LET'S MAKE A DEAL:

Using Alasitas to Bargain with the Pachamama

BY

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Katie Friedman, my dear friend.
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All photographs are by the author, Mary W. Davis.
SUMMARY

Contemporary Aymara people use alasita miniatures as ritual objects in a practice that precedes the Spanish conquest. Alasita rituals take place publicly at various saints’ day fiestas throughout Bolivia, and at a dedicated fiesta in La Paz. Alasitas assume a wide variety of forms, and their message is addressed officially (but not exclusively) to the earth deity Pachamama. While there are similarities between the alasita ritual and standard pagos, alasitas constitute demands, not supplications. They are emblematic of reciprocity, the social construct that shapes the relationship between indigenous people and their deities, and the ritual has a highly transactional flavor. The miniatures are presented as “gifts” to the deities, but interestingly, the assumed reciprocation (when the alasitas appear as full-sized realities) is entirely the responsibility of the practitioner. Alasitas are similar to other Andean ritual artifacts in that their appearance matters far less than the ritual, physical treatment they receive. After being installed out-of-doors, the miniatures – houses, trucks, money, land – act as descriptive “props” in a full-sized performance of daily activities that takes place in the environment that the pilgrims have imagined and modeled for themselves. Alasitas embody the Aymara value of “spiritual-materialism” and are modern-day expressions of traditional desires of agro-pastoral peoples: abundance and fecundity. The forms that alasitas take, like many Andean autochthonous objects and practices, exhibit accommodation to change, and a tradition of appropriation from foreign cultures that precedes the conquest. While they are often misinterpreted and critiqued as signifying pure materialism, alasitas accurately reflect the Aymara cosmovision, in which the material and the spiritual are joined in a perpetual flow that animates the world and creates infinite abundance.
I. INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with *alasitas* took place on the summit of Cerro Baúl, a dramatic extinct volcano that rises high up over the Osmore valley in southern Peru (see Map 2, pg. 8). (Note: All italicized words are defined in the Glossary that begins on page 85.) Cerro Baúl is covered with hundreds of lithic installations that have been created in many sizes and a variety of designs and shapes. The alasitas on Cerro Baúl are constructed entirely with stones, and completely occupy the top of the mesa, continuing to its edges (Fig. 1). Alasitas are physical representations of material desires and aspirations of individuals, and on Cerro Baúl, the depicted desire is for *finca* (farms) that include houses, agricultural fields, and animals.

Alasitas play a central role in a contemporary ritual practiced by the Aymara people in the vicinity of Lake Titicaca. These Aymara-speakers are indigenous descendants of pre-conquest Aymara people, and now reside in Bolivia and southern Peru. Alasita rituals are often conducted during public fiestas in Bolivia and I attended two such fiestas during August of 2010. The first was on Lake Titicaca at Copacabana, and the second at Quillacollo, a small town near the city of Cochabamba in central Bolivia (see Map 2, pg. 8).

At Copacabana and Quillacollo, alasitas were indeed present, but they assumed completely different physical forms than the all-stone alasitas I had seen on Cerro Baúl. While there were a few houses constructed with stones, most of these alasitas depicted contemporary subject matter, extremely mimetically (Fig. 2). An Andean aesthetic that privileges essence over appearance has facilitated both the metamorphosis of alasitas into their contemporary forms, and the persistence of their autochthonous purpose. Alasita
objects (or constructions) operate as symbolic communiqués addressed to the spirit world. During ritually performed negotiations, practitioners demand abundance from their deities and the accompanying alasitas describe, in miniature, the specific physical embodiment of abundance that the practitioner desires. Contemporary commercial alasitas may appear to have been completely subsumed by contemporary western iconography, but the autochthonous purpose of using alasitas – to wrest fecundity and abundance from Pachamama – persists. The confidence with which the rituals are enacted is empowered by reciprocity, a defining social construct that has framed the relationships of alasita practitioners with both their deities and the sacred landscape, which in the Andean cosmos are merged and undifferentiated.

For the Andean agro-pastoralists whose survival is challenged continually by the extremes of their environment, reciprocity provides an effective social structure and is ubiquitous. Labor and products are exchanged through channels that have been shaped by reciprocal relationships; the participants are empowered to initiate exchanges with both community members and the deities, and are fully confident that they will receive the appropriate response.

According to ethnographer extraordinaire Catherine Allen (1997:76), interactions between indigenous humans and the spirit world (in the form of the natural landscape) are believed to begin in childhood, with direct communication between children and the deities. Adults continue to communicate with the spirits, but the interactions are now structured by ritual practices, embodied in proscribed physical actions. In perhaps the most basic Andean ritual, libations are offered, frequently, throughout every day to Pachamama (the female, telluric, cosmic concept who is frequently glossed as “Mother
Earth”) when a few drops are flicked to the earth before any liquid is ingested. Less frequently, practitioners engage in rituals that demonstrate agency in their intention of tipping the balance of the cosmos toward themselves; the alasita ritual is an example.

Bolivian fiestas provide an opportunity for the public installation of alasitas. The fiestas are usually scheduled on a saint’s or a Virgin’s feast day, and take place at Catholic shrines. Typically, these locations are polysemous; their sacrality is based on a variety of beliefs. The disparate beliefs of these heterogeneous gatherings are enacted in a variety of ritual expressions that are appropriate to the specific beliefs of an attendee. In the words of Michael Sallnow (2000:151), anthropologist and expert on Andean pilgrimage, fiestas accommodate “a complex, dialectical interplay of meanings and practices in which everything appears as double-edged and self-contradictory.”

Pachamama and the Virgin Mary embody a dialectic that, as part of an ongoing process, continues to be synthesized within the unique environments of pilgrimage and fiesta. *Yatiris* (indigenous ritual specialists), for example, address both deities during alasita blessings and incantations. After observing representations at a contemporary fiesta, the two female icons might even appear to have been successfully combined. The Virgin of Copacabana has indigenous facial features, and the triangular shape of her dress alludes to the sacrality of mountains, a basic Andean precept. These incorporations can be thought of as typical evidence in support of the idea that a “syncretic Catholicism” is practiced in the Andes. Fundamental differences between what the Virgin and Pachamama continue to represent to their followers, and the nature of the relationships, however, are insurmountable obstacles to the acceptance of this glossing and amalgamating description. Discrete layers of disparate beliefs, Christian and indigenous,
continue to exist at Copacabana, for example. They have never fused or combined sufficiently to justify a label of syncretism; “co-occupiers” of various sacred palimpsests seems more accurate.

The Hispanic conversion project in the Andes can be described as an attempt to remove the physical location of divinity from the sacred landscape that indigenous people have worshipped for millennia, and transfer it into a group of anthropomorphically-formed sculptures with European origins: the Virgin, Jesus Christ, and the many saints.

Sallnow (2000:139-149) divides the Christian process of the “religious colonization” of the Andes into three stages. Marian and saintly images were introduced initially with the hope that they would completely replace indigenous sacred objects, but in many cases, the new Spanish icons were simply added to their existing, welcoming pantheons. After the Taki Onqoy crisis of the 1560s, Andean ethnic groups were scattered into reducciones (villages) and doctrinas (Indian parishes) that were far from their local huacas (venerated features in the landscape). Every town was supplied with its own Christian saints, and a vigorous campaign of extirpation of idolatry began (Sallnow 2000:139). By the end of the sixteenth century, a series of visions, primarily Marian, began to be reported at sacred indigenous sites and, after taking physical form as sculptures, began to produce miracles. For the Spanish, the first miracles in the New World were interpreted as divine vindication for their conquest, but for indigenous people, the reported visions (which often were captured physically as images imprinted on a stone) simply proved that the existing sacrality and powers of their own landscape had been endorsed and further strengthened by these additions to their cosmos.
Defining and diverging attitudes toward material objects complicated the possibility of Spanish/indigenous comprehension as well. To an Andean, the “essence” of an object was more important than any of its specific aesthetic attributes, and the fluid, interactional nature of the cosmos created an assumption of instability and transformation that baffled would-be extirpators.

Spanish efforts to relocate indigenous concepts of sacrality originated in a Christian cosmos comprised of dualities, populated with a long list of paired opposites. This construct created strict divisions that left little room for nuance: good or evil, sacred or profane, God or the Devil, the material or the spiritual (MacCormack 1991:337). The Andean cosmos is conceptually based on an eternal, energizing, sacred flow that touches everything, blurring (essentially eliminating) the distinctions between humans and the landscape, between landscape and the deities, and between deities and humans. The indigenous cosmos embraces an all-encompassing concept of “spiritual materialism,” a precept that is embodied in alasitas.

Anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow (2000:24) bring the “overtly transactional nature of pilgrimage,” to our attention, describing the atmosphere as “the stock exchange of the religious economy,” one in which transactions of all kinds are common. They do, however recognize distinctions between specific transactions. When rituals are addressed to Pachamama, as alasitas are, they are associated with this world and the present, while offerings made to the Virgin - candles, milagros, and donations to the Church - promise spiritual redemption in the future, in a metaphysical next life.

Pachamama and the Virgin Mary thus embody the classifications of material and metaphysical (or spiritual), differently. Pachamama combines the material and immaterial
together, in the present, while the Virgin is only associated (at least in theory) with the
immaterial, or spiritual. Robert Albro (1998:139-140), an expert on Latin American
social and indigenous movements, details their differences, describing the appropriate
Catholic stance toward the Virgin as “veneration,” in contrast to interactions with
Pachamama, who can be dealt with practically and directly simply by following a series
of explicit steps, in a defined ritual.

Alasitas could not be more material. By definition they are physical objects that
replicate other physical objects, and their purpose is to embody – exactly and in three
dimensions – inchoate desires that represent achievable forms of abundance to an
individual supplicant. Their details, designs, and their festive installations are intended to
attract the attention of the deities, but simultaneously (and ultimately more importantly),
the specific alasita that is chosen, and its public display, constitute a loud statement of the
personal goals of the supplicant for the coming year. A vow has been made to the
immediate community and the family that has the appearance of a gift to Pachamama.

The physical appearance of alasitas today is dramatically different from their
lithic predecessors’, yet their autochthonous purpose has persisted. The embrace of new
subject matter that better reflects a continually changing environment is an example of
what historian of religion Sabine MacCormack (2010:75) has called a “dynamic adaptive
accommodation of practice and belief to religious, political, and social change,” that is
typical in the Andes. Alasita rituals, as they are carried out at the Copacabana and
Quillacollo fiestas, are elements in the Aymara people’s active project of redefining their
own identities, appropriating elements from indigenous, colonially-imagined “Indian,”
Hispanic, European, and other cultures as they see fit.
Abundance is an enduring Andean value, and contemporary alasitas are re-interpretations of the traditional pursuit of abundance. Alasita deployment typifies the Aymara relationship with the physical environment. It is based on the assumptions that there is no division between the material and spiritual worlds, and that a desire that has been articulated in the form of an alasita and has been properly addressed to the deities, will be fulfilled, in a cosmos that has structured relationships between human and deities on the expectation of reciprocity.
II. FIELD NOTES: BOLIVIA, 2010 AND PERU, 2009

In this chapter, I describe my observations of alasitas at three locations, Copacabana, Quillacollo, and Cerro Baúl, and provide some contextual information. I saw the first example of alasitas in July of 2009 on Cerro Baúl, a mesa near Moquegua, a small town in southern Peru. Alasitas are increasingly present at Bolivian fiestas, and during August of 2010 I attended two, in Copacabana at the southern end of Lake Titicaca, and in Quillacollo, a small town near the city of Cochabamba (see Map 2 below). What follows are my observations from these three encounters with alasitas.

Map 1. Section shown, right.  
Map 2. Area referred to in text.

Fiesta of the Virgin of Copacabana, Bolivia

The Fiesta of the Virgin of Copacabana celebrates and honors the patroness of Bolivia (also known as the Virgen de la Candelaria), and takes place every August on the southern shores of Lake Titicaca (above). Archaeologists Brian S. Bauer and Charles Stanish (2001:53-54) describe Copacabana as having been a destination for pilgrims over
many centuries, and during the Inka occupation of the area in the fifteenth century, an
embarkation point for pilgrimages to the sacred Islands of the Sun and Moon. Today
Copacabana is Bolivia’s principal shrine, and attracts thousands of pilgrims on three
occasions: February 2 (one of the Virgin’s feast days), Good Friday, and at the beginning
of August, on a feast day that coincides with Bolivia's Independence Day on August 6.

Art historian Kelly Donahue-Wallace (2008:131) describes the struggle involved
in the creation and acceptance of indigenous sculptor Francisco Tito Yupanquí’s 1582
sculpture of the Virgin, replacing a blue stone that had signified the spirit of the earth,
Pachamama. The miracle-producing Virgin of Copacabana now resides in the gleaming-
white, mudéjar-style Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana that was designed by Spanish
architect Francisco Jiménez de Sigüenza, built between 1610 and 1640 specifically to
house the sculpture of the Virgin (Donahue-Wallace 2008:143-146) (Fig. 3).

Alasitas are associated with several fiestas in Copacabana, and appear, most
frequently in the forms of houses, trucks, and currency. They are available for purchase
throughout the town from street vendors, who are interspersed among the vendors selling
everyday items and special-occasion souvenirs commemorating the fiesta, Copacabana,
Lake Titicaca, and the Virgin of Copacabana.

The celebration at the August fiesta takes place over a period of four days. Many
but not all of the pilgrims at Copacabana are Aymara, and despite the fiesta’s official
designation as a celebration of Bolivia’s patron saint and Bolivia’s independence, many
Peruvian pilgrims journey to Copacabana from across the nearby border. According to
Sallnow (1987:67), the attendees at Copacabana are not a homogeneous group but
represent a wide variety of social classes and professions, both urban and rural.
Events scheduled by the church include outdoor processions featuring a replica of the sculpture of the Virgin, brass bands and dancing, and the blessing of physical objects, from tiny alasitas, to cantaloupe-sized stones, to trucks. The fiesta is punctuated frequently by firecracker blasts, and the late-night partying is accompanied by loud music, dancing, and plenty of alcohol. The official and unofficial activities of the fiesta take place in a variety of locations throughout and adjacent to Copacabana, a relatively small town. The official procession and the church-sponsored blessings of objects take place near the Basilica, while other activities that have not been sanctioned by the Church take place a half-mile or so away from the Basilica, on a natural protuberance that rises up sharply between the town and Lake Titicaca called Cerro Calvario, or Calvary Hill.

**Blessings at the Basilica**

Outside the walls of the Basilica’s enclosed atrium, most of the merchandise for sale features an image of the Virgin, or makes reference to Copacabana, or to Lake Titicaca. Elaborate mamacas, doll-like representations of elaborately dressed Virgins of Copacabana and demandas, the glass-fronted boxes that contain heavily decorated images of the Virgin (Fig. 4) are readily available. Religious medals, milagros, candles, and souvenir-sized reed boats can all be purchased in the town’s plaza in front of the church, but I did not see alasitas being sold near the Basilica. Most alasita vendors set up their stands further away, near or on Cerro Calvario.

In the center of the Basilica’s large walled atrium, an outdoor chapel is outfitted with a temporary raised platform that is open on all four sides, at a height that is just out of reach for an adult. On top of the platform, acolytes wearing white robes dip plastic flowers into buckets of holy water, and wave them over the crowd, blessing any object
that is held up by a supplicant. Objects presented for blessings include family photographs, small metal milagros, and in one instance, a stone (Fig. 5), but many of the objects are unidentifiable inside opaque plastic bags. A large Copacabana Virgin mamacha is installed at the front of the platform; she is dark-haired and clothed in a mountain-shaped dress and is perched on a silver sliver of the moon, a silver star adorning each tip. The Virgin and moon rest on top of a small painting featuring the image that typically accompanies images of this Virgin: the sacred Lake Titicaca, surrounded by snow-topped mountains.

Flowers and candles are left by pilgrims on the front edge of the platform, and a red cloth is pinned to its side to receive attachable offerings: many milagros, a few photographs of individuals, and a few arrangements of dólares. “Dólares” describes a variety of paper items: full-sized and miniature fake currency (American dollar bills, Peruvian soles, and Bolivianos), as well as passports, plane tickets, and other valuables, ubiquitous at both fiestas. In the distance, Cerro Calvario is visible, framed by the arches of the outdoor chapel. Cement crosses dot the hill and its summit, and hundreds of people are slowly making their way to the top (Fig. 6). Further from the Basilica’s walls and deeper into the plaza the wares displayed by the vendors include alasitas and bruja (witch or sorceress) supplies, including llama fetuses, talismans, and plates piled high with colorful faux food (Fig. 7). Most of the bruja supply vendors are women, and many do double-duty as yatiris, the ritual specialists who administer blessings and are usually identifiable by their braziers, filled with smoking lumps of copal. The vendor/yatiris are available to provide ritual libations (ch’allas) at no extra charge, with the purchase of dólares, or another alasita. During my ch’alla, the yatiri first held the object (a plastic bag
containing a variety of dólares) in the brazier’s smoke, continued with an incantation that incorporated (at the least) the Virgin Mary and Pachamama, then rang a bell over the objects and sprinkled mistura, (petal-like, yellow confetti) and alcohol over my hands and the object to complete the ceremony (Fig. 8).

