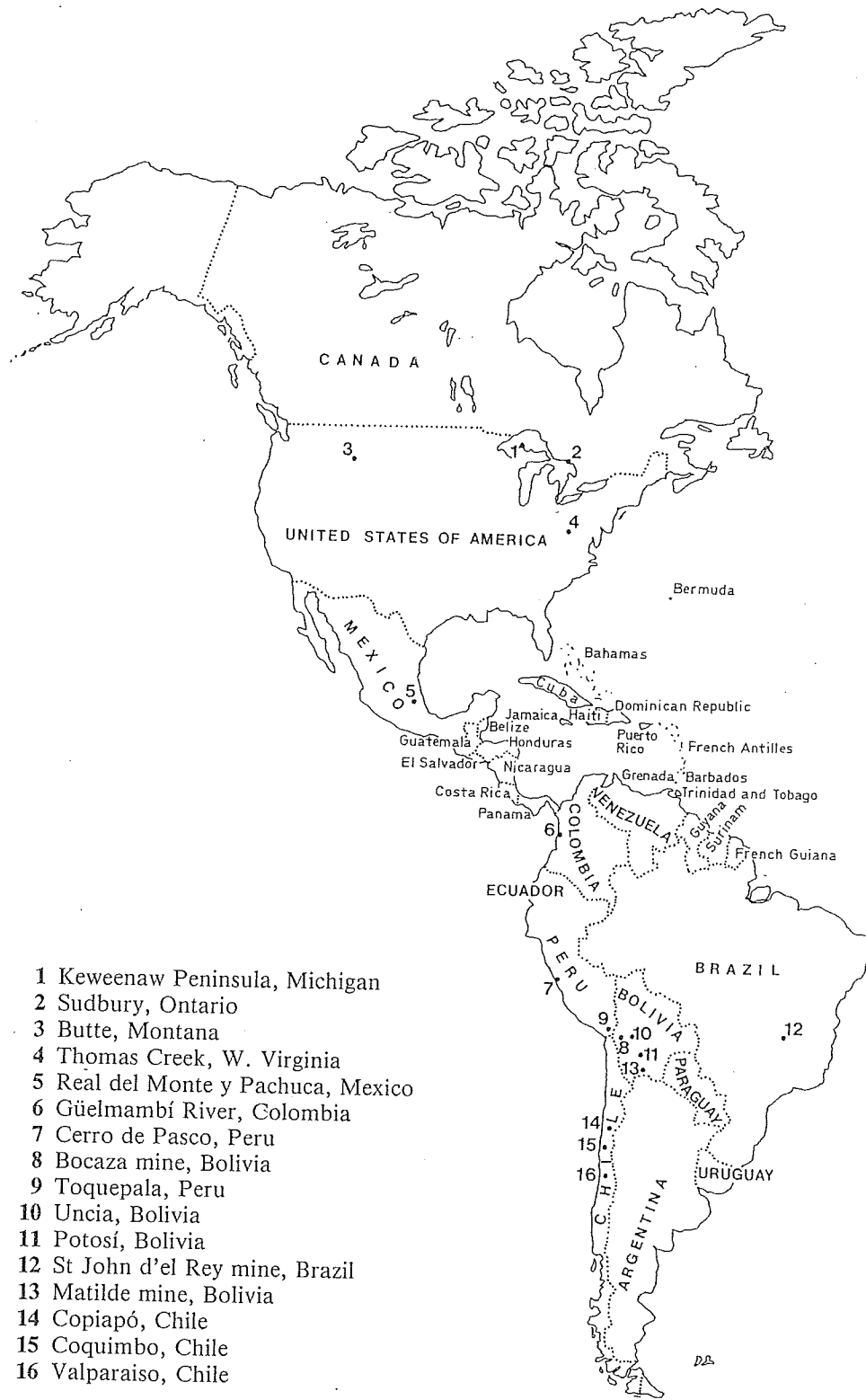


# Miners and mining in the Americas

THOMAS GREAVES  
WILLIAM CULVER *editors*



Manchester University Press



- 1 Keweenaw Peninsula, Michigan
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## CHAPTER 9

# Industrial stagnation and women's strategies for survival at the siglo XX and Uncía mines

GUILLERMO DELGADO P.

