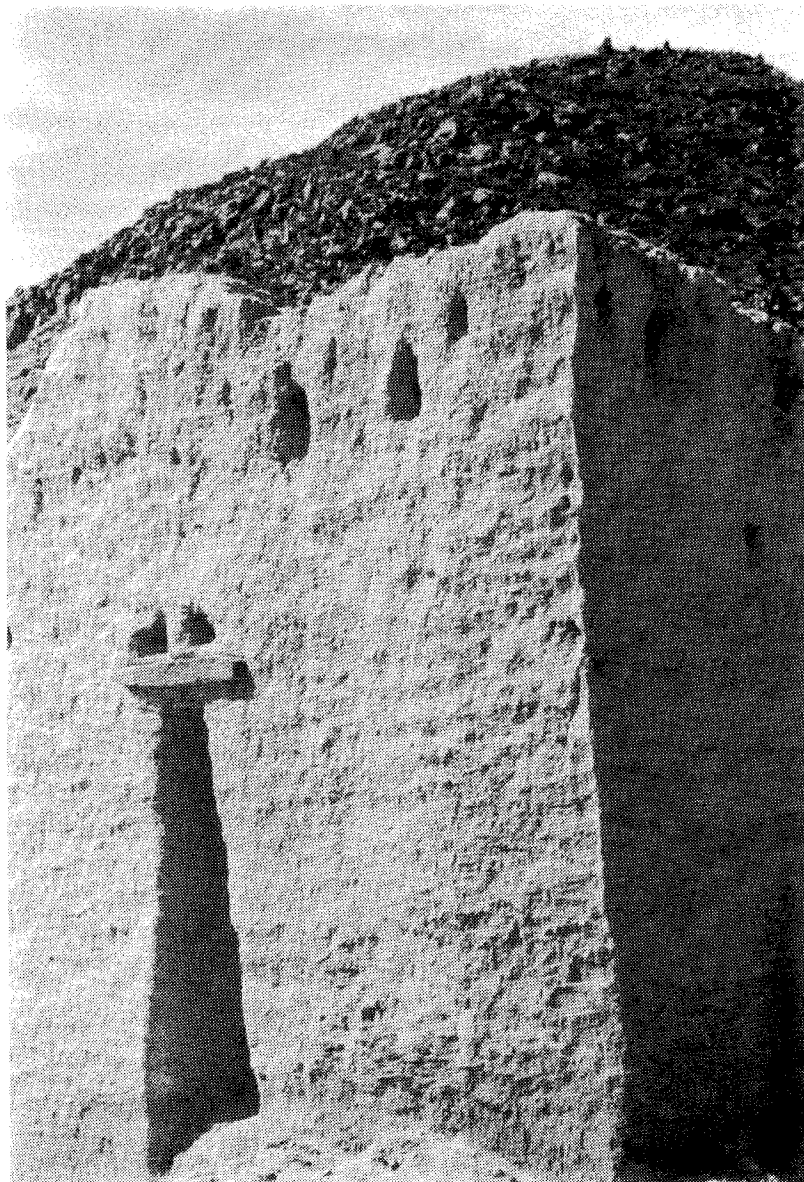
Now 26, Dionysio is married with three children. According to Chipaya custom, this means he can vote in the village council meeting, where decisions of common importance are taken and authorities elected. Having a family, however, means that Dionysio must hunt occasionally to supplement his children's otherwise subsistence diet that consists mainly of soup made from the high protein grain "quinua" [See WLM-12] and the rare portion of dried llama meat called "ch'arki". And, without saying as much, Dionysio and the other Chipaya hunters maintain the traditions of the hunt in an effort to preserve their unique indigenous culture.

A 1582 census conducted by colonial Spanish authorities counted approximately 80,000 Chipaya. Officials of the Royal Audiencia in Lima were so impressed by the social cohesion of this indigenous group that the Chipaya -- and their native language, Poquina -- were described as one of the "three most important" in the Andes. But the Chipayas probably once numbered many more. Before the Spanish Conquest, competition with the Aymara resulted in the loss of Chipaya hunting grounds. Aymaras, who were less nomadic and prided themselves on the past glory of the Tihuanacota civilization that had flourished around Lake Titicaca, looked down upon the Chipaya. Slurs directed by the Aymara against the Chipaya were common. The Chipaya were nothing more than "chanchumanqueris" (weed eaters) or "villi villis" (duck eaters). In reaction, Chipaya elders forbade marriage between their daughters and Aymara men.