Ch’allas on Cerro Calvario

By around noon on August 6th, many pilgrims have gathered in the Cerro Calvario area (Fig. 9). A temporary village of vehicles and tents constructed from tarps and poles is massed at the bottom of the hill; within it small areas are devoted to services provided by a variety of ritual specialists. Yatiris in one area, for example, specialize in telling fortunes by interpreting the shapes that are formed by melted lead that is dropped into a bucket of cold water. The entry to the wide, worn path leading to the summit is marked formally by a large white arch that reads “Bienvenidos a Calvario” (Fig. 10). The arch is topped with a cross, and an illustrated sign hangs down advertising the availability of “artesanías en miniaturas como ser casitas, autos y billetes,” miniature versions of the houses, cars, and money that are the three most popular forms for alasitas. “Billetes” here is equivalent to “dólares,” which at the end of the day, are scattered and trampled everywhere. Alasita currency is reproduced extremely realistically, but the lettering has been subtly altered to feature the “Banco de la Fortuna” or the “Banco alasitas;” and an image of the Virgin is often substituted for the usual statesmen and heroes (Fig. 11). The bottom portion of the entry sign reads “Prohibido Arrojar Piedras a las Estaciones” in a (futile) attempt to prohibit stone-throwing at the Stations of the Cross.

Despite that warning, the square bases of the gray cement crosses are piled with stones. On the hill, most of the wares displayed are alasitas, including the houses, buses,
trucks and cars that are promoted on the welcoming arch (Fig. 12). Other popular alasitas are suitcases stuffed with tiny dólares, miniature bottles of liquor, and *ch’uspas*, copies of the woven bags traditionally used to carry a supply of coca leaves that now sprout fans of currency, credit cards, visas, and airplane tickets (Fig. 13). Many vendors offer paper decorations such as multi-colored streamers, fold-out three-dimensional hearts, butterflies, flowers, Bolivian flags, and *mistura.* Along with the alasitas and decorations, there is a smattering of religious goods: demandas featuring the Virgin that double as electric lights, and cutouts in the shape of a hand with an image of the Virgin of Copacabana in the center and a different Catholic icon on each finger, intended for rear-view mirrors.  

Halfway up the hill, the path expands into a broad, flat saddle on which hundreds of people are gathered. A group crowds around a towering plinth topped by a brightly-painted, life-size statue of Jesus Christ. A line has formed to take turns placing objects and decorations into a smoking “oven” located in front of the plinth. A sign on the plinth states that one is welcome to perform a ch’alla for “*Sus objetos deseados: Autos casas dólares, etc.*” (one’s desired objects: cars, houses, money, etc.) by exposing the miniatures to the fire’s smoke; the sign’s production values and its placement at the top of the plinth suggest that it was added by the Church (Fig. 14).

The oven/plinth/statue area is enclosed by an iron fence, surrounded in turn by a ring of a dozen or so permanent cement *mesas* (tables or altars) and card tables where yatiris wait to conduct ch’allas for interested customers (Fig. 15). Each yatiri’s ceremony differs slightly from the others’; holding the object in smoke during the blessing is universal, but individual incantations and physical props vary in number, type, and
complexity (Fig. 16). Ch’allas on the cement mesas are conducted on a cloth that has been spread out over the mesa’s surface (Fig. 17). Halfway up the steep hill, most of the pilgrims join an immense, slow-moving line that is snaking its way up to the summit, where church representatives and yatiris are stationed to bless proffered objects ranging from alasitas to mamachas (Fig. 18).

While most of the pilgrims wait to go to the top, a smaller number of them engage in a ritual activity on the side of the hill that overlooks Lake Titicaca. Pilgrims and yatiris stand and sit in small groups among a series of rough rectangles that have been defined by rows of small stones (Fig. 19). The size of the plots varies; the smallest are about two or three feet wide and most are about three to six feet long. The rocks marking the boundaries of the lots are decorated with the short branches of greenery that are available from vendors, and are wedged into the ground. The final creation is a miniature rural estate that is enclosed by a low wall and shaded by small trees. The two dozen or so rectangles are grouped together into a few clusters, all with excellent views of Lake Titicaca and the surrounding hills and mountains (Fig. 20).

Family groups, couples, and other larger groups arrange their objects on the bare ground with care, and most place casitas (small houses) and trucks in the center of their rented stone-defined rectangle (Figs. 21, 22). Many pilgrims decorate their estates further, festooning the stone boundary walls with colorful paper streamers and adding branches of greenery. Arrangements vary by the number of alasitas included and the degree of decorating complexity, but virtually every arrangement features a miniature house of some kind. The production values of the casitas range from slick, obviously newly-purchased and highly mimetic versions, freshly purchased from the on-site
vendors, to very simple structures made of heaped stones that are finished off with roofs fashioned from cardboard or newspaper (Fig. 23). Most arrangements also feature a vehicle, usually a truck (Fig. 24), and some incorporate stacks of dólares into their arrangements. In a few of the rectangular plots, large stones that appear to be too difficult to remove are featured in the arrangement, decorated as if they were casitas (Fig. 25).

Yatiris, almost all of whom are male, circulate throughout the area with their braziers and are hired to perform ch’allas. The yatiri begins by blessing all of the assembled family members, then waves the brazier so that everyone and everything within its vicinity is exposed to the smoke. He moves in a series of circles around the finca’s boundaries, chanting, sprinkling confetti, ringing a bell, and offering alcoholic libations to the alasitas, to the family members, and to a list of deities that includes Pachamama and the Virgin Mary. Many of the rituals conclude with a generous spray of alcohol over the entire area (often including nearby onlookers), and fireworks are blasted off sporadically near the miniature houses, as a finale. After the ritual is complete (including of course, paying the yatiri), many of the families remain within their finca’s borders to relax, talk, eat, and drink, as they gaze out over Lake Titicaca and the mountains in the distance.

**Mobile Shrines on the Shore of Lake Titicaca**

Many of the Peruvian pilgrims arrive at Copacabana in trucks, cars, and buses, and park them for the duration of the fiesta along the waterfront (Fig. 26). In an interesting variation on the finca constructions on Cerro Calvario that look down onto Titicaca, here the vehicles themselves are transformed by their owners into “portable” shrines (Fig. 27). Most of the lakeside car/truck shrines are decorated more extravagantly
than the farmsteads on the hill, and stones do not play any part in the lakeside installations. Most of the shrine offerings here are created with carefully arranged casitas, miniature trucks and cars, dólares, and a few other miniatures, all apparently purchased. All of the elements are assembled either on the car’s hood or on the ground in front of the vehicle, and most are topped off with bright splashes of colored paper decorations (Fig. 28).

Along the lakeshore, which is neither hill nor church, men in white surplices, baseball caps and crucifixes circulate rapidly through the area on foot with buckets of water, administering blessings for the vehicles; and yatiris carrying braziers conduct their ch’allas. They follow each other around the trucks and cars in quick succession, and all rituals are completed with a vigorous spray of holy water and/or alcohol (Fig. 29). The two sets of rituals enacted appear to be very similar. First, the ritual specialist blesses the owners and the family, then circles around the vehicle to bless it inside and out (the doors and hood are opened in preparation); he blesses the engine and wraps it all up with a libation. In many instances, everyone poses afterward for a photograph of the entire group with their now blessed (or doubly-blessed) vehicle (Fig. 30).

**Fiesta of the Virgin of Urkupiña, Quillacollo**

During three consecutive days during mid-August, a series of official events and unofficial rituals takes place in Quillacollo, Department of Cochabamba, Bolivia (see Map 2, pg. 8) under the banner of the “Fiesta de la Virgen de Urkupiña,” in honor of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. This fiesta is intended by Quillacollo’s leaders to exhibit unity among the many ethnic groups who comprise “The Plurinational State of Bolivia,” (the country’s complete name); the parade’s alternative title is “la Fiesta de la Integración
Anthropologist Jim Weil (1998:11) reports that the fiesta is very popular, and is attended every year by more than half a million Bolivians, plus a handful of foreign visitors. The fiesta’s events begin with a massive parade on Saturday, titled “la Entrada Folklórica.” On Sunday, a mass is conducted that is attended by high government and church officials, and on Monday, the pilgrimage to Cerro Cota, a nearby hill, takes place. The sale of “miniature handicrafts,” presumably referring to alasitas, is mentioned but not featured in publicity for the fiesta.

**Quillacollo: La Entrada Folklórica**

The Saturday Entrada is a seemingly endless parade (from mid-morning until past midnight) of more than ten thousand dancers who comprise sixty-plus co-fraternities from throughout Bolivia. Every dancer has made a promise to the Virgin to dance for three consecutive years in her honor, a commitment that demands many hours of rehearsal, the expense of a costume (which is often extremely elaborate) and financial contributions toward hiring a band. The dancers wear what is described in official Quillacollo publicity and the media as “traditional” dress, most of which replicates the costumes and dances at Oruro, Bolivia’s most famous folkloric fiesta that celebrates Carnaval. Costumes include neon-colored versions of “traditional” indigenous dress (Fig. 31), Inkas (Fig. 32), and a cadre of apparently genuine miners, marching and dancing in their own clothes and pounding the pavement with their sledgehammers (Fig. 33). The Entrada’s overall effect is sensual overload: eight hours of loud music, wildly colorful, bizarre, and sexually provocative costumes (usually worn by young women) (Fig. 34), colored smoke, fireworks, and lots of chicha. The traditional Andean maize beer is officially banned from the parade area, but is readily available.
The dancers make their way slowly along the four-mile parade route to Quillacollo’s main plaza and church, the late nineteenth-century Iglesia de San Ildefonso, stopping frequently to perform for the enthusiastic audiences that line both sides of the entire route. When the dancers and musicians finally enter the church, many proceed to the altar on their knees, physically and emotionally exhausted and in tears, after the many hours of dancing in heavy costumes (Fig. 35).

On Cerro Cota: Doing Business with the Virgin

Maria L. Lagos, an anthropologist who did fieldwork in the Cochabamba area, relates the legend of the Virgin as it is usually told (Lagos 1993:55). Cerro Cota, a little more than a mile from Quillacollo, was the location of a spring regarded as sacred by indigenous people. During the seventeenth century, it was the site of several appearances by the Virgin that were witnessed by a young, indigenous shepherdess. After hearing the girl’s description of her visions, fellow-villagers accompanied her to the hill, arriving just in time to catch a glimpse of the Virgin ascending, disappearing into the sky. The Quechua-speaking shepherdess cried out, famously, “Ork’hopiña! Ork’hopiña!” (“She is already on the mountain!”). The Virgin was gone but she had left an image of herself behind, imprinted on a stone. The villagers took the stone-image into nearby Quillacollo where it proved to be a source for miracles. Quillacollo’s Virgin was named after the girl’s exclamation, hence “la Virgen de Urkupiña.”

Today, Cerro Cota is the site of a ritual that, as far as I know, is unique to the August fiesta of the Virgin of Urkupiña, the ritual procurement of “stone loans” that represent transactions with the Virgin. Although I was aware of the practice, I was nonetheless startled to see my first stone-loan, which was barely concealed behind a large
chair in the lobby of an upscale Cochabamba hotel. It was enormous, the size of an ice-chest, and had been prepared for shipping in an open-slatted wooden crate that left the giant stone visible. The stone’s owner was undoubtedly fulfilling the terms of the Virgin’s loan: a promise made the previous year to return the stone within a year to its source, Cerro Cota.

On Monday, after the official parades, parties, and masses are over, an enormous number of people (in addition to pilgrims who have walked the twelve miles from Cochabamba) descend on the hill. In a scene similar to Copacabana’s, tents, cars, trucks and vendors fill much of the space around the hill’s base and form a temporary town. Also like Copacabana, an elaborate white gateway, built recently by the Catholic Church (and paid for by the owner of the town’s largest local brewery) towers over the path that leads up the hill (Fig. 36). Cerro Cota is far less steep than Cerro Calvario at Copacabana, and is much more crowded. A long line of people moves slowly along a dirt path that is initially wide enough to accommodate two double-rows of vendors, but later narrows into a single lane with vendors crowding both sides. As the path continues up the hill, the arrays of general-purpose goods (hats, food, sunglasses and cold drinks) begin to include more and more alasitas, interspersed among the Virgin of Urkupiña souvenirs and the usual brightly-colored paper decorations. Plaid plastic carrying bags are a popular item for sale, as they offer a practical solution to the problem of carrying one’s (potentially very large and extremely heavy) stones home at the end of the day (Fig. 37); bags created for this fiesta are stamped with messages and logos depicting the Virgin.

The stone-loan phenomenon was explained to me by a stone-borrower as a carefully defined and business-like transaction, with terms that are created and well-
understood by the “borrower.” The préstamo (loan) is made directly by the Virgin to the believer, and repayment is expected in full within a year’s time. If the stone-loan is not returned then, the borrower fully expects to pay interés (interest) to the Virgin in the form of candles, flowers, or other offerings typically left at shrines. Paul Dustin Guardia Marañón, a Paceño whose family is from Cochabamba, for example, hoped to leave his current job and begin his own travel agency in the upcoming year, and his stone-loan incorporated a specific goal: the exact amount of money that he needed to make during that time, in dollars. Borrowers define their loans very specifically, and the loan’s details are then thought to be contained by their stones.

A shrine dedicated to the Virgin, sponsored by the Church, is located part way up the hill, and just as I saw at Copacabana’s Basilica, men (and in this case a woman) dressed in white surplices splash holy water from long-stemmed plastic flowers over the pilgrims descending from the hill-top, stones in hand. To the right of the shrine, under church-sponsored, life-sized sculptures of sheep (recreating the primordial vision of the shepherdess described earlier), a path leading to the hilltop is lined with yatiris (Fig. 38). Men and women preside over their smoking burners, surrounded by heaps of last year’s abandoned stones, most still wrapped in plastic carrying bags, festooned with colorful paper ribbons and damp from their alcoholic libations.

Having fulfilled the terms of last year’s loans by returning their stone-loans, the crowd continues up the hill to the “mines,” as the stone-quarries are called. The miniature quarries cover roughly half of the summit with their deeply cut pits (Fig. 39). Local entrepreneurs obtain rights to the mines from City Hall for the course of the fiesta, then rent out sledge-hammers and sell beer to pilgrims, along with the opportunity to whack
away in pursuit of a stone (Lagos 1993:61). The process of obtaining the actual rock and the loan are understood to mirror each other: if it is difficult, and it takes the would-be borrower a long time to obtain the stone, it will be equally difficult for the borrower to achieve the goals that the stones embody. Anthropologist Susanna Wilhelmina Derks (2009:99) reports that if the loan is intended to purchase something large or expensive, the borrowed stone will reflect these high aspirations in its heft and volume, as well as in the effort that is required to obtain it. Removing stones from the mines is not easy; I observed large, strong, coca-chewing men taking swing after swing without getting what they were after (Fig. 40). In an extension of the mining metaphors that accompany the stone-loans, firecrackers are frequently blasted like milder forms of dynamite, possibly loosening the rocks, and certainly ratcheting up the excitement level.

Once they are removed from the mines, the stones are usually placed into bags to be taken away. Bagged stones in hand, borrowers seek out the services of a yatiri, either on the hill, or back down toward the shrine where the Church’s blessings are being administered (Fig. 41). Under the intense sun, areas on the hill-top that are not cratered with mines are shaded by hundreds of open, makeshift tents. Pilgrims sit inside them on the ground or on improvised seats, eating, drinking, chatting, napping, and on occasion, dancing to the music of one of the strolling bands that are available for hire. Having obtained their loans, the pilgrims relax and enjoy themselves in the company of their families and friends, making themselves thoroughly at home (Fig. 42).

The spaces in which these convivial groups are relaxing strongly resemble the demarcated, rectangular mini-lots that overlook Lake Titicaca at Copacabana, although no water (besides a tiny trickle of a stream) is visible from here. 19 Much of the area that
has been marked is being used ritually in a manner almost identical to Copacabana. At Quillacollo most of the borders are constructed using rows of small stones, as at Copacabana, but in an interesting variation in materials, some of the boundaries are drawn directly onto the dusty ground with chalky white paint (Fig. 43). Again, rectangular boundaries prevail, but chalked circles surround the miniature trees, and the carefully drawn entryways add graphic detail to the grid-like basic forms.

The Department of Cochabamba has been Bolivia’s most productive agricultural region since pre-Inka times. The climate is milder than Copacabana’s due to its lower altitude and proximity to the Amazon, and the foliage is lush. Cochabamba is the region where most of Bolivia’s coca is grown, and coca-growers constitute a powerful national political force. Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president (and an Aymara) was originally a coca-farmer (cocalero) in the Cochabamba region. The fincas at Quillacollo seem to be more lavishly furnished and decorated than those at Copacabana, and most include abundant foliage created with branches of coca leaves (Fig. 44). Almost every plot features a house, but as was true at Copacabana, there is a wide range in the appearance of the houses (Figs. 45, 46, 47). Some dream-houses are as basic as a cardboard box with crudely cut doors and windows, while a few have obviously been purchased (Fig. 48).

Like the houses at Copacabana, all the casitas at Quillacollo are placed directly onto the earth, usually in the center of the areas bounded by stone and chalk. Paper decorations are much in evidence as wrappings for alasitas and as decorations on the borders, further defining the boundaries of the mini-property. Many fincas include small cars and trucks, as well as the usual displays of dólares. Unique to Quillacollo, of course,
is the addition of newly-mined stones to these arrangements (Fig. 49); stones usually remain inside their plastic carrying bags, but like the alasitas, are covered with damp tangles of multi-colored ribbons and yellow confetti, evidence that they too have been blessed by a yatiri.

After constructing the tiny replications of their wished-for environments, many families perform a version of their own domestic lives inside them, if only for an hour or two. Seats are found, drinks are poured, and the new inhabitants of these self-constructed dream worlds appear, literally, to be making themselves at home (Figs. 50, 51), gathered around their new alasita home. Inserting their own bodies into the physical arrangement signals a commitment to the future that the alasitas are depicting, and this temporary occupation of their wish gives them an opportunity to rehearse for it. Like the mini-mines, the mini-estates are rental propositions, and when the tenants move on, the empty spaces are cleaned by a broom-wielding “land-lady” who sweeps it out to ready it for the next occupants.