Women who are the spouses of miners are under-recognised for their contribution to the viability of miners, both politically and economically. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the violence-prone, state-owned mines of Bolivia, where the women of the mine camps have militated for action from the unions, from the mine management and from the government. On occasion they have been killed, as was María Barzola, martyred at the great tin mine, Siglo XX-Catavi.

This paper presents mining life as a environment in which coping strategies are employed by mining men and women, focusing on the women. It argues that women harbour a different mix of these strategies from those used by men, and proposes that the women's strategies can be traced to peasant origins. This is especially true of women in the mining families in the most marginal economic conditions.

Guillermo Delgado P. (Department of Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712, USA) is completing a doctorate on the basis of his participant research in a major Bolivian mine, including employment as a *carrero* (car hauler), the lowest job in the mining job structure. He is author of *Comentario a la Bibliografía del Movimiento Obrero Boliviano* (forthcoming, La Paz) and editor of *Cien Años de Lucha Obrera en Bolivia, 1876-1976* by Trifonio Delgado (1984).

— The editors

This paper advances the argument that the chronic economic crises in Bolivia tend to push the mining population, especially the female sector, toward reliance on survival strategies of peasant origin. For example, at first glance the COMIBOL-owned<sup>1</sup> Siglo XX-Catavi mining complex gives the impression of operating in a modern, well-organised, business-like manner. However, its failure as a rationally organised capitalist enterprise is revealed by the continuing persistence and reactivation of many coping strategies among its workers and their families. Among these strategies are a widespread reliance on gardening and peasant mechanisms of exchange, *juqueo* (mineral theft), *rescate* (ore collection outside managerial control), and *pasanaku* (an informal game women play in order to obtain cheaper commodities by circulation a pooled sum of money, allowing only one to benefit at a time).

While it is difficult to demonstrate with certainty, my observations at Siglo XX-Catavi suggest that the coping strategies of mine women are more often derived from agricultural peasants than are those employed by men. In Bolivia, miners overwhelmingly come out of peasant backgrounds, though in the several largest mines where the size of the labour force has been in long-term decline the connection to peasant ancestry may be two or three generations back. It may be, however, that women in peasant households and women in mining households find the *same* coping strategies workable, and, so, there has been more persistence of the peasant heritage among women than among men. Indeed, I would argue that the more impoverished the household, the more pronounced the tendency to maintain peasant strategies. It is possible, however, that this may be changing: new pressures of the consumer culture are an additional threat to women's solidarity. Mine women appear to have begun a process of proletarianisation. Too, they have increased their participation in the market, augmenting their household responsibilities with those of running a small business, while, also, maintaining their critical militancy through the housewives' union. Only since 1961 has their union gained legitimacy as a political party and been recognised as an important part of miners' struggles, although plagued by widespread belittling of their political potential by the men.

Can it be said, then, that strategies of peasant origin are reactivated by the women in mining populations? If so, which women reactivate them? And why or under what kind of circumstance? In order to develop my answers I will divide the discussion into three parts: (1) peasant antecedents to strategies of miner adaptation; (2) waged miners and unwaged women; and (3) women's reactivation of peasant strategies to cope with mining life.

### **I Peasant antecedents in strategies of miner adaptation**

The great tin centre of Siglo XX-Uncia-Catavi entered the circle of mining life at the turn of the century after the drop in silver on the international market. Still earlier, two silver mines gave employment to the area's population; these were the Colquechaca and Aullagas (1865 and 1871). In the mid-nineteenth century, the mining elite of these mines numbered two hundred and twenty eight individuals who hired around 9,000 workers of peasant origin (Dalence 1851: 236-7). There has been a bitter tradition of capitalist presence in the area since the penetration of national capital, accelerated by the construction of railroads from Antofagasta (Chile) in 1889. In 1892 the railway reached Oruro, the mining centre where most production of the Northern Potosi mines was concentrated. According to Antonio Mitre, by 1870, 43 per cent of the work force in Pulacayo consisted of women, who also received the lowest wages (Mitre 1981: 146). Through this period, women were slowly being replaced by machinery in the mines,<sup>2</sup> and, as a response, they were building business in the trade of commodities available regularly through the

*pulpería* (company store), but in scarce supply in the peasant villages. Women of miner families were sometimes able to accumulate reliable supplies of these commodities and barter with peasant clients. Thus the income earners in the mine camp at century's end included not only miners, but also these women traders, attached as spouses to the mining households. This practice still goes on at the Siglo XX mine. The presence of Quechua, Aymara and Spanish speakers in these early mining camps was thus due not only to workers, but also to businesswomen.