What little the Aymara respected of Chipaya culture was nearly destroyed by the Spaniards. Chipaya men were compelled to lend "mita" service in the mines of Potosí or sent to work in the corn fields and "obrajes" of Cochabamba [See WLM-14]. When Santa Ana de Chipaya was founded on the banks of the Río Lauca in 1572, the settlement boasted 2,000 inhabitants. After the Wars of Independence, another 1828 census revealed that the Chipaya population had dwindled to 170 persons. By their own reckoning, Chipaya leaders today estimate that their tribe numbers less than 1000 persons.

Given their small numbers, the Chipaya resistance to "change" and "modernity" is even more remarkable. Not even the steady stream of evangelists that passes through the region has altered the traditions of the Chipaya hunt. A basketball court was constructed last month in the village, paid for by the Christian Children's Fund. But one teenage Chipaya hunter named Bernabé remarked, "Come January, February and March, and everyone will forget about basketball. We'll all be in the marshes trapping `parihuana`."

"Parihuana" is the Poquina term for the flamingo. The summer months in the Southern Hemisphere coincide with the Andean rainy season, and it is during this period that three flamingo species frequent the salt lakes and fresh-water marshes in the midst of Chipaya tribal lands. The extremely rare "churi", or "James", flamingo does not nest in the Chipaya region, but village hunters do report having seen the species. More often, though, the Chipaya trap and snare the "parina" (Chilean) and "titi" (Andean) flamingoes. The "parina" is distinguished from the "titi" by the former's yellowish legs as compared to the latter's, which are bluish grey. Both flamingoes are characterized by vermilion wing coverts that give way to black primary and secondary feathers that are prominently displayed when the flamingoes run or take off in flight.



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One Chulpa tomb, found within 10 kilometers of Sabaya, an Aymara community that marks the northern limits of Chipaya lands. The tomb did not stand alone, but was surrounded by 16 more of varying heights and widths.

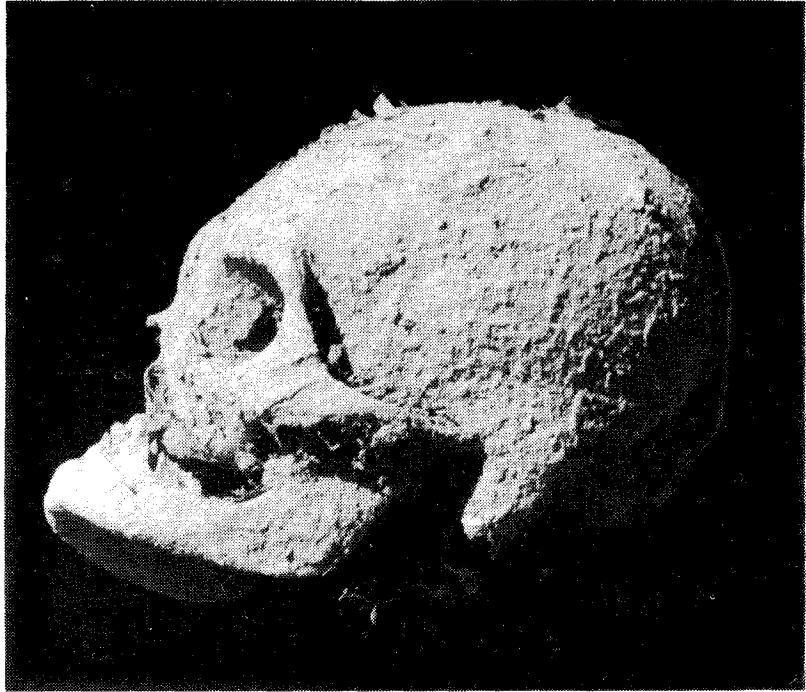
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Hunting and gathering on the Altiplano surely coincides with man's first steps across these highlands 21,000 years ago. Fossil remains of flamingoes have been discovered that date back nearly 20,000 years. Today's Chipayas consider themselves direct descendants of a spectacular "Chulpa" civilization that built trapezoidal, adobe structures in an area of Bolivia that extends from the Río Desaguadero and current Chilean border to the north and west all the way down to the salt flats of Coipasa and pampas of Lago Poopo to the south and east. Archeologists theorize that the Chulpas were sun-worshippers since all of the Chulpa tombs point eastward so as to allow dawn's light to illuminate the ruins. The Chulpa culture mysteriously vanished between 600 B.C. and the First Century A.D. Actually, no one is certain, and some archeologists speculate that the Chulpas disappeared even later, perhaps around 1000 A.D. Such ancestral heritage would make the Chipayas around 2500 years old. Chulpa tombs ring the present day community of Chipayas, lending an ethereal air to the already stark landscape marked by extinct volcanoes, snow ridges, and sand dunes.