**Cerro Baúl, Southern Peru**

Cerro Baúl is a dramatic mesa in southern Peru that rises sharply about 2,000 feet and towers over the Osmore Valley, a green, fertile agricultural area surrounded by dry, dusty, monochromatic desert (Fig. 52), (see Map 2, pg. 8). Cerro Baúl is a popular destination for Aymara pilgrims who believe that it is an apu (mountain spirit), a belief that was held by their ancestors and persists, according to Michael Moseley (2001:236). The view from the summit is extraordinary: a 360-degree panorama of mountain after mountain with glimpses, far in the distance, of snow-covered peaks. Cerro Baúl was the site of the southernmost Wari settlement (600 to 1000 ce), and what remains of their
outpost is the subject of an ongoing archaeological excavation. Today’s Aymara pilgrims are re-purposing stones from the Wari ruins to construct their alasitas, a practice that despite being officially discouraged obviously continues.20

After the hour-long climb to Cerro Baul’s summit, the first man-made construction encountered is a large shrine constructed of heaped stones (Fig. 53). It is surrounded by small ovals made from stones that are receptacles for offerings; most contain the typical detritus of pagos (ritual offerings to the earth): candle wax, empty liquor bottles, and the remains of flowers, plastic and natural. The shrine is topped off with five large, wooden, Christian crosses that are elaborately dressed in white textile “costumes;” a separate and even taller cross is installed between the shrine and the mesa’s edge.21

Beyond the shrine, as far as the eye can see, is a vast and sprawling array of stone constructions that appear to spread out far enough to cover the summit entirely. Their sheer number, as well as their sizes, variety, and the architectural ambition they exhibit are impressive (Fig. 54).22 Acres of alasitas cover Cerro Baul’s giant flat summit like farmland seen from an airplane; the many tiny houses, fields and buildings comprise an enormous, mono-chromatic, asymmetrical tapestry. The miniature/giant discourse is echoed by the view over the mesa’s edge of the full-sized, real agricultural scene surrounding its base below (Fig. 55).

Fincas fill the entire north quadrant of the summit, running from east to west. Every construction is unique. They have been created with enormous variations in form, from rounded (Fig. 56) to rectangular (Fig. 57) to irregular, as well as in combinations of different shapes (Fig. 58). Most feature low stone walls that define the borders and
contain a variety of buildings, also constructed with small stones. Most fincas contain at the least a miniature house, and many include additional buildings, presumably shelters for animals or storage (Fig. 59). Animals are represented with small stones that have been arranged into small groups (Fig. 60). In many fincas, the illusion of an agricultural field has been achieved with striations scratched into the extremely dry earth (Figs. 61, 62). Like the miniature properties at Quillacollo, the lines of the stone boundary walls are broken by formal entryways, and many feature lintels, created by placing flat rocks across the top of an opening in the wall (Fig. 63). There are even a few multi-storied buildings constructed using the same flat rock technique (Fig. 64). Some installations have incorporated very large stones that appear to be immovable (Fig. 59), making them part of the installation, a popular Inka architectural practice that art historian Carolyn Dean (2007:502-518) describes as an expression of Inka power and legitimacy. At Copacabana (Fig. 20) the practice is similar and may, on a much smaller scale, share the intention of demonstrating the right of the installation, and by extension, of the builder, to be where they are.

Occasional non-stone elements appear: bits of wire and cardboard or most commonly, plastic from bottles (usually Inka Kola) that have been cut into pieces to create architectural details such as water barrels, windows, and roofs (Fig. 65). Unlike the alasitas at Copacabana and Quillacollo, Cerro Baul’s alasitas constitute a semi-permanent installation; the pilgrims who construct them do not take them home in plastic bags when the day and the rituals are over.

I observed only one family group (possibly accompanied by a yatiri), sitting on a distant edge of the mesa during the one day I was there. Archaeologist Ryan Williams
(2011: personal communication), director of the Cerro Baúl Archaeological Project, writes that “August tends to be the high season for [Cerro] Baúl pilgrimages. It is the start of the planting season and a critical time in the agricultural calendar for productive success”
Andean Miniatures

Carolyn Dean (2010:56), writing generally about miniatures as a physical form in the Andes, reports that their use is well-documented in the present and the past, and that miniatures usually embody entities regarded as uncontrollable. Catherine Allen (1997:75) describes the use and presence of miniatures in the Andes as ubiquitous. During the early seventeenth century, chronicler Pablo Joseph Arriaga (quoted in Lau 2008:1031) reported that “the Indians recognize deities in small things, for it is known that these figures and stones are images representing hills, mountains and riverbeds, or even their progenitors and forebears, whom they invoke and worship as their creators and from whom they expect well-being and happiness” (italics mine). Ritual manipulation of miniatures offers their users the possibility of control over an uncertain future: fecundity for their animals, abundance for their crops, and overall well-being for their communities.

According to Susan Lee Bruce (1986:191), miniatures have been present in the Andes since at least the time of the Paracas civilization (750-250 BCE), and have been created with a range of materials including shell, metal, ceramic, and textile, replicating a variety of objects. Ancient miniatures include the tiny replicas of clothing that were found tied into bundles and buried with young women at Pacatnamu (1400 CE), the magnificent ceramic vessel-houses created by the Recuay and the Moche (100 – 800 CE), the Chancay representations of women weaving textiles that are made of similar textiles (1000 – 1400 CE), to the Inka Sayhuite Stone, a giant boulder carved into a vast, miniature landscape that is populated with carved monkeys, birds, pumas and frogs (Bruce 1986:192; Stone-Miller 2002:176; Dean 2010: 31).
The best-known Andean miniatures are the exquisitely-dressed male and female figurines made of gold, silver, and spondylus shell, that were buried with sacrificed children during the Inka ritual of *capacocha* (royal obligation), along with tiny llamas made of the same materials, and miniatures of household equipment. Colin McEwan and Maarten Van de Guchte (1992:364) interpret this sacrifice of children as a reflection of the Inka’s “fascination with the notion of an ideal but invisible world, and their attempt to represent this world in miniature.” They characterize the capacocha ritual as a replication of the cosmos, in which children chosen from newly conquered polities represented links that connected the far-flung borders of Tawantinsuyu to the Inka ruler, in Cuzco.

Cuzco was the site of the Coricancha, the most famous Inka huaca, and was the spiritual and political center of Tawantinsuyu (Bauer and Stanish 2001:8-10). In addition to sacred images of the Sun and Moon, it contained a legendary garden filled with representations in gold and silver of flora and fauna, another Inka material articulation of the ideal world they imagined.

Less dramatic, quotidian examples of miniature clothing and household equipment are plentiful, and are often included in Andean burials, as Bruce (191-192) documented at Pacatnamu. Archaeologist Mark Aldenderfer (1991:251) also reports installations of miniature houses at Asana, the early Aymara site near Cerro Baúl. While the specific purposes of these small replicas are speculative, their creation and deployment as controllers of the uncontrollable, as Dean suggests, is a reasonable assumption. The Inka pursuit of a better world through the creation of miniature versions of it resonates with today’s alasitas.
Sacred Objects: Huacas, Chancas, and Conopas

The terms huaca, chanca, and conopa describe three types of pre-Hispanic Andean objects, all associated with deities and the spiritual world. Huaca is the most difficult of the three to define because of its many possible physical manifestations. *Huaca* usually describes physical features in the landscape such as stones, mountains, and caves, but is also associated with, and can apply to *mallkis*, ancestral mummies.

According to anthropologist Frank Salomon (2004:115-7), mallkis were believed to exercise great power over their descendants, particularly over their fecundity. Huacas are still worshipped publicly, and during the colonial era, were the primary targets for extirpation. They were interpreted by the Spanish to be (comprehended in their own terms) “deities,” and thus assumed to be idols that threatened Christianity’s single god.

“Chancas” (also known as *con churis*, *enqaychus* and *illas*) are small figures usually made of stone; in colonial times they were often confused by the Spanish with the broadly-defined huacas. Francisco de Avila, a colonial extirpator and author of the *Huarochni Manuscript*, referred to them as “lesser gods” (quoted in Salomon 1991:16-18). Historian of religion Kenneth Mills (1997:75, 89-90) refers to them as “lineage gods” and reports that they were used for private rituals in the homes of individuals. He adds that they were revered by extended family groups, and were regarded as valuable enough to be passed down through generations.24

Of the three classifications, conopas have the most in common with alasitas. Mills (1997:75) describes them as “personal gods of fecundity,” small stones that have been sculpted to represent animals (usually camelids), or individual pieces of commonly grown produce such as maize or potatoes. Some conopas resembling camelids have
depressions carved into their backs in which llama fat can be burned during private rituals. According to Mills (1997:75-78) conopas, like huacas, chancas, and alasitas, are directly associated with beliefs and concerns about future abundance and fertility.

Each of these physical manifestations of the numinous is believed to possess illa, which Salomon (2004:115) describes as energized matter, “a metaphysical substance…that infuses the herd with essential strength, health and fertility.” Salomon traces illa back to pre-Inka times, and asserts that the concept is one of the community-defining beliefs regarding ancestors that is held by many Andeans.25 The same word is used to describe small, personal objects that are repositories of good fortune, and is applied to alasitas, according to anthropologist Nico Tassi (2010:200). Salomon describes the strong connection made between ancestors and fecundity in Andean societies, long before the Inka reign. Every group’s fecundity was believed to be directly affected by its own ancestors’ mummies, the very oldest of whom were believed to have emerged from the earth long ago (Salomon 2004:117). The continued residence of illa within the ancestor mummy is an example of the Andean emphasis on “essence.” The importance of essence is demonstrated by the royal Inka practice in which pieces of an ancestor’s finger-nails or hair were saved, and deposited into a metal container that was then kept beside the ancestor’s mummy; it was referred to as a “brother” and was regarded and treated ritually as if it were the equivalent of the mummy (Salomon 2004:117).

Alasitas

Aldenderfer (1991:250) claims that alasitas are one of the three elements of Aymara ritual and ceremonial practice that can be legitimately classified as proto-Aymara, with neither Inka nor European origins.26 Physical evidence from the Asana site
leads Aldenderfer to conclude that alasitas were deployed in ancient “fiestas of the miniature,” annual trade and barter fairs (Aldenderfer 1991:250). Aldenderfer (1991:227) further claims that alasitas have been present in the Aymara culture since at least 4500 BCE.

As was mentioned earlier, alasitas are ritual objects that are deployed publicly at fiestas as well as in private domestic settings, which will be discussed later. Their treatment is consistent with the ritual care that Andeans have given to a variety of physical manifestations of the spirit world, from huacas to the mummies of ancestors. At fiestas, alasitas are ritually “activated” in the same manner that mummies and huacas were and are: they are decorated, given libations, blessed by yatiris, and occasionally treated to music and dancing. At their most basic, like so many Andean ritual artifacts, alasitas are communications with the deities on the subject of future fecundity, articulated formally as examples of material abundance.

The word “alasita” is applied, as I observed, to a wide variety of physical entities, from the large-scale lithic constructions on Cerro Baúl to objects (tiny suitcases packed with currency, for example) that can easily be held in one hand. The defining characteristics of alasitas are their scale and their subject matter: they depict the desires of humans - whether physical or intangible - in miniaturized, representational, three-dimensional forms.

Alasitas appear in many guises and are currently constructed from a wide range of materials. The classification is broad enough to include the semi-permanent stone mini-estates built by pilgrims on Cerro Baúl (Figs. 56-65), cardboard boxes that have been roughly transformed into basic, home-made houses as at Quillacollo (Fig. 50), and the
miniatures that have been hand-made in multiples, specifically for sale (Fig. 2). Commercial alasitas include an ever-expanding variety of subject matter: computers (Fig. 66), tiendas piled high with branded, packaged foods (Fig. 67), and framed certificates documenting professional certifications, such as Ph.D.’s, medical degrees, and architecture credentials, for example (Fig. 68).

Alasitas originated among indigenous, Aymara-speaking people in the southern Andes. The word “alasita” is Aymara, and has no meaning in present-day Spanish. It is derived from the Aymara verb alathaña (to buy) and is commonly translated as the imperative, “buy from me” (Weil 1989:15). Clare Sammells (2011: personal communication) translates the word, perhaps more precisely and certainly into a construction that is more specific, as “you buy it from me.” Alasitas are included in Bolivian fiestas at an increasing rate, and according to Albro (1998:133), the possession and use of alasitas is also spreading to Peru and further, to locations where there are Aymaras and/or Bolivians, such as Los Angeles and Washington D.C.

Contemporary Alasitas

The single most common form for an alasita to take is that of a miniature house, representing the basic human desire for shelter, and today the second most popular alasita is a car or truck, obvious replacements for the llamas and alpacas of the recent past. Beyond the two essentials that represent shelter and livelihood, there is almost nothing that a person might desire or aspire to that is not available in alasita form. Just a few examples include food (ready-to-eat dinners or the ingredients needed to cook them), the materials needed to build a house (bags of cement and a mixer, ladders and tools) (Figs. 69, 70), and tiny suitcases stuffed with dólares (Fig. 71). The dólares sub-category, in
addition to fake currency, includes tiny versions of daily newspapers, professional diplomas, credit cards, passports, visas, airplane tickets, and titles of ownership that to accompany casita purchases (Fig. 72). Certificates documenting desires for alternative marital states that are reported by anthropologist Thomas Abercrombie (1998:450) include papal dispensations for divorces and written permissions (in miniature) to commit adultery.

Houses, farms, and animals have provided the subject matter of alasitas for many centuries, but one of the most interesting characteristics of alasitas is their fluidity, the degree to which their forms and subjects have changed over time, and continue to change. Contemporary alasitas reflect the contemporary desires of their purchasers for contemporary products, illustrated by an example from Copacabana: a combination grocery store and internet café is for sale along with houses, trucks and dólares (Fig. 73).

Most commercial alasitas are hand-made individually, by thousands of artesanas who operate within Bolivia’s giant informal economy; they are sold for eventual re-sale to the vendors who travel to the fiestas.³⁰ Hans Buechler (1989:39) reports that craft-persons who make full-sized objects during most of the year take a few months off to produce alasita versions: printers print dólares, potters make tiny bowls, and instrument-makers produce tiny charangos (a stringed instrument native to the Andes). According to Derks (2009:104), one Boliviano (BOB) buys $10,000 worth of alasita currency, and a fully-outfitted bar can be purchased for thirty BOB, worth about $4.00 US, approximately one day of wages.
Public Fiestas and Private Altars

Fiestas are the occasion for the public deployment of alasitas, as I observed. Bolivian fiestas frequently incorporate more than one theme; Copacabana’s August fiesta venerates the Virgin of Copacabana and celebrates Bolivia’s independence simultaneously. The only Bolivian fiesta that gives alasitas the top billing is the “Fiesta de las Alasitas,” a three week-long event that begins, every year, on January 24. This fiesta is in La Paz, Bolivia’s largest city, which combined with its neighbor El Alto is home to the greatest concentration of Aymara people in the Andes.31

At the alasita fiesta, second billing goes to the Virgin of La Paz and “Ekeko,” described by anthropologist Weston La Barre (1948:195) and popularly as “the ancient god of good luck” (Fig. 74).32 Ekeko is almost always shown as a small figurine, an enthusiastic and plump man with western facial features (blue eyes, white skin, and a mustache) dressed in Aymara-style clothing. His poncho (sometimes a jacket) is meant to be covered by alasitas that are just an inch or so long, specifically made to be sewn or pinned to Ekeko.

This fiesta’s attendees begin by purchasing the appropriate alasita versions of their personal aspirations, and desired material goods that they hope to obtain during the upcoming year. If one is not already owned, an Ekeko figure is purchased. Next, blessings of Ekeko and the alasitas are conducted by a yatiri, one of the hundreds who are available on the streets. Noon is believed to be the most propitious time to receive the ch’alla; it can, but does not have to be, followed by a blessing of the same objects by a priest, according to Bolivian archaeologist and Ekeko expert, Carlos Ponce Sanginés (1969:198).33 At least one blessing is believed to be necessary in order for the alasita to
fulfill its purpose: to appear as the full-scale “real” object represented by the alasita, within the year.

The La Paz fiesta becomes more popular every year; thousands of vendors from Bolivia and elsewhere travel to La Paz to sell alasitas to the fiesta’s many thousands of attendees. Purchasing alasitas and Ekekos and having them blessed at the fiesta have been embraced by sophisticated, urban Paceñas, who view it as an appealing, “traditional” folkloric activity. President Morales is photographed holding an Ekeko at the fiesta every year.

After the public rituals are concluded, the once- or twice-blessed alasitas are taken home, where depending on their size they are either attached to Ekeko’s poncho or placed beside him on his shelf-altar (Fig. 75). Throughout the rest of the year, according to anthropologist Melania Calestani (2009:63), Ekeko and the alasitas must be taken care of with rituals that resemble the treatment traditionally given to mallkis (ancestral mummies) and huacas. Ekeko is given a lighted cigarette to smoke, and he is offered alcoholic libations and coca leaves in a domestic ritual that is conducted every Friday. If Ekeko’s needs are not satisfied, it is expected that he will become angry and the probability that the desired objects will appear will be diminished.