In current times, a practice of borrowing and sharing has developed that derived from the peasant *mañay* practice. At present women in the mining camps use the term and practice *mañarimuway*. One can easily circulate a 'borrowed bone' for soup from household to household. Often children are sent by their parents to the neighbour's door to borrow odds and ends, from blankets to money to perishable food. The items are returned after use, and in the case of food, replaced as soon as the family gets items from the *pulpería*, the peasant market or the city. The sharing of food is especially important at the mine. Whether in the celebration of fiesta days or at wakes it is closely linked to ritual peasant practices in the fields.

Not unrelated to these ritual peasant practices, gardening at the mining enclave is tied to the idea of sharing an abundance of tubers or grains.<sup>3</sup> Potato, *oca*, and *quinua* planting has become important for some generations of women at the camp. Some women in Uncia, Siglo XX, Cancañiri and Miraflores (Empresa Minera Catavi) devote some time to gardening in limited plots which belong to the company. A few share gardens outside the mining area with *comuneros* (recognised members of peasant communities).

Another interesting interaction between peasants and miners of the lower strata is evident at the *Tinku* celebration in the peasant villages of Chayanta, Aymaya, San Pedro and Amayapampa. Though no longer peasants themselves, the lowest strata in the mining camp show the greatest solidarity with the peasant class. Many of the women who garden have informal connections to land, and many wives of miners in the lowest strata of the mining camp still maintain ritual kinship ties with the peasantry, which – sometimes – become exploitative of peasants (I observed five such cases among some *locatario* miners). A long period of stability at the mine tends to recreate linkages with the peasantry. With political unrest peasants tend to withdraw from the scene and relations become tense between the groups. Because political upheavals make a difference in the area, adding tension to relations between peasants and miners, women are caught in a system where they do not have definite political power. The independent *locatarios*, *venero* workers, *lamerros* or *canaleta* workers, who do not necessarily belong to the company, mediate between the full-time miners and peasants. Wives of these 'surface' miners often work alongside their husbands, and because of poorer conditions they are more inclined to be accepted by peasants, who can even make fun of them. The degree of peasant–miner interface changes radically

with fluctuations in the local levels of political participation. The distance between the 'señoras' at the mining camp and Indian women is great and reduced only through mediation by women of intermediate rank and under stable conditions. Class and ethnicity are at the base of the conflict.

Underground mining activities are destructive and devastating and males as a rule are openly exposed to such experiences (called by miners 'chasing death on a daily basis'), while females are in charge of and occupy the reproductive role. They constitute the unwaged workers at home (Cleaver 1979: 160). They are also in charge of maintaining the male labour force through their nurturing role. It is due to their unwaged worker status at home that women are able to avoid the fatal confrontations of the mine, the underground, lung diseases, *viento, susto, jap'eqa*, TBC, silicosis, colds, paranoia, depression, anguish and alcoholism. The miners have become proletarianised, but the miners' wives have entered a stagnated phase in the process of semi-proletarianisation. This allows them, according to their degree of pauperisation, the flexible use of peasant strategies as ways of coping with mining life.

## II Waged miners and unwaged women

A miner's wife in 1959 cooked with *yareta* (*Bolax* and *Azorella*) firewood. She took almost the whole day to keep the fire alive so that she could have a warm dish of food for her family. Despite kerosene's wide distribution, poor households continued to use *yareta* until 1965. Women were able to cope with kitchen duties by sharing those responsibilities with extended kin or other neighbours. Time was invested also in the exchange of *yareta* with peasants, and to fulfil other needs such as washing, child rearing and carrying water. In 1980 women used gas stoves, but their other household duties remained as hard as before to fulfil. Women in depressed areas of mining camps (the poorest of the poor) consider gardening a resource for survival. These poverty sections can be seen at Cancaniri, Uncia, Morococala, Chocaya-Siete Suyus, Colquiri-Huayrapata, Pacuni-Caracoles and among their residents one observes gardening and even herding (such as in Atocha, Telamayu).