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**RIGHT:**

Ancient precursor to the Chipaya hunter? A fossilized skull taken from the Chulpa tombs around Sabaya. The tombs were also full of entire skeletons, but the disordered state of the bones indicated that grave robbers had disturbed the burial site long ago.

**BOTTOM:**

The bee-hive design of traditional Chipaya homes keeps the hunters warm and safe from winds that can approach 40 m.p.h. These dwellings are located in the marshes and are used only during the rainy season, when hunting parties of 10 or more Chipaya men trap flamingoes for days at a time.

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The Chipaya make no claims to possessing expertise in ornithology. But they do know their flamingoes. Felix, one of the older, active hunters in the community, emphasized that the same techniques suitable for wild ducks will not work with flamingoes. "The `parihuana` is an evasive bird. And since the parihauna always travel in flocks, we can rarely get within 30 meters of the `parina` or `titi`. Instead, we lay out traps in the afternoon, sit out the night on the marsh, and check the snares in the morning."

The trap Felix referred to is an ingeniously simple affair called the "chall kauñi". Until the snare is set up, it looks like a mere bundle of branches. When spread out over the 50 meters of its expanse, however, the chall kauñi quickly takes shape. Branches approximately two meters in height support a knotted twine thread of llama wool, from which hang a series of slip-knotted loops. While the flamingoes are too agile to fly directly into the nooses by day, they are not so clever by night. Then too, when the flamingoes forage and fly in the chilly hours before sunrise,

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Early drouth and late rains on the Altiplano this year have meant that flamingoes can still be observed around the Río Lauca. Here, two Chipaya hunters take advantage of the flamingoes' continued presence in the marshes to set up the "chall kauñi". Despite their efforts, an early morning check of the snare the next day revealed no flamingoes.

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they are lethargic from the bitter Altiplano cold. The subsequent stupor causes the flamingoes to veer off into the snares. Try as the flamingoes might to escape, the birds are intractably caught with their necks or wings in the knots. Felix summed up what he considers the flamingoes' greatest problem. "They cannot stand the ice like the ducks. At night, parihuana are constantly in search of fresh, unfrozen water. So they tire, and that makes it easier for us."

The Chipaya doe not hunt the flamingo solely for its meat. It is considered a matter of honor and prestige to be able to craft head-dresses from the coral and pink feathers of the parihuana. Each October, when Santa Ana de Chipayas celebrates its festival, tribesmen will don inevitably their round, felt sombreros. Only this time, the sombreros will be resplendent with flamingo plumes. To Chipaya women, who often braid their own hair into more than 100 separate "skurus", or pigtails, the sure sign of an accomplished hunter is the sight of a well-adorned hat. And while the yearly catch of flamingoes is relatively small, no sensible Chipaya woman

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This split-tailed duck awaits death moments after being taken down with the liwi skhõnni. Since ducks usually fall still living, they must be killed by wringing their necks quickly so as to avoid undue pain.

NEXT PAGE:

One of the Chipaya masters of the hunt, Felix Mamani, takes a breather after a long day in the marshes.

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[All photos taken by W.L. Melvin]





would ever dream of turning away extra food at her table. Centuries of domination by Aymara and Spanish intruders has left the Chipaya with few hectares of truly good, arable land. To the Chipaya, the hunt is not a sporting diversion, but a way of life.

Nevertheless, environmentalists have expressed concern that this way of life might lead to the depletion of flamingo populations on the Bolivian Altiplano. When times are tough for the Chipaya, hunting and trapping often turn into flamingo egg-harvesting. As a result, many of the eggs left by the Andean and Chilean flamingoes never reach the end of the gestation period uneaten. Tony Morrison, the renowned British expert on flamingo behavior, has been outspoken in arguing for the need to prevent excess egg-harvesting. But few Bolivians would agree that the Chipaya pose a significant problem in this regard. An assistant curator at La Paz's Museum for Ethnography and Folklore commented, "The Chipayas are the best ecologists we have. They do not allow poaching. They do not normally sell flamingo eggs. They hunt for themselves."

For those willing to tread in unfamiliar waters, the Chipaya are a reminder of just how straightforward life can be. Hunter or hunted, man and nature seldom strike such a harmonious accord as when rose-tinted flamingoes soar at 50 km./hour over bleached salt flats. One might even be forgiven for thinking that the Chipaya -- having managed to survive for at least a millenium now -- deserve a few feathers in their caps.

As ever,

*WLM*