Fiestas outside of La Paz that include alasitas do not include Ekeko. The fiestas at Copacabana and Quillacollo, for example, focus officially on their respective Virgins but publicity materials and the media acknowledge the presence of alasitas. The stone alasitas constructed at Cerro Baúl are not associated with a specific fiesta per se, but pilgrimages are made there in conjunction with Easter, and in August, the beginning of the planting season, according to Ryan Williams (2011: personal communication).
Alasitas: Post-Conquest

The La Paz alasitas fiesta appears to be unique: the autochthonous phenomenon of alasitas and Ekeko, always described as “an indigenous deity,” were appropriated by the ruling class of La Paz and joined together. Carlos Ponce Sanginés (1969:200) recounts a version of the popular legend (greatly abbreviated here) as follows: Governor Don Sebastian de Segurola decreed in 1781 that a heretofore indigenous fiesta honoring the Aymara god of good luck would be re-scheduled to January 24. The date switch and appropriation were meant to demonstrate his gratitude for La Paz’s survival against a Quechua-led uprising; the re-scheduled fiesta would now coincide with the Virgin of La Paz’s name day.

It seems possible to me that the association now made between Ekeko and alasitas in the La Paz fiesta is a Spanish invention, and reflects a political agenda. Appropriating the alasita practice may have been viewed by the Governor as a sop to the Aymara people, who had not joined the Quechua-speakers in their attack on La Paz. Segurola’s appropriation of Ekeko includes the attachment of the label “Aymara deity.” While including this “deity” in a Christian feast day celebration could be construed as magnanimous, the act simultaneously materializes a heretofore formless spirit, forcing it into the body of a comical figure who is no one’s vision of a “deity.” Ekeko’s blustering manner and smirk have also been described as an indigenous mockery of the Governor, but historical facts on Ekeko are elusive, at best.

Ponce Sanginés (1969:194, 204) observes that Ekeko figurines are rarely seen outside of La Paz, and that indigenous people rarely possess them. My observations agree with his; although I saw many Ekekos for sale in La Paz, I saw only one or two for sale
(and none being used) in Copacabana or Quillacollo. If there ever was a connection between Ekeko and alasitas before Segurola’s declaration, it now appears to be lost, but the selective appropriation of indigenous practices by the Bolivian elite is a well-worn strategy.

Alasitas: Beyond La Paz

Anthropologist Paul Goldstein (2005:295) claims that finca-constructing activities on Cerro Baúl can be traced back at least to colonial times. Beginning in the early twentieth century, there are many reports, from throughout Bolivia, on the indigenous use of alasitas. Adolph Bandelier observed miniature house construction and fruit exchanges in mid-September at the Akapana (at Tiwanaku) that were intended to “invoke prosperity, good weather, and the fertility of crops and livestock from the mountain gods…,” (quoted in Reinhard 1990:161), and in 1948, Weston La Barre (1948:195) reported seeing an alasita fair with houses, fields, and animals comprising what he called “toy” fincas. La Barre also reports that during the recent past alasitas were purchased with potsherds or buttons, instead of with standard currency. A list of alasitas that La Barre purchased, also during the 1940s, reflects the material desires of the times, from knitted socks to a fur saddle blanket. A New Year’s Day celebration, referred to as “alasita,” included a fertility rite in which food and animals were modeled from quinoa meal and sold and alasita rituals have been observed at the Oruro Carnival.

Alasita rituals play a part in one of Bolivia’s most famous pilgrimages, Qoyllor Rit’i, a celebration marking the legendary 1785 appearance of the Christ child similar to the sighting of the Virgin of Urkupiña on Cerro Cota. But as Catherine Allen (1988:190) observed at Qoyllor Rit’i, indigenous pilgrims “seem uninterested in [the Virgin’s story.]
For them, the pilgrimage is to *Rit´i* (the Snow) and to the *Taytakuna* (Fathers), [and] the great *Apus* (Lord Mountains).” Allen describes the activities of the pilgrims at the shrine following days of arduous travel, when they build houses with small stones and fill stone corrals with pebble animals. These alasitas replicate the most basic human needs: houses (shelter) and animals (livelihood). Allen (1988:196-197) concludes that, far from being a childish game (she reports that an unusually light-hearted atmosphere accompanies the project) the constructions constitute messages to the spirits that communicate and define desired acquisitions. Beyond these typical forms for lithic constructions, Allen (1997:74) observed tiny sewing machines, cars, and televisions constructed with stones, and in a variation, desires were written on slips of paper and inserted into the mamacha’s shrine. Michael Sallnow (1987:201) sees the rituals at Qoyllor Rit´i as a sacred fantasy, and, using Victor and Edith Turner’s terms, categorizes them as ludic. Allen (1997:75) concludes that the motives and agency she observed in the Qoyllor Rit´i pilgrims indicate that alasitas are “textual strategies [that] must be understood as active, interactional techniques for changing the lived-in world,” facilitated in their depictions of the imaginary by the ludic atmosphere of the pilgrimage and fiesta.
IV. MUTUAL ENTANGLEMENTS

The alasitas that are ritually deployed at Copacabana and Quillacollo are examples of a contemporary Andean (and here, specifically Aymara) phenomenon: the persistent practice of an autochthonous ritual whose surface appearance has been utterly transformed. For hundreds of years, the Andes have been the site for religious, cultural, and political interactions that have taken place between every possible combination of Aymaras and other indigenous peoples, including the Inkas, the Catholic Church, and the forces of modernity and globalization. While “the conquest” usually refers the Spanish Conquest that began with Pizarro’s arrival in South America in 1532, the Aymara people had already been conquered by the Inkas during the mid-fifteenth century. I contend that the alasita ritual as it is enacted today resembles its autochthonous predecessors in its intentions (as is claimed by Aldenderfer) because of its expression of long-held Andean cosmological assumptions.36

Inkas and other Andeans

Kenneth Mills (1997:16) writes that when the Spanish arrived, what might have appeared to them to be the practice of a monolithic Inka religion would be better described as a loosely-joined patchwork of many regional religions that had been “united” under the Inkas for a relatively short period of time. The Spanish, at least at first, assumed though that all Andeans practiced the religion of the Inkas, and focused their conversion project on the eradication of specifically Inka beliefs and objects.

The long-term effect of Inka religion on the pre-existing religions of their subjects is estimated by MacCormack (1984:33) to have been merely “skin-deep,” although as Mills (1997:16) observes, the cults of the Inkas and their subjects had developed in
similar environments, and thus already had elements in common. MacCormack (1991:13) describes the practices of indigenous Andeans, both pre- and post-conquest, as being shaped by meta-Andean beliefs, with common themes informing their mythologies and histories. While the Spanish focused on Inka beliefs, “what endured instead [of the Inka religion] were pre-Inka myths and cults, along with the conceptions of deity, of human society, and of cosmic order and disorder…many of the guiding religious ideas [that] continue to be expressed by contemporary Andeans” (1991:13). While the overall destruction caused by the Spanish cannot be overstated, the cults and myths that preceded the Inkas proved to be resistant. Catholicism was established quickly in Cuzco, but further from the Inka capital, indigenous religious practices continued much as they had before the Inka conquest.

While specific elements of the Inka religion faded away under Spanish pressure, certain Inka and Andean “policies,” under which Inka and non-Inka interactions vis-à-vis religion had taken place, had a profound impact on post-Spanish interactions concerning religion. Brian Bauer and Charles Stanish (2001:7) explain that at the time of the Spanish invasion there were thousands of small, non-Inka huacas scattered throughout Tawantinsuyu that were sacred only to their local worshippers. While the Inkas conquered people, and took over their land, they did not demand that their subjects abandon or renounce their deities or huacas, requiring only that the Inka Sun and Moon be added to the existing pantheons, and be acknowledged as superior.

Bauer and Stanish (2001:7) report that the Inkas often constructed temples of their own near their new subjects’ existing huacas as physical reinforcements of Inka hegemony and legitimacy. Bauer and Stanish (2001:18) observe that “the mere fact that a
pilgrimage center associated with the dominant state exists on or near an older sacred site sends a powerful message of cultural dominance or legitimate succession,” yet religious beliefs of their newly-conquered subjects were unchallenged. The Inka practices of physical co-option coupled with tolerance of existing local shrines resulted in local huacas that were now regarded by the conquered worshippers as improved, having been made even more powerful with the addition of a new shrine and new deities (MacCormack, quoted in Bauer and Stanish 2001:18).

Bauer and Stanish (2001:21) write that a “Durkheimian approach,” in which religious expressions are aligned and merged with the ideology of the state, accurately characterizes the massive shrine construction projects of the Inkas. While Inkas applied their corporate stamp throughout Tawantinsuyu by erecting thousands of stone structures (Dean 2007:508), one of the most extreme expressions of their power was at Copacabana, on Lake Titicaca. The shrines that were built on the Islands of the Sun and Moon were, according to Bauer and Stanish (2001:22), “designed to project certain meanings associated with Inka culture and political ideology.” The Inkas proclaimed their political dominance by employing religious iconography, and in Durkheimian terms, seized hegemony and legitimacy by merging state ideology and religion, in a magnificent new shrine (Bauer and Stanish:2001:19).

An alternative “Turnerian” theory interprets pilgrimage and shrines as counter-hegemonic, concluding that ultimately they operate subversively, against the state (Eade and Sallnow 2000:5). The local huacas that the Inkas permitted appear to be Turnerian, because of their lack of alignment with the state, but it is also possible that toleration of the shrines of the conquered was simply an element in a more subtle application by the
Inkas of Durkheim’s theory. The apparently generous Inka strategy toward their subjects could easily be another demonstration of Inka hegemony.

The Inkas were not the first Andeans to practice toleration of the existing beliefs of their conquests. Michael Moseley (2001:67) notes that before Inka rule, it was acceptable for individual Andeans to practice more than one Andean faith, an inclusive philosophy that certainly contributed to the attitude that the Aymara would bring to future encounters with foreign belief systems. The accepted practices of incorporating new deities, and adding temples to already-sacred locations was not only normative for Andeans, but was viewed positively. I would argue that this philosophy created an atmosphere in which polysemy was an indigenous cultural assumption, one that played an important part in the ongoing development of Andean Catholicism.

Spaniards and Andeans

More than five hundred years of interactions between indigenous Andeans and Europeans, “the long-term collision, and complex combination of Andean and Christian cosmological systems,” as Albro (1998:138) describes it, has produced a form of Catholicism in the Andes that has incorporated (rather than merged) an array of beliefs and practices with diverse origins. A condition of polysemy is prevalent in this practice; Sallnow (2000:150) describes its existence in the early indigenous/Spanish encounters in which, “a mutual misinterpretation of motives, in which both conquerors and conquered each saw their own religious sensibilities reflected in the behavior of the other… (resulted in) a chronic indeterminacy as to what these miraculous shrines did actually signify.”
Thus, unrecognized (per Sallnow) and fundamental differences between the cosmologies of the Hispanic Catholic Church and the (various) Andean religions, created enormous obstacles for the Spanish in conducting their conversion project. Perhaps the most profound difference is evidenced in radically different conceptions of sacrality. The cosmology of the Andeans comprised a spirit-world that is located in the natural landscape; the resulting lack of identifiable “deities” recognizable in western terms seems to have been utterly confounding to the foreign minds attempting to grapple with them.

The Church’s extirpation project focused on physical objects and their possible status as idols. This process, despite many church-led investigations of indigenous religions and beliefs, was conducted by individuals who had been (as everyone is) exclusively shaped and informed by their own cosmologies. Conclusions were, naturally, drawn in ignorance when Christians were confronted by a completely foreign system of signification. Michael Sallnow (2000:150) concludes that “each group perceived and misunderstood the behaviour of the other through the inverting lens of its own understandings.” The sacred images and ritual objects of the Other proved to be particularly incomprehensible for Spanish and indigenous people alike, leading MacCormack (1984:50) to remark that “the Indian observation that Christian images were the huacas of Spaniards – [was] an idea extremely difficult to contradict.”

A metaphysical construct of duality is basic to the Catholic (and European) worldview, differentiations between paired, opposed concepts such as divine and demonic, sacred and secular, and so on are assumed and given importance. But for Andeans, “perceptions of nature, society, and the holy were structured differently” (MacCormack 1991:338), and these sorts of pure oppositions did not exist. Catherine
Allen (1988:61) offers an example of the difference, contrasting Andean and Christian beliefs regarding the relationship of the body with the material and immaterial worlds:

The essential incompatibility between Christian and indigenous beliefs lies in the different understandings of the relationship between body and soul. The Andean worldview does not accommodate the western dualism of body and soul; for Andeans, all matter is in some sense alive, and conversely, all life has a material base.

Unlike the Inkas, the Spanish approached their conversion project with the assumption that Catholic symbols, accompanied by Catholic beliefs, could simply be substituted for whatever the Spanish decided (in all likelihood incorrectly) were the indigenous “equivalents,” according to Barbara Mauldin (2011:24). The assumption made by the would-be converters was that, after being replaced, the targeted indigenous objects (interpreted by the Spanish as “deities”) would simply vanish, not only physically, but from the Andean cosmology altogether. This strategy was applied successfully on occasion when destroyed mallkis were replaced with individual saints, assigned to individual villages. The traditional care and treatment that had been lavished on the ancestors in the past was transferred to the substituted santos, who were treated to new clothing, given offerings (coca, guinea pigs, and libations) and taken out to socialize with other santos during fiestas and pilgrimages, just as the mallkis had been treated (Allen 1988:65, 179-80; MacCormack 1991:119).

Abercrombie (1992:105) and Sallnow (1987:70) describe other attempted substitutions: Jesus or God was offered as a replacement for the Sun deity, and the Virgin Mary was associated with the Moon deity, or with nature. But for most Andeans, Sun and Moon deities had been relatively recent Inka impositions, and these attempted equations distanced the Christian deities from the indigenous pantheon, unintentionally relegating
them to a lower status than had been intended. According to MacCormack (1991:257), missionaries equated the Devil with the ancestral deities residing in the underworld, but this equation, which was intended to denigrate the ancestors, produced more unexpected results. Just as the addition of new temples increased the sacrality of a physical location, the sacred ancestors gained new power from their association with the Devil.  

The most profound substitution that was attempted came in the form of efforts to extinguish the locus of indigenous sacrality by removing it from the all-encompassing, spirit-filled landscape. The Copacabana site offers an example. The location on the shores of Lake Titicaca had been sacred to successions of local inhabitants for thousands of years, mythologized as the site of the first appearance of the sun, and transformed by the Inkas into an extremely important pilgrimage destination. Post-conquest, during the seventeenth century, the Virgin Mary was chosen to be the town’s patron saint by the Inkas of Copacabana, because of the power she had demonstrated in her miraculous intervention during the siege of Cuzco. MacCormack (1984:47-53) calls this a “time-honored Inka method: seeing that the Sun could no longer be an imperial deity, the victorious Virgin of Cuzco succeeded the Sun in this role.” A sculpture of the Virgin was carved from a maguey tree by an indigenous sculptor, and during its installation in 1583 in Copacabana’s modest church, a heavy cross fell onto the head of the town corregidor. Because no harm was done to him, this image of the Virgin was credited with the creation of a miracle, the first of many to come. MacCormack (52-53) characterizes the behavior of the Virgin of Copacabana (she is imbued with life, she smiles, speaks Quechua, and gets down from the altar at night) as independent agency; she is alive, powerful, and acts exactly like a huaca. The magnificent Basilica was eventually built
specifically to contain the sculpture, and it became (and continues to be) a popular pilgrimage destination. Some sacrality was thus captured and placed indoors into this giant, sacred “container,” but as ever, the landscape had lost none of its sacrality and had even gained power with the addition of the Virgin’s sculpture, which in no way functions as a substitute for anything.

**Mimesis, Form and Fluidity**

Andean aesthetic concepts and preferences regarding representation and form are complex in ways that pose profound obstacles for Europeans attempting to understand them. This became relevant when the Church attempted to extirpate idols that were recognizable to them as such, based only on physical appearance. Art historian Tom Cummins (1994:190) explains that there is a great disparity between indigenous and European aesthetics, claiming that “Andean art did not correspond in any sense to European notions of representation” (italics mine). The Andean aesthetic revolved around the physical placement of objects in relation to each other, highly abstracted symbols, and metaphorical associations (Cummins 1994:202), an approach that, according to Cummins, was so utterly incomprehensible to the Spanish that they simply ignored it. While this lack of understanding did not keep the Spanish from extirpating objects, it must certainly have facilitated the survival of some objects. Mills (1997:278) suggests that indigenous people took advantage of these confusions over appearances by offering up unimportant objects for extirpation while holding back objects that possessed real significance. George Lau (2008:1030) describes another strategy that illustrates the repercussions of a philosophy that accepts fluidity as a physical reality. Indigenous people “found other ways [to avoid extirpation]…ideologically converting ancestors into
stones and everyday items (such as jugs) which could be made discreet or easily hidden…reinvented and re-cast as things and places.”

Carolyn Dean (2010:62) describes the Inka aesthetic preference for “essence” over mimesis, citing their practice of using the actual fingernails and hair of ancestors as raw material for creating royal likenesses. She explains that for the Inkas, material endowed with a physical connection to its subject embodied more meaning than visual veracity did. The Inka point of view privileged material over form, and an object’s sacrality could not necessarily be apprehended visually.

The Andean cosmos is animated by a current that is in constant motion, and is in contact with all of the objects within the cosmos. The physical form of an object is regarded as a transient state and the possibility of metamorphosis is omnipresent; fixedness is never assumed. In an example of an Inka preference for change, Dean (2007:512-513) details a practice of their rulers. Typically, the new Inka built his own palace rather than inheriting the existing palace (which was now the property of the earlier Inka’s mummy) (Bauer 2004:162). Palaces were built in freshly-conquered territory, and displayed individual variations on the Inka corporate style (Dean 2007:512-513). Alan Kolata (2004:98) relates a contemporary Aymara vision of a world where “humans and the natural world [are in a] relationship of mutual transformation… [and] humans can turn into mountain deities. They see the visible, material world interpenetrated by animating spiritual forces with which they have intimate relations.”