Most of these women belong to impoverished households, and most of them have picked up their agricultural knowledge from contact with the land or the peasantry in years past. While none of them own land, they are able to use land available from the company. In Santa Fe-Morococala occasionally they enter into '*al partir*' (sharecropping) relations with peasants, especially when there is a lack of cash or food at the camp. The *al partir* system means that peasants allow women to help with the duties of tilling, planting, harvesting, choosing seeds, *ch'uñu* making and land rotation. Most older women in the Siglo XX camp, as well as Santa Fe, Morococala, Siete Suyus, Telamayu, Huayrapata (Colquiri), and Pacuni (Caracoles), know how to make *ch'uñu*. Sometimes they are called to advise or teach the process to younger women. In Siglo XX itself there are few plots. Women engage in these land

activities only when they will be planning for an important celebration (such as a wedding, baptism, or a widow's ritual emergence from the mourning period) for family and friends. It is a way of getting a large amount of tubers or grains to feed friends and relatives.

Couples who are recently wed and belong to the lower strata of the mining camp have closer ties to the peasantry. Often these relations fall under *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship based on godparenting), which can be used by peasants to get into independent mining activities at the camp (*rescate, juqueo*, grinding ore for monthly *entregas* (product shares)), or may be applied in reverse to enable a miner's wife to find work or easy barter of products in peasant areas. The level of poverty of unwaged women forces them to make concessions, so that some women look to agriculture before thinking about moving to the city. This is so particularly of widows and married women with marital problems.

Elba María, from Cancañiri, is one such woman. Remarried and lacking a formal education she looks to her brother's land in the Cochabamba Valley as a way of finding security every time relations with her husband Tomás sour. Tomás is a *jefe de punta* (shift boss), a position of high responsibility and prestige. He has to support his mother, Benigna, who, because she lost her husband ten years before, also lost rights to a household. The sudden death of her husband resulted in depression, social maladjustment, and the failure of her business at the Llallagua market. According to Elba María, who knew Benigna before she married Tomás, Benigna was unable to recuperate economically. Benigna now lives on charity from her three sons, does not have a place of her own, and feels rejected. Being the spouse of a mechanic, and a business woman, her ties with the peasantry were extremely weak, and she now has completely cut all ties with the peasantry, thereby removing any possibility of returning to the land. Interestingly enough, however, she will not hesitate to borrow money from her acquaintances at the mine to be able to pay for a 'luxurious' wedding for her last male child.

Tomás, the *jefe de punta*, is not well accepted by his extended family because Elba María is more 'campesina' than they. Elba María, because of her ties to the land in Cochabamba, is better able to cope with life than other females who sometimes face the same problems at the camp. The discrimination Elba María suffers has reinforced her relationship with the land. Her brother welcomes her every time she escapes from the mining camp to the valley. Elba María's brother was a *perforista* (driller) at the Siglo XX mine, but he chose to go back to the land as soon as his father died.

Domestic work such as child-bearing, nurture and the reproduction of labour power are female duties. To fulfil these duties at the mining camp some women take advantage of certain natural resources. Resources from the herbalist tradition are in common use. For certain diseases of a major clinical nature, such as those requiring long-term treatment, women and miners rely on the recommendation of western-type doctors and hospitals. But for mild

diseases of a more psychosomatic nature, they still listen to native healers' and herbalists' recommendations. Women with knowledge of native medicine in Siglo XX or Santa Fe are not uncommon.

