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The Ukukus Wonder Why a Sacred Glacier Melts in Peru's Andes; It Could Portend World's End, So Mountain Worshipers Are Stewarding the Ice

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Abstract (Summary)

The ukukus first started to get worried about the ice about 1993, said Carlos Flores Lizana, a former Jesuit priest who ran the Qoyllur Rit'i sanctuary at the time. The mystical bear-men, who consider themselves guardians of the snow, worried that taking ice might be causing it to shrink. "They had the ecological issue in mind," said Mr. Flores. "They didn't want the glacier destroyed more."

Mathias Vuille, a climatologist at the Department of Geosciences at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Mass., said fireworks and campfires aren't likely to affect a massive glacier. "I couldn't possibly imagine that would have an impact," he said. Dr. Vuille, who helps operate a weather station in Peru, says when glaciers shrink it's due to a combination of higher temperatures, less snowfall and factors such as humidity.

Mr. [Enrique Vera Farfan] said it's no wonder that the snow is vanishing. "It's because the apu is leaving. He's moving further from this place."

Full Text (1247 words)

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QOLQEPUNKU GLACIER, Peru -- One recent moonlit night high in the Peruvian Andes, about 200 men dressed in furry cloaks and woolen masks trekked up to a glacier whose ice is said to have magical healing properties.

In the past these men, called ukukus after the word for bear in the local Quechua language, cut and hauled down large blocks of ice to share with family, friends and livestock as part of an annual Catholic pilgrimage known as El Senor de Qoyllur Rit'i that usually draws about 40,000 worshipers to a dizzying 16,000 feet above sea level.

These days, cutting ice is all but taboo. "We used to take ice, but now it's prohibited," said Darwin Apaza Ano, a broad-faced ukuku from the province of Anta.

The bear-men say their sacred glacier is disappearing. Over a period of two decades, its edge has drawn back 600 feet along the boulder-strewn slope leading to the church in the valley below, according to people here. Even compared with last year, the glacier is noticeably smaller.

That's a worrisome portent for locals who still worship snowcapped mountains as gods, or apus. It's out of concern for the apu living here, the bear-men say, that they have decided not to take any more blocks of ice.

Although few on this remote mountaintop are aware of it, the demise of this Andean ice-cutting ritual is likely the result of global warming. The United Nations says rising temperatures are causing glaciers to recede throughout the world, with some of the most pronounced effects on relatively rare patches of ice in countries like Peru that lie within the tropics.

A study by the Peruvian government in 1997 found that the country's glaciers had shrunk by more than 20% over 30 years. The National Commission on Climate Change in Lima now predicts that Peru could lose all its glaciers below 18,000 feet in elevation in the next 10 years. Within 40 years, they may all be gone.

Amid Peru's high mountains, where locals scratch a living from potatoes and alpaca wool, most people have little idea that changes to their climate may be caused by global warming. As debate rages in industrialized countries over how to control the problem, it is people living in remote regions like the Andes and in the Arctic who are the first to feel the impact of climate change.

The cosmological implications of the missing snow are clear to people here. According to local myth, when the snow disappears from the tops of the mountains, it will herald the end of the world. "That's what the farmers say. But I believe it, too," said Ramon Salizar Flores, a shopkeeper in the southern city of Cuzco who last made the 10-hour trip to Qoyllur Rit'i six years ago.

Qoyllur Rit'i, which means "resplendent snow" in Quechua, likely started out hundreds of years ago as a rite to the apus, said Jean- Jacques Decoster, who teaches precolonial history at the University of Cuzco, located in the onetime capital of the Inca empire. Later, in 1780 as tradition has it, Jesus appeared on the mountain in the guise of a little blond boy.

"When Spaniards had difficulty converting the populace, they invented a miracle," said Enrique Vera Farfan, a tour guide who is also a dancer in one of dozens of troupes that parade nonstop around the mountainside, accompanied by noisy brass bands.

Today Catholic and pagan traditions are fused, an effect known as syncretism. For instance, the glacial ice is deemed to be holy water, and it is also still revered as the apu's semen, good for fertilizing Pacha Mama, or Mother Earth. "It's the same thing," Mr. Vera explained between gulps of coca-leaf tea.

Until recently, a highlight of the festival was when the ukukus carried down heavy blocks of ice tied to their backs. Some of the ice found its way 100 miles northwest to Cuzco's cathedral. Other pieces were distributed on the spot as a healing elixir.

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Prohibiting ice-cutting was tried, but not always enforced. Gradually, the tradition seems to have all but ended.

At around 2 a.m. on the last Tuesday of May, a shaggy procession headed up to one of the glaciers. As they huddled against the cold under fluttering Peruvian flags, a caporal, or ukuku captain, shouted out the rules from a candle-lit podium carved in the snow. Dangerous crevasses had opened in the ice. So, this year, only 18 ukukus would ascend

onto the glacier at a time.

Territory on the glaciers is divided among six principal groups, or naciones, representing towns or areas in the province of Cuzco. In the section designated for the Paruro nation, only a small crescent of frozen snow now remains. Caporal Edgar Galdos told his troupe of musicians and dancers they would have to stay off the ice this year altogether.

Teodoro Sullca, a mechanic dressed in a furry tunic tied with bells, flags and a plastic doll, was disappointed. "It used to be that everyone went up," he said.

Despite the ban on cutting big blocks, many ukukus still stuff some snow into soda bottles to take home. "We don't take ice anymore because it's diminishing. We take just a little," said Alejandro Quispe, a weathered 38-year-old potato farmer.

The bear-men of Qoyllur Rit'i always speak in a high falsetto while in costume. Asked what the cause of the melting could be, Mr. Quispe lifted a thin finger toward the sky and squeaked, "It's the will of El Senor."

Others offer pet scientific theories. Mr. Vera said that fireworks are causing the glacier to collapse. He also thinks the cooking fires that choke the valley with smoke could be to blame. Serapio Mitane, the president of the Christian brotherhood that manages the pilgrimage site, said reflections from the church's steel roof may be the cause.

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Despite what is happening to the glaciers, the festival has grown substantially over recent years, drawing foreign tourists and many more Peruvians from cities like Cuzco and Lima. That means a business opportunity for hundreds of vendors hawking eggs over rice, alpaca ponchos and decorative metal teeth. "This could be the second Machu Picchu if the snow stays," said Cleto Orccon Huaman, a photographer snapping Polaroids of pilgrims for \$1.25 each.

Some longtime pilgrims don't like all the commercialism. Recently, vendors were expelled from in front of the sanctuary, but they still clog the dirt path leading to the pilgrimage site. Two years ago, several members of the sanctuary's brotherhood were expelled for stealing alms.

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