A perception of the material world as fluid and malleable obviously made Spanish attempts to identify idols, by sight, difficult at best. Sabine MacCormack (1991:329) asserts that “ultimately Andean deities defied description and definition in terms of a
stable identity…that endured unchanged over time. …divine identity shifted and changed incessantly; it mocked human attempts at precise formulation.” Kenneth Mills (1997:66) concludes that this state of continual shape-shifting and the resulting lack of standardization in the appearances of indigenous deities led to the “extraordinary degree of persistence into mid-colonial times” of huacas.

I suggest that the Andean attitude towards form that privileges the invisible and the essential, accompanied by the assumption that inconsistency of form is a normal property for physical objects, contribute to the acceptance of the extreme changes in the appearance of alasitas that has taken place over time. At Copacabana and Quillacollo, objects being blessed were often kept inside their opaque plastic carrying bags throughout the ritual. Although there are certainly practical considerations, I conclude that their essence – whatever was represented by the object in the bag – was more important than what could be seen from the outside. The depictions and forms of alasitas change and adjust to their surrounding material world constantly, yet the objects retain consistent significance for their practitioners.
V. RECIPROCITY

Alasita rituals enact the reciprocal relationships that exist between practitioners and their deities, and with the landscape. In this chapter, I consider alasitas in relation to Aymara cosmology and the ways in which alasitas embody and enact reciprocity, a major force in shaping the Aymara worldview, and the source of agency for practitioners conducting their rituals.

Living among the Gods

Michael Sallnow (2000:141) eloquently describes the intense and personal relationship between Andeans and the physical world, as follows:

The Andean landscape is imbued with sacredness. Human destinies are in part determined by chthonian powers, localized in the spirits of the mountains, rocks, springs, rivers and other topographic features, and generalized in the earth matrix, Pachamama… [with the] spiritual goal [of the] …channeling of the variegated powers inscribed in the landscape, preeminently the power of fertility, towards the satisfaction of human interests.

This landscape is (often) described as “sacred” to Andeans, a one-word gloss for a worldview that is utterly unalike a western understanding of “landscape.” The spectacular topography of the Andes is, obviously, visible, but Andeans believe in an invisible force lying beneath the earth, an all-encompassing circulatory system (Sallnow 1991:348) that touches all sacred places and is connected to the earth by a system of roots (Abercrombie 1998:348). This flow is in perpetual motion, is animated and animating, energizes everything that it touches, and provides the fuel for life. Anthropologist Lawrence A. Kuznar (2001:42) describes its fluid and malleable nature as “the spiritual power that pervades the Andean cosmos… [It] is not static; it flows, circulates, and is exchanged among objects, landforms, people, plants, and animals.”
The Andean cosmos contains three layers: a sea-like underworld, the earth, and a canopy of sky. Water is the life-producing and sustaining substance that circulates continually between the layers, and can be thought of as a physical embodiment of the constant flow that is described above. Mountains are designated as the primary source of water in the cosmos, according to archaeologist and mountain specialist Johan Reinhard (1990:174). Water flows from the mountains to irrigate crops, is absorbed by the earth, then travels through the underworld. It reappears later as rain and snow and falls back onto the mountains; the cycle is thus renewed and repeated (Reinhard and Ceruti 2010:13). This strong association between mountains and water explains the highly-sacred status of Andean mountains, according to Douglas Sharon (2006:23). The apus, which are located in the mountains, embody this sacrality; they are regarded as deities, are associated with the venerated ancestors, and are specifically credited with power over the fecundity of animals, plants, and humans.

Kenneth Mills (1997:72) explains that indigenous people in the Andes believe that they are living with their gods, in the form of the mountains that surround them. Andeans assume too that there are similarities between themselves, and features in the landscape. Cartographer William Gustav Gartner (1987-1998:276) claims that Andeans believe that they resemble mountains physically, with similar arrangements of body parts and similar physical requirements. Like people, mountains require constant attention that includes feeding and libations provided by their human relatives (Mills 1997:72). Anthropologist Joseph W. Bastien (1995:360) notes that the language used to describe these daily interactions with the earth employs an amalgam of domestic and agricultural
metaphors: Andeans “feed the earth, put it to sleep, give it drink, plow, germinate, nurture, and harvest its gifts.”

The earth and mountains are also believed to experience human emotions, including anger, and vengeance is to be expected if they perceive deficiencies in their feeding and care (Mills 1997:72). Penelope Harvey (2001:198) describes a subtle Andean interpretation of natural surroundings, claiming that it is “less like the reading of a map and more akin to how one might try to interpret the feelings of others by looking at facial expressions and bodily postures.” Harvey characterizes the relationship between Andeans and their volatile deities as being inherently unbalanced and weighted against humans, explaining that the stronger powers of the deities are responsible for the constant state of human anxiety. It is believed, however, that positive attention from the deities can be attracted by conducting rituals and sacrifices, which are attempts to shift the balance back toward humans. According to Harvey (198-99), rituals such as these, directed at mountains, replicate basic human activities, such as eating, drinking, and having sex.

Ritual: Traditions and Inventions

Lawrence Kuznar (2001:42-43) characterizes the ritual feeding and care of mountains and spirits as an ongoing daily activity, whose overall objective is maintaining the existing balance. But as Harvey observes above, rituals can be carried out with the express intention of affecting change, tipping the balance away from the deities and toward the initiator of the ritual, and thereby altering the status quo.

The Andean cosmic balance is maintained by the ongoing repetition of daily rituals; small ch’allas, for example, are conducted almost continually. In its simplest form, a ch’alla consists of a drop or two of a beverage flicked onto the ground before any
liquid is consumed. This constitutes a quick gift to the earth and signals the hope that the cosmos will continue to be balanced. Anthropologist June Nash characterizes these offerings to Pachamama as a way of ensuring the continuation of equilibrium by the female forces that have power over production and reproduction (quoted in Díaz-Barriga 2003:247).

When instead of securing the status quo, rituals are enacted to bring about change; the desired change is usually intended to benefit the supplicant as an individual or as a representative of the community. Belief in the human ability to influence and alter the direction of the cosmos makes a crucial assumption that underlies the alasita ritual: that human ritual practitioners possess sufficient power and agency to affect and alter the future actions of the deities. Catherine Allen (1988:50) describes the power of ritual to make adjustments in one’s favor, writing that “while everything that has material existence is alive, the intensity of a thing’s liveliness varies and can be controlled, at least to some extent…Andean ritual works at holding, controlling, and directing the flow [of energy]”. She indicates here that life and future events are regarded as sufficiently fluid that human beings can successfully employ ritual to generate desired changes.

About Reciprocity

Alan Kolata (2004:99) connects the beliefs of the early Aymara with contemporary Aymara ritual beliefs and practices, claiming that by exploring contemporary Aymara rituals and beliefs, as well as the testimony of Tiwanaku material culture, we can begin to grasp the meaning of a deeply embedded Andean philosophy of social being that revolves around the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment.
The alasitas at Cerro Baúl, Copacabana, and Quillacollo were all deployed within the context of a ritual that has been profoundly shaped by the tenet of reciprocity, the fundamental Andean societal assumption that supports and defines structuring aspects of work, kinship, and community life (Kuznar 2001:42; Dean 2010:19). The sacrifice of an alasita occurs within a belief system that assumes reciprocity in the relationship between the ritual’s practitioner, and the spirits to whom it is addressed. 39 The activities that are performed on Cerro Calvario and Cerro Cota – the arranging, decorating and blessing of miniatures, followed by a performance replicating everyday life inside the resulting installations - should not be mistaken as polite requests, or mere suggestions to the gods. An alasita is a demand that is offered ritually to the spirits with the confident expectation that its full-size counterpart will appear in the life of the supplicant during the upcoming year. That assumption is built on reciprocity.

Catherine Allen (1988:93) asserts that reciprocity is “a pump at the heart of Andean life.” The ongoing exchanges of work and goods that are structured by reciprocity provide fuel to energize the community and beyond, and encompasses obligations to plants, animals, and Pachamama (representing the land, the world, the cosmos), into the landscape and “even to the saints.”

Reciprocal arrangements are an effective strategy for managing an agro-pastoral livelihood in the Andes, an area of the world where the topography and weather are extreme and, according to Moseley (2001:30), highland families must find a way to effectively farm in two or three different ecological zones. Moseley (2001:53) concludes that it would be impossible for a single nuclear family to survive in the Andes without the assistance of others. Andean reciprocity takes the form of defined exchanges of labor and
goods that are organized through a variety of codified agreements, including the formalized relationships of *ayni* and *mink’a*.

*Ayni* describes the trading and sharing of work among relatives, friends, and neighbors, a series of arrangement about which, according to Allen (1988:92), “accounts are (at least) implicitly kept...Nothing is done for free; in ayni, every action calls forth an equivalent response.” Justin Jennings and Melissa Chatfield (2009:208-209) describe ayni as a symmetrical labor exchange that is repaid in kind after only a slight delay, usually taking place between members of a single community. *Mink’a* is defined by Jennings and Chatfield as an arrangement that is asymmetrical, a situation where “labor is recompensed with rights and gifts [but there is] no obligation to reciprocate [in kind].” A mink’a might be unbalanced because of differences of the economic class or status of the parties involved. If it cannot be (or is not) repaid, the giver has effectively demonstrated power over the recipient. In rural Andean communities, ayni and mink’a obligations are constantly being created, and consequently the underlying balances shift constantly (Allen 1988:92).

**Gifts as Expressions of Power**

Reciprocity can be constructively considered as a form of gift-giving. In his seminal examination of the nature of gift exchanges, sociologist Marcel Mauss (1990:3) asks the following question: “What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?” Mauss concludes that even gifts that appear to be “free and disinterested [are] nevertheless constrained and self-interested,” and in fact are often fully intended to be declarations of hegemony and power.
The alasita rituals at Copacabana and Quillacollo epitomize Mauss’s analysis. Their deployment is predicated on the belief that by ritually making a gift to the spirits in the form of a tiny (yet specific) replication of a personal desire, a demand has been made of the spirits that is now owed a response that will take the form of a full-sized, “real” version of the sacrificed object. I interpret the ritual alasita enactment as an example of Mauss’s conclusion that the presentation of a “gift” is an exercise of power.

Expanding on Mauss’s analysis, Marshall Sahlins (1972:193) divides gifts into three categories: “generalized” (altruistic); “balanced” (in which an equal return is confidently expected in the near future); and “negative,” when a gift is given in order to gain advantage over the recipient with no expectation of reciprocation. Applying Sahlins’s categories, alasitas are “balanced” gifts; the appropriate response to an alasita is expected, absolutely and soon. The expectation reflects the confidence of the practitioner that, despite the greater power of the deities, humans are able to employ ritual to insert themselves into the cosmic flow and alter its direction to their own benefit (Kuznar 2001:42).

Alasitas and Magic

The presentation of a small replica accompanied by the confident expectation of reciprocation in the form of a Volvo truck might appear unbalanced and thus “negative” within Sahlins’s classifications, but this is not the case with alasitas. Deploying alasitas is an aggressive act, in that a large (often literally) response is expected from the spirits, yet unlike prayer or lottery tickets, the responsibility for the successful outcome of the ritual is understood to be solely the responsibility of its mortal initiator. This realistic assessment aligns the alasita ritual with James Frazer’s classic descriptions of religion.
and magic (Frazer 1922, 1963:56). One of magic’s defining characteristics is that the failed magical ritual is blamed, not on the gods to whom it was addressed, but on the supplicant or shaman who executed it. The working assumption is that a failure proves, definitively, that the ritual was not conducted perfectly.

Paradoxically, magic seems to be a form of supplication through which the supplicant is empowered. The alasita ritual is initiated and enacted by a single party, the supplicant. This results in a “deal” between two parties, yet only the supplicant has actually agreed to it. Rituals that interject themselves into the cosmic flow of reciprocity operate on the magical assumption that the ritual sacrifice has incurred a debt that must be repaid. Whether the sacrifice is a drop of chicha, a guinea pig, a llama, or an alasita, a human being has effectively forced a deity into an unavoidable obligation. Some amount of magical power over the deities is thus assumed in Aymara rituals that are aimed at extracting fertility and abundance from the deities, including the alasita ceremony.

The Language of Transactions

The alasita ritual is steeped in an atmosphere of money, deal-making, and transactions. It is predicated on the arrangement described above, an agreement that is defined by one party (the human supplicant) to which the other party (the deities) must agree. Transactions are omnipresent at Quillacollo, and anthropologist Miguel Díaz-Barriga (2003:246) writes that the mercenary atmosphere is regarded by the media (local newspapers, and television) as disturbing, and an inappropriate cultural practice for Aymara people. Almost every aspect of the activities that take place on Cerro Cota is described by its participants in purely economic language, in what Albro (1998:135) describes as “an unapologetically acquisitive market idiom.” The pilgrims describe their
ritual interactions as “the chance to do business with the Virgin” (1998:142) and refer to alasitas as “an investment” (Derks 2009:99). The image of the Virgin herself often appears on alasita currency, replacing the standard historical figures.

In a reflection of the complicated (and often contradictory) distinctions that are made by Andeans between the sacrality of the landscape (represented by Pachamama), and the sacrality of Christian deities such as the Virgin, Albro (1998:140) contrasts the two, describing “interaction with Pachamama… [as] individualistic and transactional; devotees hope to persuade her to pay off by giving her what she wants.” On Cerro Cota, the pilgrims have (metaphorically) released the Virgin from her usual condition of containment inside the church and have “returned” her to the hill where her image is supposed to have appeared. The hill, an element within the landscape, is usually assumed to be part of the sacred domain of Pachamama (to whom alasitas are primarily addressed), but the nature of the interactions between the pilgrims and the Virgin are transformed by this natural, out-of-doors location. According to Albro (1998:140), devotees usually “adopt a more distant and passive stance toward the Virgin [than toward Pachamama], dissociated from acquisitive sensibilities.”

The mines that supply the stones (the plots of land are rented by the town to entrepreneurs and re-rented to the pilgrims) were described by one pilgrim to Derks (2009:100) as being “the property” of the Virgin Mary. Pilgrims’ descriptions of the “owners” of the hill, the mines, and the stones vary wildly, however, with no consensus. The concept of ownership itself may be more relevant than any specific beliefs about it.

One pilgrim, quoted here by Albro (1998:142), asserts that “We always come [to Cerro
Cota] in order to adore the Señor. One does a libation to the diablitos, to the Tío...In truth, the Virgin is a diablito, so say our tata-abuelos.”

The vocabulary employed to describe activities on Cerro Cota is mercantile: the hill itself is sometimes referred to as a mine (mina), and sometimes as a banco de cambio (Albro 1998:134). A dislodged stone is described as plata de la Virgen, silver having played an important part in Bolivia’s economic history. In the words of the pilgrims, to take a stone is tomar un préstamo, to take a loan. Pilgrims understand that if the stone is not returned a year later they will be liable for interés, payable in candles and flowers to be deposited at the Church’s official shrine on the same hill (Lagos 1993:57; Albro 1998:134; Derks 2009:98-9).

The physical appearance of the particular stone is meaningless (Albro 1998:140); the pilgrims themselves define verbally exactly what is being “borrowed” in this transaction, and what the stone represents to them (Guardia Marañón, personal communication, 2010). The particulars of the deal are not kept secret however, and describing them aloud to family and companions is an important step in the process. The deals that are absorbed by the stones constitute contracts between the procurer and the Virgin, usually for a specific sum of money or a specific material desire, like a house or car. Interestingly, the nondescript stones often represent the same desires that alasitas embody mimetically. The scope of the desire and the future work that achieving it will require from the pilgrim are reflected in the effort it takes to remove the stone from the mine (Derks 2009:98-99). Although the stone does not resemble the desire it represents, the details of the loans are described specifically, just as the physical appearance of an alasita is often visually descriptive and specific.
The Cerro Cota stones taken directly out of the earth are considered to be inherently sacred (Derks 2009:99-100), but consistent with the “more-is-better” philosophy, the bagged stones are included in the yatiri’s blessing along with the alasitas (which are not sacred until they are blessed). After the ch’alla is over, pilgrims locate a small plot of land, rent it, and place house, stone, and other alasitas directly onto the earth, nestled among the coca branches. In the late afternoon in Quillacollo in 2010, pilgrims’ activities consisted of eating, drinking, and dancing, but Lagos (1993:56) describes a symbolic action that was observed at the same site in the 1930s. An elderly resident recalls that “the Quillacolleño youth ended the day on the hill with mock marriages, the purchase of a little house and a plot of land, and…the traditional ch’alla and sunt’ida, a ritual during which a couple rolls on the ground locked in an embrace, physically enacting their symbolic possession of the land.
VI. ALASITAS PERFORMING ABUNDANCE

Millions of dólares worth of fake money scattered across the ground, loans from the Virgin with unambiguous interest terms, and rituals whose objective is a flat-screen TV do not immediately inspire associations with the spiritual world. Quite to the contrary, these pilgrimage-fiesta-and alasita-related phenomena seem to be completely mercenary. That, in fact, is exactly the assessment of some of Quillacollo’s town officials and representatives of the Church. I contend, however, that alasita rituals enact a contemporary version of the traditional Aymara concept of spiritual materialism, and are thus predicated on beliefs and aspirations that originate in Andean cosmology. The ritual deployment of alasitas constitutes what Tassi (2010:194) has described as a performance of abundance, one that is compelling enough to attract the attention of the deities, and powerful enough to alter the direction of the cosmos.