### III Women reactivate peasant strategies

Nicolasa is an unusual illustration of Andean women at the mining camp making use of peasant-based adaptations. Her husband, an old-time miner with silicosis, has got a position as a door keeper at the mine's entrance at Socavon Patino (Uncia). He leaves home for his job at 6.15 am to work the *primera punta*, the first in the three-shift, twenty-four-hour cycle. Nicolasa prepares a food dish, *quñi quqawi*, which she places in the *vianda* wrapped in woven *unkuña* of llama wool for warmth. In 1940, Nicolasa inherited her mother's home at the Uncia mine, where she lives with her husband and a *Charka* peasant boy who helps her with small jobs. Missing the land, Nicolasa was able to locate her mother's *chaqra*; it is a five-hour walk from the mining town at the foot of the Qala Cruz peak. While she does not have any *de jure* possession of the land because it legally belongs to the *comuneros* from Sunujuyu, the space has been used *de facto* since her mother entered exchange agreements with the *comuneros*. According to Nicolasa, her mother practiced the same strategy of shifting 'islands' of cultivation each year in this ecozone.

Her sporadic relationship with the land is not limited to the five-hour hike to the *chaqra* in the *puna* (ecological niche above 4,000m). Nicolasa has inherited not only the plot rotation technique but also the knowledge of the ecosystem's output. Her knowledge of the ecosystem may be considered as a subsistence resource, a version of ecological control. From the political centre, Uncia, she is able to establish ties with the surrounding peasant communities and exchange several products for salt, fire wood, *quinua*, *tarwi*, *ch'uñu*, *ch'arqui* and *quwikuna*. For instance, she trades dehydrated potatoes (*ch'uñu*) which are cooked ceremonially during certain times of the year.

In addition to using her knowledge of the Andean high-altitude ecosystem as a subsistence resource, Nicolasa uses it to reinforce ritual ties of mutual aid. An example of this occurred with the up-coming wedding of one of her sons, a *contratista* miner at the *canaletas*, close to Socavon Patino, who had just passed his *tantasqa* (*sirwinaku*) state. Nicolasa put together products originating from different peasant areas, telling me she was interested in gathering all plants grown in the area in hopes that the assemblage might produce a cosmic equilibrium '*waqachinanpaq*, *qallarinanpaq*' providing the couple with products for a whole, tranquil life. With this in mind, during the year prior to the wedding, Nicolasa accumulated small quantities of ceremonially valued products such as: *ch'arqui*, *tarwi*, *ch'ichi mut'i*, *millma*, *t'unta*, *k'awi*, *haba*, *quinua*, and wheat (for *llusp'achi*). She was familiar with the places one could collect *llullucha* and *sik'i* as well as products not easily accessible due to distance. She knew that *coca* coming from Chapare was

*k'allku* (bitter) and less appreciated by coca-chewers. Through second-hand references and her own experience she acquainted herself with the importance that shape, content, colour, flavour and thickness make in selecting the best coca leaves. Those turn out to be the ones from Yungas, 'the same ones my husband takes to the *Tio*, the sweet ones he likes'.

Unwaged women coping with mining life remain doubtful of becoming completely integrated into the proletarian process. They have learned to unearth and use resources that appear to be lacking from the mining life style. Child-rearing limits many women's capabilities and mobility; it appears that some of the older generations looked at the land as a real way of spending happy days after finishing their family raising years. With the resettlement of some mining families of *rentistas* (retired miners) in the Chimpa area of the city of Cochabamba, it was observed that gardening is an activity of many of those households of retired miners. A couple of them have even agreed to run a small business raising chickens. However, the closest ties to peasant culture for men remain limited to short trips to the *Tinku fiesta* at Chayanta, Aymaya, or San Pedro where some miners arrive in peasant *bayeta de la tierra* garments. Despite the years, the *Tinku* continues at Chayanta and, from time to time, acts as a sort of ethnic identity ritual.

#### IV Conclusion

In general, it can be said that most miners have become more interested in the cities or other mining centres than in returning to the fields. Nevertheless, due to long existing problems in the Bolivian economy, the lower strata of the working class at the mines seems pushed to scratch a meagre living from resources of the resilient peasant culture and economy surrounding the Siglo XX-Catavi mining complex. At the same time, the solidarity among women created by the use of these peasant coping strategies is undermined by pressures of the capitalist system such as new technology in the mines, competition for wages, consumption of sumptuous goods, educational opportunities, and even for the means of subsistence. Scarcity, especially, tends to challenge community ties and may weaken kinship relations. Nevertheless, women are able to establish woman-to-woman communications which enable them to assist each other in times of stress or when coping with scarcity. Peasants at the same time have entered another level of political maturation and are able to engage in dialogue with miners. These movements occur largely due to the economic role of women in the mines. The high degree of pauperisation pushes the women to look for the best survival strategies. Coping through peasant strategies results in a positive gain; *juqueo*, *rescate*, reciprocal exchanges and gardening (wherever it is viable), will keep the mining population alive, but tin will still be Bolivia's wage.

## Notes

1 COMIBOL (Corporacion Minera de Bolivia) is the state-owned mining corporation administering Bolivia's largest mines.

2 'Cornish' water pumps, and 'Whorthington' motors arrived in the Bolivian mines in 1898. Other brands came from England: 'Homman Brothers', 'Deissel', 'Sulzer SA Winterur'; and German 'Imperator' motors. In 1900 tin production was 9,739 tons; by 1918 Bolivia exported 29,280 tons. See Albarracin Millan 1972.

3 I use the term 'gardening' to stress the difference between *farming* and a more restricted agricultural activity current in the mines. This gardening is limited in the nationalised mining, more noticeable among medium miners, and extensive among *mineros chicos* (small mining).

## Glossary

**Bayeta de tierra** Loose woven material used for underwear. At *Tinku* men's pants are rolled up to show the bayeta leggings.

**Ch'arki** Quechua = dehydrated meat.

**Ch'ichi mutiy** Quechua. Boiled lupinus.

**Ch'unu** Dehydrated potatoes. Can be stored for several years.

**Huelgas** Strikes. There are several kinds: huelga de brazos caídos, de hambre, escalonadas, de protesta, de horas, días, semanas, de rechazo, indefinida, de advertencia, parcial, general, repudio, etc.

**Jukeo** From the Quechua, juku = owl. It is an old practice of direct appropriation of ores. The juku, usually a waged worker, remains underground after his eight hour shift. He is capable of working for himself some eight more hours. Risks and danger are very high.

**K'awi** Quechua. Dehydrated oca.

**Lameros or canaletas** Independent workers. They collect ores from the small river's water waste flowing from the ore concentration plant.

**Locatarios** Spanish term. Individual and independent miners who rent a space from the mine in order to look for ores. They independently hire seasonal work force from the peasantry.

**Llullucha, sik'i** Quechua. A kind of water 'cress'. *Porphyra columbina*.

**Llusp'achi** Quechua. Boiled wheat soup. Mourning dish.

**Millma** Quechua. Wool.

**Mañay, mañarimuway** Quechua, to borrow. Attached to this term and practice is a meaning of reciprocity and retribution.

**Oca** Andean tuber. *Oxalis tuberosa*. Once removed from soil, it is necessary to expose them to the sun light and heat in order to sweeten. This belief is extended throughout the Andes.

**Pasanaku** Women's groups of ten get together for the purpose of diminishing expenses by putting together money to buy commodities at cheaper prices. It is seen as a type of game belonging to women.

**Qallarinanpaq** Quechua. To start.

**Quinoa** Andean grain, *Chenopodium*.

**Quwikuna** Guinea pigs (an important festival meat delicacy).

**Quini quqawi** Warmth food.

**Rentistas** Spanish. Retired miners.

**Rescate** Lit. to rescue. Private ore collection; an arrangement among independent miners and wealthy ore buyers. Sometimes rescatis (buyers) get the ore from jukus.

**Tantasqa, Sirwinaku** Quechua. Trial marriage. Lit. = together.

**Tarwi** Quechua. *Lupinus mutabilis*.

**Tinku** Andean blood ritual. Quechua term for 'encounter', it is also associated with the idea of the centre of a cross.

**T'unta** Quechua. A variety of dehydrated potato.

**Unkuña** Square woven cloth, usually of llama wool, used to wrap the vianda food containers to preserve food's warmth.

**Veneros** Independent workers. The ore they collect is sold to the Bolivian Ore Bank (BAMIN).

**Vianda** A fitted, covered tier of small metal pots used to pack a meal for eating away from home (typically at work).

**Viento, susto, jap'eqa** Psychosomatic diseases.

**Waqachinanpaq** Quechua. To keep.

**Yareta** Firewood, *Bolax* and *Azorella*.

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