Alasitas as Demands

Understanding the subtle relationship that exists between alasita users and the deities they address is essential. Alasita rituals are “addressed to Pachamama,” the sacred being who represents, embodies, and is embodied by the earth. Like all other Andean spirits, she is understood by her devotees to possess (along with sacrality) human qualities and normal human requirements. I claim that while Aymara people certainly do not regard themselves as “equal” to the deities they address ritually, the practices and assumptions of reciprocity have created a paradigm within which they can address their deities aggressively, which they do with alasitas. The “anthropomorphic” similarities that Andeans believe exist between people and mountains – their similar physical and
emotional makeups and their shared dependence on food and drink – create a metaphor within which aggressive human/divine interaction can occur.

**The Balancing Act**

Reciprocity is the conceptual postulate for a relationship in which humans possess less power, yet have the ability (and agency) to aggressively address the spirit world through rituals. The cosmos is conceived of as a balancing act that shifts, then shifts again, unceasingly. Obligations between individuals, families, communities, and their deities are in a constant state of flux. When acts of reciprocity are performed with labor, food, or libations, the balance of the cosmos shifts accordingly. Deities and humans are not equally matched, but engagements between the two are possible; rituals provide the appropriate vehicle for humans to shift the cosmos, if only slightly.

Nico Tassi (2010:195) describes an example of a strategy based on reciprocity that is employed by *pasantes* (fiesta sponsors) to entice participants into their dance groups: “You find out that John Smith is celebrating his birthday and, despite not being invited, you show up and surprise him with a few crates of beer. John is already obliged to dance in your fraternity.” Catherine Allen (1988:175) describes another ritual executed by community members that is predicated on similar assumptions that are intended first to gain the attention of the deities, then make demands of them: “Stomp-dancing pounds the sensitive Earth; their raucous music carries to the Apus and the sky; their brilliantly colored clothing glows against the bland adobes. With all their collective energy [they] *force* the reluctant world to sustain them” (italics mine).
Exaggeration

Like Tassi’s pasante, Allen’s dancers, and the gifts that Sahlins categorizes as balanced, the sacrifice of an alasita is intended to force a response from the spirits. Tassi (2010:196) considers ways in which Aymara material exaggeration is displayed: bulky, heavy dance costumes (Fig. 35) or eight polleras (brightly-colored full skirts) worn at once as “pathway[s] of communication between the human and the divine.” The Aymara philosophy of “more is better” is applied in order to force reciprocation in a variety of situations. Tassi (2010:196) remembers being encouraged to drink more, more, and then even more, during a celebration of the Holy Trinity. “I had to drink more, as if that exaggeration pleased the Saint, induced him to reciprocate [my] offering of abundance and reproduced a relation between human and spiritual worlds.”

Artisan-made alasitas, while miniature in scale, are highly detailed and brightly-colored. Their installations at Copacabana and Quillacollo are bright and festive, and the firecrackers that mark the end of the blessings are absolutely attention-getting. The alasitas that cover Cerro Baúl make a visual statement that would be impossible for even a deity to ignore. They are enormous, perhaps not on the scale of the Nazca lines, but large enough to be noticed and admired from above. After attracting the attention of the deities, Andeans make demands, just as they do with fellow-humans, aggressively making the first move, and specifically defining the transaction on their own terms.

A Quid pro Quo Economy

Douglas Sharon (2006:20) describes the Andean relationship between humans and their apus (mountain deities) as part of “a spiritual economy of quid pro quo.” Alasitas enact precisely this kind of relationship. The transactional vocabulary with
which activities at the Virgin of Urkupiña’s fiesta are described (“doing business with the Virgin” and so on) emanate from the precept that frames the alasita ritual: reciprocity. Scores are kept assiduously between people and among communities to document ayni interactions (Allen 1988:92). In another expression of numinous bookkeeping, Mauldin (2011:54) reports that Bolivian priests are occasionally asked to provide supplicants with receipts for the blessings they have received (and paid for). I suggest that in this spirit, the personal photographs attached to milagros that I saw outside Copacabana’s Basilica have been included to assure that there will be no errors in crediting the proper spiritual account, so to speak.

Specificity

The alasitas that I saw exhibited a wide range of production values, but the increasingly popular artisan-made, for-purchase alasitas possess an astonishing level of detail. An alasita tienda (Fig. 67) is packed with tiny versions of food products that are recognizable as brand-name items. The artisans have taken the trouble to photograph full-sized packages, shrink and reproduce them (in full color), then carefully cut them out, fold and glue them, creating tiny six-sided boxes that are accurate (and recognizable) in their tiniest details. The user of an alasita like this is not simply in pursuit of “a store,” but a store that sells Trix cereal, Ariel dish powder, Primavera cookies, and has coolers full of ice cream treats. In another example of the level of detail that alasitas demonstrate, the purchase of a casita always includes the appropriate paperwork, as is seen in the title that was provided with the purchase of this finca (Fig. 72).

Specificity, in the form of extensive detail, is popular in the alasitas that are sold at contemporary fiestas. This is an attribute that distinguishes them from ex-votos such as
milagros (Fig. 76), for example, whose depictions of body parts and automobiles are, to say the least, generic. I contend that this specificity indicates the alasita practitioner’s high level of confidence that the desire that is depicted will actually be realized. A generic request without the expectation of fulfillment could easily be portrayed more broadly, at the mimetic level of milagros for example, and be perfectly adequate for its purpose. An alasita is a powerful means of communicating a very specific desire to the deities, and its ritual is enacted with great confidence in a success that ultimately, is quite independent of the deities.

**Realistic Assessments**

Alasitas are chosen with extreme practicality reflecting a dispassionate analysis by the purchaser of the true probability of realization. Building a house in reality, for example, is a drawn-out process that can easily take more than a year; this reality is acknowledged by the popularity of alasita versions of bare plots of land that are piled with tools, cement-mixers and building materials. Even half-finished houses are available as alasitas (Fig. 69). Allison S. Kohn (2011:2) observed that in La Paz “if they already have tools, they will buy [alasita] materials; and if they already have tools and materials, then they will likely buy a finished house.” Instead of wishfully deploying an alasita version of a completed dream-house, supplicants appear to be fully cognizant of the probability that a year from now, the dream-house will probably just be a dream, but a completed cement-block foundation is a realistic goal.

Maria Lagos (1993:65) attributes the realism of these assessments to an awareness that results from an acceptance of class differences. She observed choices made by pilgrims at Quillacollo in 1993, and reported that while some pilgrims bought an
unobtainable alasita first (a fancy house or a car) like a lottery ticket, they followed it with serious choices that reflected more realistic outcomes: tools for workers, good grades for students, and improved business for merchants, truckers, coca farmers, and cocaine dealers.

Differences between “luck” and “hard work” are apparent in the conceptual differences between alasitas and other Andean miniatures like conopas, or other amulets. Ultimately, instead of representing the object that the alasita replicates as a gift from the gods, alasitas represent a public promise that the necessary hard work will be expended to achieve the replicated desire. The notion of “luck” is present at fiestas (games of chance and similar activities abound at the fiesta’s periphery), but even luck is believed to be improvable with the application of faith and hard work. As Calestani (2009:63) reports from an alasita user in El Alto, “luck is not something that happens, but something that you need to feed by buying [alasitas], and by giving to supernatural forces at the right moment,” and, I would add, by making realistic choices.41

I had the opportunity to observe another example of the realistic nature of alasita choices at a private home near Cochabamba, where almost all of the miniatures on display were trucks. When I inquired about the lack of casitas, which are normally so prevalent, my informant (the owner’s nephew) explained to me that his aunt did not need an alasita representing a house because she was satisfied with her own house.

**The Absence of Human Figures**

An interesting convention regarding the subjects depicted in alasitas is the almost complete absence of miniature human figures. Representations of humans appear occasionally, in the form of Barbie-ish plastic figures, as in the tienda example (Fig. 74),
or when the desire depicted is a human being: a maid, a girl-friend, or a baby. A rare male figure, presumably the builder and therefore a part of the package, appears in the alasita of building materials (Fig. 70). I contend that the lack of human bodies in alasitas is another illustration of the seriousness with which they are chosen. Alasitas are the elements that are used to construct a model of one’s desired life. An alasita is the focal point in a frame that contains an ideal (yet realistic) vision of an environment that can actually be constructed. The inclusion of miniature figures is unnecessary, because alasita supplicants believe that they will be populating the environment that they have imagined themselves. I observed at both Copacabana and Quillacollo that pilgrims completed their alasita rituals by “residing” inside the tiny lots containing the houses and trucks they desired, kinesthetically rehearsing for roles that they fully expect to be playing in the near future.

The environment of the fiesta is ludic, an atmosphere that makes altering the status quo (by obtaining a new houses or truck, for example) seem possible. A vision of a desired (and obtainable) ideal is imagined and physically recreated; the physical occupation and performance of the vision contributes to its realization. Reflecting Harvey’s list of the human activities that are replicated during rituals, pilgrims eat, drink, and dance in the new worlds that they have imagined, specified, and created for themselves. Although I did not see it myself, presumably some still engage too in a sunt’ida, the ritual action enacted by couples that suggests fecundity while symbolically and physically claiming the earth that they roll over as they embrace. The future residents of the ideal fincas satisfy the need for human presence with their own bodies.
VII. FIESTAS, PERFORMANCES

The polysemous nature of Bolivian fiestas is illustrated in the following descriptions. Copacabana’s fiesta celebrates a Virgin’s feast day and Bolivia’s national independence. Pilgrims, who are self-described as Catholics, clutch house and truck alasitas and Virgin of Copacabana demandas, while they climb a huaca-like “Cerro Calvario” to receive blessings from both yatiris and priests, in the splendor of the sacred landscape. The site features a sweeping view of Lake Titicaca, and the Inka Island of the Sun is visible in the distance. A few weeks later, Bolivians representing every ethnicity and class travel to Quillacollo to witness a parade that claims to celebrate “folklorico,” and excludes local indigenous Aymaras. Later, pilgrims wrestle their personal stone-loans out of “the Virgin’s mine” from another huaca-like hill. After having stones and alasitas blessed with both indigenous and Christian rituals, arranging everything in a tiny lot, and performing a personal version of daily life inside it, the stones and alasitas are taken home. Everything is installed there – often near a statue of the Virgin – and throughout the ensuing year, the stone, alasitas, and Ekeko figure (if he is present) will be fed and given libations and cigarettes like pre-Hispanic mallkis.

Sabine MacCormack (2010:69) summarizes the layers of religious beliefs that are present at Copacabana as the “superimposition of a Christian figure onto a pre-Christian deity, and the subsequent re-imposition of a remembered pagan past onto a now Christian matrix.” The mélange of beliefs and activities contained in the Copacabana and Quillacollo examples are elements in the performative discourses that these Bolivian fiestas frame.
Fiestas provide a supportive venue for the performance of “tradition” and offer two possibilities for these ritual enactments. The first approach maintains the status quo by reproducing past performances (or what are remembered as past performances) as exactly as possible in the name of tradition, while the second approach abandons, updates, or even invents new “traditions” from whole cloth, as described by Eric Hobsbawm (1983:1-2). Either direction, or both, is more easily accommodated in a fiesta’s atmosphere than is possible in normal, daily life.

Victor and Edith Turner (1982:202) claim that fiestas (or more specifically, rite-of-passage rituals) offer their participants contradicting possibilities simultaneously: the opportunity to reinforce tradition by reenacting it, and (or) the opportunity to experiment with or reject tradition. Its permissiveness is attributed to the liminal atmosphere of fiestas that fosters an interstitial state that allows and even encourages behavior that is normally forbidden.

The transgressions and contestations that fiestas enable are communicated through public, symbolic performances in a variety of forms and media. New or provocative concepts can be presented with impunity, but only for a limited period of time. As a result, important issues - national, ethnic, personal, religious, and political – become subjects for discourse within an atmosphere of unusual fluidity, described by Sallnow (1987:201) as one that “suspend[s] mundane experience for a few moments to throw open a realm of pure possibility.”

In the remainder of this paper, I will consider four discourses that were present at the fiestas that I attended: contestation of the landscape, contemporary definitions of
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ethnic identity in Bolivia, performance of the Aymara value of abundance, and the enduring Aymara value of spiritual materialism.

**Discourse: Landscape**

The land on which the fiestas take place, the destination of the pilgrims, is layered with competing beliefs and the ownership of these highly significant sites is continually contested through a variety of physical and symbolic actions. Michael Sallnow (2000:148) believes that the ritual of pilgrimage is, in itself, an act of possession that constitutes “a symbolic re-appropriation of the all-powerful, animate landscape by its rightful denizens.” Enacting this dominion, however, can move beyond the symbolic to take physical form.

At both Copacabana and Quillacollo, soaring white arched entryways to the “mini-mountain” shrines have been erected by the Church, and act as unavoidable funnels. Every human who enters the shrine must acknowledge with their body, this physical claim that must be interacted with in order to enter (Figs. 10, 36). At Copacabana, a sculpture of Jesus (Fig. 14) greets visitors from the top of a towering plinth, and the oven beneath it gives pilgrims the opportunity to expose their objects to smoke that has *not* been produced by a yatiri. Permanently installed cement mesas surround the sculpture and oven construction, manned by yatiris, while further up the hill, Catholic priests wait to bless objects presented by pilgrims (again) with holy water, at the hill’s highest elevation. In the patch of earth that has been claimed for alasita rituals with a stone-bordered grid (Fig. 19), only yatiris conduct blessings.

These physical additions make statements that include and exclude, and (in the case of the smoking oven) comment on alternate religious practices. At Copacabana,
fourteen cement Stations of the Cross were erected on Cerro Calvario in the 1950s, “when the government decided Copacabana should have more to offer its thousands of pilgrims than just the Basilica of the Virgin,” according to the Catholic “Sacred destinations” web-site. Since then, pilgrims have engaged in a more traditional (for them) interaction with the crosses. They are treated as if they were apachetas, the piles of stones that are placed at Andean junctions that travelers have been adding to for millennia; stones are now being heaped onto the bases of the crosses and are added to daily (Aldenderfer 1991:250; Bastien 1978:5).

At Quillacollo, shrines, an open-air chapel, and full-sized replications of the sheep that were present during the legendary appearance of the Virgin have all been added recently. Susanna Derks (2009:106) learned from a local priest that the Church’s future building plans on Cerro Cota include a large basilica, in the hope, as the priest described it, that it would change the mercenary flavor of the shrine into “an absolutely spiritual one, like Lourdes in France or Guadalupe in Mexico.” Derks reports that the Church bulldozed sand into the Quillacollo “mines” in an attempt to shut them down, but the sand was quickly removed and the landlords were back in business soon after.

Alasitas most frequently take the form of houses, and when they are installed en masse as they are at Cerro Baúl (and to a lesser degree at the other two sites), they comprise a vision of “occupation.” At Cerro Baúl, the mass of houses appears to re-claim the summit from the archaeological project with which they uncomfortably share the space (and materiel). At a symbolic level, houses can be equated with the human bodies they are built to contain, and these dwellings become stand-ins for the people who have created these claims. The sunt’ida ritual that Lagos (1993:56) reported on from
Quillacollo’s past enacts this concept literally, when a man and woman who are embracing roll over the earth to take (symbolic) possession of it.

Finally, there is the issue of the site itself and its relationship to the mountains that embody sacrality and transmit it, when they are gazed upon. The three sites I observed are all out of doors and on “mountains,” literally so at Cerro Baúl, and on what could be described as miniature mountains at Copacabana and Quillacollo. Cerro Baúl offers a spectacular view of distant apus, which is an important factor contributing to Cerro Baul’s own sacrality, according to Ryan Williams and Donna Nash (2006:457). Copacabana’s Cerro Calvario presents an awe-inspiring view of the lake and its surrounding mountains, while Cerro Cota provides, if nothing else, a bit of elevation.43

All three sacred locations are physically removed from the Christian churches that, for two of them, act as official epicenters for the fiestas. Cerro Baúl, however, rises up far away from any church at all. Sabine MacCormack (1991:433) comments on differences in the sacrality of indoor and out-of-doors locations. She points out that deities with Spanish origins - Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints - are normally located inside, contained within edifices that have been rendered sacred as a result of human action. The natural topography and its surroundings embody, instead, permanent and inherent sacrality that is, in the eyes of indigenous worshippers, “beyond the reach of extirpation and consecration.”

Discourse: Identity

Cynthia LeCount Samaké (2004:173) describes the celebratory festivals of pre-conquest Andeans as opportunities to recall history, recount tales about ancestors and sacred places, and repeat and enact myths and legends with song, drink, food, and dance.
The festivals were opportunities for Andean communities to publicly communicate the beliefs comprising their specific identities, as communities and as a people. After the Spanish conquest, indigenous fiestas were initially incorporated into the Catholic processional rituals that the Church imagined that they resembled, and indigenous celebrations that coincided with Church feast days were encouraged (Samaké 2004:173), sometimes facilitating the continuation of non-Christian practices (Mills 1997:254-255).

Participation in church-sponsored, didactic dramatizations of struggles between good and evil became mandatory (Samaké 2004:174), and Samaké (2004:175) reports that these feast day enactments eventually became important forms of indigenous expression. Nico Tassi (2010:194) credits fiestas with being a successful indigenous/Christian substitution, one of the “technologies through which Andean ancestral cults were substituted and transformed into the contemporary worship of Catholic Saints and images.”

The rituals, processions, artifacts, and costumes that accompany fiestas offer opportunities to define (and re-define) identities, both ethnic and national. Just as the post-conquest Aymara appropriated aspects of the Hispanic religion that they found useful or attractive (Mills 2004:279), the elite of Bolivia have historically appropriated elements of indigenous culture to aid in national identity-building and branding projects. According to anthropologist Daniel Goldstein, Bolivia made this practice “official” with the 1968 presidential decree that claimed “folkloric music” as property of the state (Goldstein 1998:117).

In Quillacollo, definitions and depictions of “folklore” and issues concerning indigenous identity have introduced a discourse on identity into a tangle of competing ethnic, religious, and economic agendas. The town’s officials, the town’s elite, the town’s
long-time mestizo residents, the Church, and the relatively recently-arrived Aymara residents of Quillacollo all seek to actively shape the local fiesta to reflect their own beliefs, values, and preferences, all of which contribute to definitions of identity.

After the land reforms of the early 1950s, towns like Quillacollo were granted, according to Albro (1998:147), “control over the exploitation of their patrimony” (patrimonio propio) which…includes the promotion of ‘cultural development and the defense of autochthonous cultural values.’” To take advantage of this opportunity, Quillacollo decided to borrow a page from Oruro, “The Folklore Capital of Bolivia,” and re-invent their low-profile, primarily indigenous fiesta procession into a folkloric spectacle, deploying Bolivia’s “patrimony” with the hope of gaining economic success comparable to Oruro’s.

Attracted by the success of Quillacollo’s redesigned Entrada, indigenous vendors and yatiris (who were primarily Aymara) began flocking to the adjacent Cerro Cota to sell (among other things) artisan-made alasitas and ch’allas. This unexpected development distressed the town officials who regarded indigenous people as inevitably unruly and chaotic. Robert Albro (1998:153) records the reaction of a Quillacollo resident who blamed the Aymaras for converting “what had been a truly native fiesta …into something pagan, uncustomary, grotesque, extravagant, ridiculous, contrary and absurd.” The Quillacolleño complains that the ch’alla-conducting yatiris are insufficiently consistent in their religious practices, and dismisses their rituals as “foreign to our culture” (1998:155).44 And finally, the Quillacolleño accuses yatiris of using the fiesta to make a financial profit, a somewhat ironic accusation considering that the expansion of
the Virgin’s fiesta was originally intended to improve the economy of Quillacollo (1998:155-156).

Cultural appropriations and re-definitions are apparent in the costumes and dance moves of the caricatured “Indians” who now dance in Quillacollo’s “Fiesta de la Integración Nacional” Entrada. Maria Lagos (1993:60) considered the effect of the enhanced Entrada on the identities of indigenous Quillacolleños, and concludes that not only have Indians been displaced from the Entrada, but imitations of their dances and clothing styles have become part of a national ‘folkloric tradition.’ Divorced from living practices…[the dancers] have taken on a supra-class, supraregional, and supra-ethnic meaning with which people from different social and regional backgrounds can identify. ‘National’ traditions have come to link the present with an imagined glorious Indian or colonial past while simultaneously denigrating and denying the vitality of contemporary popular or Indian cultures.

In another unintended consequence, the success of the expanded Entrada brought new attention to an existing Cerro Cota stone procurement rituals, which until the 1970s had been an entirely indigenous practice that was carried out through an unremarkable and low-key exchange of stones and handmade miniatures (Derks 2009:98).

Performing Abundance

The postulate of abundance is fundamental to the Aymara worldview, a value that is regarded highly, and whose pursuit is considered to be a worthy aspiration. “Abundance” has obvious associations with agriculture. The agro-pastoral origins of the Aymara people are apparent in their appreciation for reproduction as a process, but now it is expressed with large quantities of commercial goods rather than expanding camelid herds.

Agricultural metaphors persist. Catherine Allen (1997:79) quotes a La Paz yatiri who compares alasitas to seeds that must be taken care of well to become mature fruits.
Once blessed [alasitas] do not simply provide a model, in miniature, for the objects, desires, and goods they represent, but they give rise to the objects themselves, their energy and even physical form… [They] are iconic statements that bring about ‘growth’, abundance and reproduction…elements that enable people to direct the world in the direction of their needs and desires and that actualize the abundance they represent.

The dates of the Copacabana and Quillacollo fiestas have significance in agricultural terms. Both are scheduled in August, and Cerro Baúl is also visited by a larger than usual number of pilgrims in August (Williams 2011: personal communication). Catherine Allen (1988:150) explains that August is important because of the belief that on its first day, “the earth opens…lightning strikes… [and] the solstitial sun turns on its course… [It is] a time of opening, a kind of crack in the world’s fabric.” According to Allen (2002:195, 198), Pachamama, in the living earth, opens up to receive rain, a requirement for productivity and abundance. In an echo of the labor that accompanies alasita commitments, Allen (1988:198) notes that “human effort is needed to sustain this cosmic circulation, and ritual activities are directed to this end.” And as is frequently the case with the Bolivian fiesta schedule, the August dates coincide happily with the feast days of the Virgins of Copacabana and Urkupiña, creating a polysemous array of possible meanings to the pilgrims in attendance.45 August dates stand in obvious contrast to the January schedule of the La Paz fiesta, as declared by Governor Segurola. While 24 January coincides with the feast day of the Virgin of La Paz, which was already on the Church’s liturgical calendar, the original August association of alasitas with planting and growth was clearly severed.

Agricultural metaphors have a constant presence in expressions of Andean cultures. The Quechua word mallki, ancestral mummy, can also be translated with the words, “saplings, seedlings, or shrubs,” according to a Quechua-Spanish dictionary.
Diccionario Quechua), and in pre-conquest rituals, mummy bundles were placed on the ground like seeds and “grown,” thanks to the addition of layers of textile wrappings, according to George Lau (2008:1033). The activities that are performed during an alasita ritual make metaphorical references to agro-pastoral origins. The ritual performs a stylized version of planting: the earth is carefully prepared inside the boundaries of a stone-delineated grid, and the alasita “seed” is placed into (literally on) the ground. The placement of the alasita on bare dirt sets it apart and draws attention to the action: sacrificial rituals are typically conducted on a cloth. This intentional placement establishes direct contact with the animated current that the supplicant is hoping to re-direct, by conducting the ritual. Seeds and alasitas are both deployed in anticipation of their future metamorphoses. Both experience a radical transformation from being tiny to huge, and take place within the same time constraint - a year. Brian Bauer (1996:328) draws attention to the Inka equation of warfare with agriculture, revealed in metaphors that pair disemboweling and plowing, for example. The symbolic occupation of the landscape and the reenactment of planting in alasita rituals suggest a similar relationship.

The objects that alasitas replicate have now shifted from being purely agricultural symbols of abundance, but it is worth noting that the substitution of trucks (the second-most popular alasita choice) for llamas is significant for Andeans to a degree that, for example, the substitution of cars for horses in North America would not be. According to Abercrombie (1998:183), llamas have always enjoyed an extremely high status; they are believed to lead social lives that are similar to humans, and are almost equal in value to humans as sacrificial subjects. According to Catherine Allen (1988:151-2), llamas are treated as if they were human during a special domestic celebration in their honor that
takes place at the beginning of August. Colorful tassels are sewn onto the llamas’ ears and, joined by the rest of the family in the corral; the llamas are plied with a mixture of *chicha, trago*, soup, mash, and herbs until they are thoroughly drunk.” Trucks, the contemporary llama substitute, are treated similarly with decorations and libations, as I witnessed during the blessings of decorated vehicles on the shore of Lake Titicaca. Unlike llamas, the trucks do not become inebriated, but this treatment, according to Tassi (2010:205), transforms them from being inanimate money-makers to entities “with spiritual and corporeal characteristics.”

“Re-Indianization”

Robert Albro (2010:17) uses “re-Indianization” to describe a contemporary socio-political movement in the “Plurinational State of Bolivia that is aggressively countering the Entrada’s glittery portrayals of “Indians” (Fig. 31). Cholaje describes the phenomenon of indigenous upward mobility (Albro 2010:9), an increasingly common occurrence as rural Aymara (and Quechua) people migrate in ever greater numbers into Bolivia’s cities, particularly La Paz and neighboring El Alto. Chola and cholo were initially pejorative labels that were applied by non-indigenous persons to indigenous women and men. “Cholo,” as a category, “is still a highly politicized racial and social category,” according to Albro (2010:17), but in an interesting turnabout, the terms “chola” and “cholo” are now being embraced by the same individuals who were denigrated by them, as part of an aggressive “re-Indianizing” process, described by Albro (2) as “…a story about the changing significance of what it means to be indigenous in contemporary Bolivia.”
Democratic elections were held for the first time in Bolivia in 1982, and in 2005 Bolivians elected their first indigenous president, Evo Morales. Fifty-five percent of Bolivians are indigenous, comprising approximately thirty-six different groups, and Aymara people (self-identified) comprise twenty-four percent of Bolivia’s total population (CIA Factbook). Morales, an Aymara, has taken many opportunities to empower indigenous people; for example, children are now required to learn Aymara or Quechua in school, and three indigenous universities have been created. The indigenous experience in Bolivia is changing, and the re-definition of “cholaje” is part of a radical transformation.

The cholas of La Paz and El Alto have become national icons: no-nonsense female street vendors who dress unmistakably in a self-specified “uniform” that has come to signify indigenous empowerment (Albro 2010:83), and was a popular choice for many women at Quillacollo and Copacabana (Figs. 18, 21, 26). The uniform combines traditionally indigenous, colonial and European components. It includes as many as eight layers of polleras (skirts) worn at once, with gingham aprons, synthetic cardigans, brightly colored, hand-woven or machine-made ahuayos (carrying cloths) tied around the shoulders, and a black derby or white sun hat worn over hair that has been plaited into long, black braids. According to Tassi (2010:198-199), gold teeth are a popular accessory, installed to replace healthy teeth, and chosen for their superior decorative qualities. Robert Albro (2010:82) recognizes the power displayed in the clothing choices the cholas have made, and writes that “the pollera is increasingly donned as a cultural resource in Bolivia and as a way to situationally perform ethnicity, particularly in urban space.”
Interestingly, as part of the same process of indigenous self-definition, (male) cholos have made very different clothing choices by adopting modern European elements such as large sunglasses and aviator jackets. Tassi (2010:192) believes that these choices in fact pose a threat to the mestizos from whom the pieces were appropriated. Their very non-iconic, non-“Indian” presentations make cholos harder for the non-indigenous to identify as indigenous.

The chola uniform has been chosen with a specific objective: to elicit attraction (atracción) from the deities (Tassi 2010:197). The elements and the multiple quantities (eight skirts and flashing gold teeth) exaggerate volume. The object in artificially expanding body size is to convey “the sensation of wellbeing, power and attraction,” as Tassi (2010:199) interprets it, which allows a chola to physically embody the sought-after condition of abundance.48

The abundance that is performed by cholas in their uniforms reflects the economic success of indigenous migrants to La Paz who, according to Tassi (2010:192), have established “seriously lucrative business[es]” that are based on rural kinship networks that are still linked by reciprocity. They conduct business from neighborhoods that “…are still disseminated by tambos, [the] inns/storehouses where the goods transported from the countryside…were originally gathered and sold to urban buyers” (Tassi 2010:192). These are modern versions of the Inka tambo network described by Piedro Ciez de León in the sixteenth century and suggesting a similar pre-conquest fixation on abundance.49

Discourse: The Material and the Spiritual

The embodied displays of abundance by cholas seek the attention of the deities to affect the circulating anima within the earth, part of what is described by Allen
(2002:198) as “an endless cycle of consumption.” The material objects and money that comprise contemporary abundance are contained within and affected by the cycle that shapes all life. In accordance with Aymara belief, they should not be removed from the flow and kept as savings. Goods and money should be in constant circulation, emulating Allen’s cycling substances, in order to reproduce, increase, and ultimately produce even more abundance. The Aymara attitude translates practically into a rejection of the Christian value of thriftiness in favor of conspicuous consumption, and follows the imperative to keep money in circulation rather than holding on to it (Calestani 2009:58; Tassi 2010:193, 199, 206).

For the Aymaras, material goods that are displayed in heaps at the marketplace, that exaggerate the size of the body with a fiesta costume, or that are replicated as alasitas exemplify the abundance they desire, but from the point of view of the Church (and others), these public displays demonstrate conspicuous consumption and are evidence that the money that was earned has now been squandered.50

The Church’s attitude toward Aymara displays of abundance is part of a discourse that has been assigned a moral weight by Christianity. Marshall Sahlins concludes that the Christian worldview is based on an economic postulate of scarcity (quoted in Tassi 2010:207). Sahlins contrasts this viewpoint to one in which neither scarcity nor abundance prevails but must constantly be negotiated with spiritual forces, a fair description of the Aymara cosmology. The spiritual materialism embraced by Aymaras simply cannot be comprehended by those who see a world riven by dualities. Material goods – houses, trucks, televisions – are all connected in the fluid Aymara cosmos, where the material and spirit worlds join together and interact. The relationship of urban cholos
with “modern objects” such as buses and trucks, the very entities that alasitas typically represent, is demonstrated in a La Paz vehicle blessing ceremony, similar to ones that I observed at Copacabana. The celebration is an acknowledgment of the minibus’s need “to be re-energized, cheered by music [and libations] and be re-socialized by grouping it together with other minibuses,” according to Tassi (2010:205).

This typifies the Aymara relationship with the material world, represented and pursued with alasitas, based on the assumption that humans are linked to the physical world and to the transcendent, operating with agency in a cosmos that is defined by reciprocity.
XIII. CONCLUSION

Consistency and exclusivity in iconography, practices, and beliefs make for tidy analyses, but in a repeat of the experience of colonial Hispanics, I found neither in my investigation of alasitas. Alasitas, like huacas, fluidly resist definition and strict categorizations.

Polo de Ondegardo, the sixteenth-century chief magistrate of Cuzco (quoted in Dean 2010: note 6, 180), made a list of some of the possible forms for huacas: “idols, ravines, boulders or large rocks, hills, mountain peaks, springs, fountains, and finally whatever natural objects that seem notable and are differentiated from the rest.” Possibilities for the iconography of alasitas are equally varied: tiny suitcases full of money, trucks that look like toys, miniature versions of pallets of construction materials, and sprawling stone installations on a sacred mesa. Whatever their appearances, huacas all share the condition of sacrality and all alasitas represent desire; huacas and alasitas are both activated and given agency by illa and their “essence.”

Like huacas, the significance of an alasita is demonstrated more by its ritual treatment than by its surface appearance, and like many Andean objects, it is its essence that determines value and meaning. A newly-acquired alasita is insignificant. Its essence will be defined during the ritual process undertaken by the supplicant who purchases it, builds it, or wrests it from the earth and ritually connects it to the animating forces of the cosmos.

Fiestas provide a public stage for alasita installations, offering a polysemous and polytheistic atmosphere that is believed to be conducive to success. Pachamama and the
Virgin Mary are both addressed by the yatiris conducting ch’allas, and the land on which the rituals are enacted is a palimpsest of layered and varied sacralities.

The contemporary cholas and cholos who engage in alasita rituals are participants in an aggressive identity re-invention project. Non-indigenous Andeans have often attempted to define “Indians” in the past, but these caricatures are now being rejected. As part of their process of re-definition, indigenous Bolivians freely appropriate elements from any and all of the cultures, religions, and ethnic traditions that have existed in the Andes at any point during the preceding millennia.

Alasitas continue to embody the desire for abundance, whether in a pebble or with a replication of a three-story building housing a cell-phone store. Whatever its physical representation may be, deploying an alasita is an aggressive move. At first it suggests supplication, then it appears to be a demand for intervention from the deities. Ultimately though, an installed alasita constitutes a kind of personal, but publicly-declared, “to-do” list. The answer to Marcel Mauss’s question about the power of gifts to receive repayment resides within the “giver,” the alasita owner. The ritual format – a sacrifice made to the gods – references the societal and cosmic structure of reciprocity, but ultimately the power of the “gift” is located in the practitioner. Practitioners evaluate the probability that they can achieve a specific desire, then choose or construct their objects accordingly. In a rehearsal for a future reality, the practitioners ritually perform the fulfillment of their desires with their families, out-of-doors and in symbolically elevated locations, in the always-sacred landscape.

An alasita that is deployed in the animated cosmos is an embodiment of the Aymara ideal of spiritual-materialism, an oxymoronic concept from a Christian
perspective, but central to the Andean worldview. Alasitas are sometimes interpreted as symbols of material excess by non-practitioners, but they represent a traditional Aymara value. The alasita ritual is criticized from some quarters too for being insufficiently “folkloric,” and thus an inappropriate activity for so-called “Indians.” Yet in a recent example of the appropriations and the adjustments that have “traditionally” characterized centuries of ethnic interactions in the Andes, the Bolivian Cultural Minister is currently applying to UNESCO for “intangible heritage” status for the La Paz Alasita Fiesta. A response is expected in November of 2012.
NOTES

1 Throughout this paper, I use the words “spirits,” “gods,” “deities,” and so on, despite my awareness of their inadequacy and generally bad fit with Andean cosmology. Kenneth Mills (1997:7) writes in his introduction to *Idolatry and its Enemies* that his “use of the terms ‘god,’ ‘divinity,’ and ‘force’ to describe Andean numina is uncomfortable and tentative, reflecting a decision made in the interest of…general accessibility and to express—however crudely—entities of great importance to people;” I am taking a similar approach in the expressions I use.

2 In “Hybridity and its Discontents,” Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn (2003) consider the vocabulary with which the indigenous/European interaction is characterized and the implications that accompany words that have been applied. “Syncretic” is a popular choice, but like “hybridity,” it fails their test. The authors examine the cultural assumptions that underlie these, and other labels. They come to the conclusion that “the deception of visibility” is central to this issue, a demonstration of the (mistaken) notions that 1) the ethnicity of the maker of an object will, or even *must* be apparent, and 2) that this assumption indicates a privileging of race. The issue of visual presentation is an issue that is considered in this paper, particularly as it is affected by the very non-western Andean attitudes towards form.

3 As is true with most of the fiesta-related activities I describe, individual pilgrims may (and probably do) engage in any or all of the rituals that the fiesta has to offer, reflecting their individual choices and undoubtedly guided by the precept that “more is better.”

4 Kelly Donahue-Wallace (2008:131) writes that the Virgin of Copacabana is South America’s closest equivalent to Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe.

5 Almost all of the many cars and trucks parked along the shore of the Lake had Peruvian license plates. I was told by a Copacabana resident that most of the pilgrims (and all of the troublemakers) were Peruvian, not Bolivian.

6 The original statue by Tito Yupanqui always remains inside the shrine, due to the belief that her appearance outside would cause a storm on Lake Titicaca; a replica is used in outdoor processions.

7 Ritual objects that remained invisible inside their bags during blessings and ch’allas were common at Copacabana and Quillacollo, and suggest earlier Andean practices of wrapping sacred items into bundles, as described by Kenneth Mills (1997:87) (Fig. 37).

8 Art historian Carol Damian (2004:305) contends that colonial painted images of the Virgin Mary often depict her as a mountain, a reference to Pachamama, an especially sacred feature in the Andean landscape, and a symbol of reproduction and fertility.
At regional fairs the currency may reference local institutions like the “Bank of Urkupiña,” or the “Banco de Copacabana.”

Each image is presented within the “frame” of a fingernail. There are three alternative images of the Virgin, including the Virgin of Guadalupe, and two of Jesus, one as an adult, and the other as a cherubic youth in a pink dress.

The yatiris’ cloths are similar to the large, brightly-colored woven cloths called *ahuayos* that are used by Aymara women to carry babies and goods on their backs (Figure 18).

This description is taken from photographs and verbal reports; I did not observe the activities on the summit myself.

Maria Lagos (1993:61) documented this rental arrangement at the Quillacollo fiesta and I’m assuming that the arrangements at Copacabana are similar.

The Copacabana Basilica is well-known for conducting weekly vehicle blessings for a small fee; every Department in Bolivia has designated a cathedral to perform this service, a reflection of the importance of transport to the Bolivian economy.

I was unaware that there would be an “Autochthonous Parade” on Friday, as it received no attention or listings in the media. This parade features local indigenous dancers and musicians and is (also) described as a “traditional,” but explicitly local event. It is apparently a political accommodation to the critique that the Saturday parade now excludes many of the indigenous people whose lavish costumes and intricate dance steps the Entrada claims are being replicated.

Although there are many Aymara people living in the Cochabamba area now, this has not always been the case. During the Inka reign, the area was valued highly for its bounteous agricultural production, and Quechua became the predominant language.

A third parade, essentially a reprise of Saturday’s Entrada, takes place on Sunday, although Saturday’s late night parties are said to take a toll on the dancers’ levels of enthusiasm this second time around.

Paul Dustin Guardia Marañón is a 28-year old travel agent who was working for a small travel agency in La Paz, and whose family lives in the Cochabamba area.

According to Maria Lagos (1993:59) and Susanna Derks (2009:53), the hill where the alasita and mining rituals now take place is not the original Cerro Cota. The original Cerro Cota was the site of a spring that perhaps was (and perhaps is) a regional *apu*. According to Derks, the rituals were moved twenty years ago to the current location. Cerro Cota’s owners apparently were unwilling to make their hill available, while the
new hill is larger, was owned by the Church, and is closer to the town of Quillacollo. The current hill is referred to as both “Cerro Cota” and “Cerro Calvario;” I use “Cerro Cota” throughout the paper to distinguish it from Copacabana’s hill.

20 An Aymara employee of the Peruvian government is stationed at the base of Cerro Baul to officially discourage this practice, but ironically, her “second job” is as a yatiri, and in that role, she conducts ritual pagos that use the stones on Cerro Baúl.

21 Mark Aldenderfer (1991:251) describes the shrine as “5.3 by 4 m and...a height of 1.2 m” but does not mention the crosses, which may have been placed there during the intervening nineteen years.

22 Aldenderfer (1991:251) reported in 1991 that there were thousands of miniature houses and 250 altars on Cerro Baúl.

23 These dates are per Moseley (2001:22-23).

24 Unlike huacas and conopas, chancas must be found by chance, but like many sacred entities in the Andes, they must continually be fed and cared for if they are to ensure a family’s future growth and fertility (Salomon 2004:115-6; Allen 1997:77).

25 A word that is both a noun and verb, “illa” illustrates the sixteenth-century chief magistrate of Cuzco, Juan Polo de Ondegardo’s frustrated observation that idols could more easily be identified by the way they were treated with offerings than by what they looked like (Dean 2010:3). Catherine Allen (1988:54) adds that “objects that concentrate special generative powers in themselves are called illas, the root of illariy, to shine out (Quechua). Each family has its illas, tiny models of animals or house compounds, which are kept carefully hidden as the repositories of household well-being.”

26 The three Aymara elements, or characteristics, that Aldenderfer (1991:250) claims are proto-Aymara are (1) a telluric nature, (2) the use of shrines, (3) “the alasita, an annual trade and barter fair also described as the ‘fiesta of the miniatures.’”

27 Susanna Derks (2009:92) raises the possibility that the word is from the Arabic al-asyd, or mediator, but does not go further with this possible source.

28 There are translations that include the words “trade” or “barter” too, possibly indicating that there is (more of) a relationship between alasitas and the concept of reciprocity.

29 Like other sweeping statements I make in this paper, this is of course not always the case. A variety of lifestyles and livelihoods coexist in contemporary Bolivia, and the array of subject matter that alasitas demonstrate reflects this; llamas and Volvos are both present, often for sale on the same table. While migration to the city is certainly the dominant trend, many Bolivians remain in rural areas, or lead their lives in both settings.
Robert Albro (2010:11) estimates that forty percent of Bolivia’s economy is “informal.”

The constitutional capital of Bolivia is Sucre, while La Paz is the administrative capital.

Iqiku, Eq’eq’o, Ekhako, Eqago, and Ekhekho are just some of the multitude of spelling alternatives.

Individual priests have differing policies regarding the blessing of alasitas and/or Ekekos; there does not appear to be a single Church ruling on the subject. Calestani (2009:62-3) suggests that blessing Ekeko figures would require a “degree of polytheism unacceptable even to liberal-minded priests,” yet many Ekeko figures have been blessed by priests, knowingly or not. (Many libations seem to be administered to objects that are inside bags and thus not visible.)

La Barre (1948:180) described a Christmas Eve ritual that included objects that fall somewhere between conopas and alasitas, in which Aymara people made dolls, animals, and huts out of mud, in the belief that this would assure that they’d never lack for the real-life versions of the objects represented.

La Barre’s (1948:196) complete list of 1940s era alasitas is remarkable:
“Double inch-long saddle-bags, two burlap sacks of coca leaves, a three-inch balsa [boat] with mast, an inch-square two-inch tin can containing distilled alcohol, a braided llama-wool soga the thickness of wrapping twine, a small wooden oblong box labeled ‘Fabrica de Fideos La Iberia, La Paz, Bolivia,’” three cotton sacks containing maize and rice, a dance-mask with a painted and raised snake and lizard on the forehead and cheek and bearing horns, a pair of knitted socks and a knitted money-bag, a cooking pot an inch in diameter, a knitted gorro, a fur saddle-blanket, a tiny tailored tweed vest, a small leather bag, a pottery jar, a box of half-inch matches, a woven basket in miniature wicker ware, two packages of “Ekeko’ cigarettes an inch long, a small tin auto with ladder attached, a small old-fashioned milk-can, a miniature wax candle with wick, and a flat bag made of ticking, content unknown.”

In A Culture of Stone, Carolyn Dean (2010:19) addresses the paradigm of lo andino (Andeanness), defining it as the conviction that there is “…a shared indigenous Andean culture that has survived from the pre-Hispanic world until the present time…[and that has been] rejected by many as a romantic and essentialist fiction.” Dean contends however that “reverence for ancestors, a belief in the basic complementary structure of the cosmos, and a fundamental reliance on reciprocity” can be legitimately regarded as part of a shared Andean culture, without denying the tumultuous changes that have taken place over the centuries,” and I am following her example.
In 1590, José de Acosta (quoted in Salles-Reese 1997:34) wrote (in apparent shock) that

We know that the Inkas found new and numerous gods in each of the towns they occupied. But they behaved toward them in a peculiar way, quite dissimilar from what we observe in the history of the Old World. They did not demolish the temples, nor destroy the effigies of the local deities, nor prohibit the rites or impose by force the beliefs from Cuzco. They did not use the stake or any sort of torment to force people to believe in the Sun or in Tijsi Wiraqocha. On the contrary, with the sole condition that they recognize the Sun’s divinity, they gave complete freedom of worship.

Sabine MacCormack (2010:63) elaborates on one of the unintended consequences of introducing the Devil to Andeans in an atmosphere of mutual misunderstanding:

By describing huacas as demons, missionaries endowed them with a new mode of existence because demons were understood to possess real power…the wrong kind of power…Why and how the power was wrong…could only be comprehended by entering into and appropriating as one’s own the monotheistic, Christian cognitive system within which such definitions were meaningful.

I am applying Kuznár’s (2001:43) broad definition of sacrifice to include “every religious act…from depositing coca quids in sacred locations to blood sacrifice.”

There are many opinions regarding the true ownership of the hill’s mines. Albro (1998:138-9) reports that, according to different yatiris, they belong to Pachamama and the Virgin, to the snakes of the Virgin, to the Tío (the male chthonic force linked to mineral wealth and the devil), to the tata abuelos (grandfathers), to the diablitos (little devils), to the Tío and Pachamama, or to the “Señor of Úrkupiña,” whoever that might be.

“Luck” is important, according to Robert Albro (2010:153) “because the spirits may not respond as they should; they can be capricious, and they might not reciprocate.” Albro observes that city-dwellers may be more in need of luck than those in the country who maintain an emphasis on “generative processes,” instead of money.

“Sacred-destinations.com” is a website that provides information to Catholic pilgrims. It describes Copacabana’s alasita rituals as follows: “About halfway up are native priests burning candles and working with coca leaves. Here you can stop and learn about the ancient rituals of fortunetelling.” http://www.sacred-destinations.com/bolivia/copacabana-cerro-calvario

Once again, this was not the location of the Virgin’s legendary appearance.
44 They have a point. See the variety of responses that Robert Albro received when he asked sahumeros on the hill about the ownership of the mines in my note #40.

45 Random coincidences with the Church’s calendar, such as Corpus Christi and Inti Raymi, produce similarly multi-layered events. Kenneth Mills (1997:254) claims that indigenous celebrations were scheduled in strategic conjunction with Catholic worship and feast days historically, and notes that “approaches to the sacred that were supposed to be in opposition were often performed, if not at the same time, at least the same day,” during the seventeenth century. And from the indigenous perspective, combining the rituals’ schedules could only enhance their power and sacrality (Sallnow 2000:149), just as the crosses on top of Cerro Baul contribute to the increased sacrality of the existing apu.

46 Robert Albro (2010:74) quotes a Bolivian journalist on the economic importance of trucks. “I would say that starting with the Agrarian Reform [1952], the vehicle of social mobility par excellence is the truck. The campesinos who brewed this chichita—still with fat, mind you, and from pure muco [the tradition of women chewing ground corn to start chicha’s fermentation] with the sweetness and scent of maiz, without sugar—build up in their chests, cent by cent, a desire:to come to the city and buy for themselves a truck…”

47 Abercrombie (1998:183) draws an interesting equation between llama pelts and textiles, a fundamental form of Andean expression, and calls them “manufactured social skin.”

48 In Moquegua, while visiting some Aymara women weavers, Nicola Sharratt and I were dressed by the ladies with many layers of polleras, as described here, that expanded our volumes quite nicely; documentation of this atracción is only available by special request.

49 A chronicler of the Inkas, Pedro de Cieza de Leon (1959:105), wrote in 1553 that “…so there would be adequate supplies for [the Inkas’] men, every four leagues there were lodgings and storehouses abundantly supplied with everything to be found in these regions…the representatives or stewards …took great care to see that the natives kept these inns or lodgings [tambos] well supplied.”

50 Catherine Allen (1997:78) suggests that the popularity of spending as much money on material goods as quickly as possible might also be a practical hedge against currency inflation.

51 “Idolos, quebradas, penas o piedras grandes, ceros, cumbres de montes, manantiales, fuentes y finalmente cualquier cosas de naturaleza que parezca notable y diferenciada de las demás.”
There is certainly a bit of irony in an attempt to officially designate alasitas, the objects that completely embody materiality, as intangible!

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GLOSSARY

ahuayo (awayo); Aymara, Quechua: Carrying cloth used by women, tied around shoulders. Spanish: manta.

alasita; Aymara: “You buy it from me,” objects that are miniature representations of human desires.

apu; Quechua: “Lord,” spirits or divinities usually located in mountains, in the sacred landscape.

artesana; Spanish: artisan.

artesanías; Spanish: souvenirs, often hand-made.

ayni; Aymara, Quechua: Strict, symmetrical trading among relatives, friends, and neighbors, that must be reciprocated.

ayllu; Aymara, Quechua: Indigenous kinship group, and/or community.

banco de cambio; Spanish: Bank.

billetes (dólares); Spanish: Replicas of US dollars, Bolivianos, euros, other international currencies, and visas, plane tickets, etc.

bolivianos; Spanish: Bolivian currency, abr: BOB.

bruja; Spanish: Witch, sorceress.

casita; Spanish: “Little house.”

Cerro Calvario; Spanish: Generic name for hills where the Virgin has appeared, often the site of a Christian shrine.

Cerro Cota; Spanish: hill, height above sea-level, the site of the Virgin of Urkupiña’s legendary appearance near Quillacollo.

ch’alla; Aymara, Quechua, Spanish: Ritual blessing ceremony that includes libations for the earth.

chancas; Quechua: Small, personal ritual objects that embody well-being.

charango; Spanish: A stringed instrument native to Bolivia.

chicha (aha, aqha, aka) Quechua: Traditional Andean beer usually made from fermented maize, often used for libations.
GLOSSARY (continued)

*chola, cholo*; Spanish: (m, f) Term for upwardly mobile, indigenous urban-dwellers, often vendors.

*ch’uspa*; Quechua: Small woven bag for carrying one’s coca leaves.

*conopa (illa)*; Quechua: Small domestic ritual object depicting animals and food, sometimes equipped with an indentation for burning llama fat.

*demanda*; Spanish: Glass-fronted boxes displaying three-dimensional images of the Virgin.

*Diablitos*; Spanish: little devils.

* dólares*; Spanish: A form of *alasita*, miniature currency and other valuable printed papers such as visas, airline tickets, passports.

*Ekeko (Iqiqu, Eq’eq’o, Ekhako, Eqaqo, Ekhekho, etc.)*; Aymara: A figure representing “The Aymara God of Abundance,” usually at the La Paz fiesta.

*entrrada*; Spanish: A forced act of entry into an unknown region, now used to refer to choreographed, folkloric parades.

*huaca (guaca, waka, wak’a)*; Quechua: Something that is sacred and venerated; objects, landscape features, shrines, mummies, effigies, and more.

*illa (enga)*; Quechua: A metaphysical substance containing essential strength, health and fertility, or, a stone model embodying well-being and good fortune.

*interés* Spanish: Interest (financial).

*mallki (mallqui)*; Quechua: Ancestral cadaver or mummy with power over its descendants’ fecundity, can be a regional deity.

*mamacha*; Spanish: “Little mother,” doll-sized representations of the Virgin Mary or female saints.

*mesa*; Spanish: A table or altar used in rituals; Quechua: *misa*.

*mestizo* Spanish: Mixed, used to describe individuals with indigenous Andean and Spanish racial or cultural heritage, with implications of membership in the middle-class.

*milagro*; Spanish: “Miracle,” tiny representations of answered prayers, usually metal, often stylized depictions of body parts.
mink’a; Quechua: Asymmetrical acts of reciprocity that are not necessarily repaid, in kind or at all.

mistura; Spanish: Confetti, usually yellow, used ritually in ch’allas.

mit’a (mita); Quechua: Obligatory labor, originally Inka, later adopted by the Spanish.

Ork’hopiña!; Quechua: “She is already there, on the hill-top!”

pacha; Quechua: The world, the earth, or time.

Pachamama; Aymara, Quechua, Spanish: “Mother Earth,” a female cosmic, telluric concept associated with agricultural production and pagos.

pagos; Spanish: Ritual offerings to the earth.

pasante; Spanish: Fiesta sponsor.

polleras; Spanish: Full, brightly-colored, skirts worn in many layers, an element of the traditional Aymara and chola costumes.

préstamo; Spanish: A loan, here referring to stones mined on Cerro Cota.

reducción; Spanish: The colonial forced resettlement of native Andeans.

Qoyllor Rit’i; Quechua: “Star-Snow,” a sacred Peruvian mountain range and the destination for an annual pilgrimage.

sahumero (curandero, yatiri; Spanish: Vendor of ritual practices at fiestas like Urkupiña’s.

sole; Spanish: Peruvian unit of currency.

sunt’ida, Quechua: Ritual in which a couple rolls on the ground embracing, symbolizing fecundity and possession of the land.

tata-abuelos; Aymara, Quechua, Spanish: grandfathers.


tomar un préstamo; Spanish: “To take a loan,” as in a stone-loan from Cerro Cota.
GLOSSARY (continued)

trago; Spanish: low grade alcohol that is used in rituals.

Urk'hopiña!” Hispanicization of Quechua “Ork'hopiña,” “She is already there, on the hill-top!”

yatiri (curandero, sahumero); Aymara, Quechua: “One who knows,” a person qualified to conduct rituals, a healer, shaman, and/or diviner.
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Figure 70. *Alasita*: construction materials for house-building, contractor, Quillacollo.
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Figure 76. *Milagros* for sale at Copacabana.
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