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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN BOLIVIA**

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Religion in Bolivia

Country Summary

Located in the center of South America, Bolivia is surrounded by Chile, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. About one-third of its territory is located in the high Andes Mountains, while about two-thirds are composed of tropical lowlands in the Amazon basin. The highest peak in Bolivia is Nevado Sajama at 21,463 feet, located in the department of Oruro. Lake Titicaca, located at 12,500 feet above sea level, sits on the border between Bolivia and Peru. Bolivia is totally landlocked but that has not always been the case. In 1883, Chile annexed the Bolivian department of Litoral during the “War of the Pacific” (1879-1884), thus taking away Bolivia’s access to the Pacific Ocean. The remaining land (419,000 square miles) is now home to 9.2 million people (2008 estimate), with La Paz as its capital since 1898.

Bolivia is one of the least developed countries in South America, with almost two-thirds of its people, many of whom are subsistence farmers, living in poverty. The nation’s major industries are mining, smelting, petroleum, food and beverages, tobacco, handicrafts and clothing; and its major exports are natural gas, soybeans and soy products, crude petroleum, zinc ore and tin.

About 55 percent of the population are Native American Indians (Amerindian: mainly Quechua, Aymara, Chiquitano and Guaraní who speak their ancestral languages), about 30 percent are *mestizo* (mixed heritage: Amerindian and European), and about 15 percent are white (mainly of Spanish ancestry but includes those of German, Italian, Basque, Croatian, Russian, Polish and USA ancestry as well as other minorities). The small Afro-Bolivian population, numbering about 50,000, is descended from African slaves who worked in Brazil and then migrated westward into Bolivia. They are mostly concentrated in the Yungas region in the department of La Paz. The nation’s official languages are Spanish, Quechua and Aymara.



Current Religious Situation

Although the majority of the population still claims affiliation with the **Roman Catholic Church**, the percentage of Catholics has declined considerably since the 1950s. According to the **2001 national census**, 78 percent of Bolivians claimed to be Roman Catholic, 16.2 percent were Protestant, 3.2 percent were affiliated with other Christian denominations, 2.4 percent claimed no religious affiliation, and less than 0.2 percent was affiliated with non-Christian religions.

Overview of Social and Political Development

Amerindians inhabited the Andean region for several thousand years during which time they produced several sophisticated civilizations. In the 9th century AD, a kingdom centered

on Tiahuanaco spread along the Andes Mountains. By the 12th century it had been replaced by the Inca Empire from the Cuzco Valley of Peru, which absorbed many of features of the earlier kingdom. By the 16th century the Inca Empire reached from Ecuador to northern Chile and Argentina, and included the Aymara and Quechua peoples of Bolivia. Today, the Quechua (2,900,000) occupy southern Bolivia and the Andean highlands adjacent to Lake Titicaca in La Paz department; the Aymara (1,800,000) occupy the upper valleys of the Andes in the central and western regions. There are dozens of small, nomadic Amerindian tribes in the Amazon lowlands of eastern Bolivia, in addition to the Chiquitano (47,000) in the eastern region of Santa Cruz department and the Guaraní (40,000) in the southern departments of Chuquisaca and Tarija near the Paraguayan border.

The Spanish conquistadors moved into Inca territory early in the 1500s and in 1545 occupied the silver mines at Potosí, which went on to become one of the largest cities in the world in the 17th century. By the late 16th century, Bolivian silver was an important source of revenue for the Spanish Crown. A generation of struggle for independence from Spanish rule that began in 1809 finally led to success in 1825 under the leadership of the liberator **Simon Bolívar** (1783–1830), after whom the independent nation was named. The coming of Independence did not help the Amerindian peoples, because the Spanish families who had settled the land years earlier now took full control. Two wars in 1879–1884 (War of the Pacific) and 1932–1935 (the Chaco War) cost Bolivia over half of its national territory.

Beginning with the assassination of President **Gualberto Villarroel López** in 1946, Bolivia has been the scene of successive waves of new governments in failed attempts to establish democracy and to deal with the country's peculiar political, economic and social problems. Bolivia had a total of 193 coups d'état from Independence until 1981, averaging a change of government once every ten months.

The **National Revolutionary Movement (MNR)** led a successful revolution in 1952, which ended the nearly-continuous rule of the Conservatives since Independence; and this resulted in the first Presidency of **Víctor Paz Estenssoro** (1952-1956). His administration, and the later government of **President Hernán Siles** (1956-1960), implemented many important structural reforms, including the extension of universal suffrage to all adult citizens (Amerindians and illiterates included), the nationalization of the country's largest tin mines, comprehensive land reforms, and promotion of rural education. The existing military apparatus, which had served the interests of the oligarchy prior to the Revolution, was dismantled and reorganized as an arm of the MNR.

What is especially significant about the **1952 Revolution** is that the Bolivian State, for the first time in its Republican history, sought to incorporate into national life the Aymaras and Quechuas, which together constituted about 65 percent of the total population. Although the policies pursued by the MNR were largely corporatist and assimilationist, it marked a significant turning point in Bolivia's contested history of Indigenous-State relations. The 1952 Bolivian Revolution has been called one of the most significant sociopolitical events that occurred in Latin America during the 20th century, together with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920.

After twelve more tumultuous years of national reform, the country was bitterly divided between left, right and moderate factions. For example, mining union-labor leader Juan Lechín Oquendo founded the *Partido Revolucionario de Izquierda Nacionalista* in 1963, which supported the 1964 military coup against **President Paz Estenssoro** (1960-1964) at the beginning of his third term in office. This military intervention in national politics is an event that many assert brought an end to the National Revolution and marked the beginning of nearly 20 years of repressive military rule.

This unstable context provided an arena for the emergence of insurrectionist activities of Ernesto "Che" Guevara (born in Argentina in 1928), a well-known leftist leader and

participant in the 1956 Cuban Revolution, who was killed by the Bolivian military in 1967 while leading a small anti-government guerrilla force, called the Army of National Liberation (ELN).

The death of **President René Barrientos** in 1969, a former member of the military junta who was elected President in 1966, led to a succession of weak governments. Alarmed by growing public disorder, **Col. Hugo Banzer Suárez** was installed as President in 1971 with the support of the military, the MNR and others political factions. Banzer, who ruled from 1971 to 1974, became impatient with discord within his political coalition, replaced civilians with members of the armed forces, and suspended all political activities. Although the economy grew significantly during Banzer's presidency, the people's demands for greater political freedom undermined his support base.

The national elections of 1978, 1979 and 1980 were inconclusive and marked by fraud, according to many observers. There was a sequence of military coups, counter-coups, and caretaker governments. In 1980, **Gen. Luis García Meza** came to power in a ruthless and violent coup; and his government was denounced for human rights abuses, narcotics trafficking and financial mismanagement.

Although Bolivia returned to democratic civilian rule in 1982, its political leaders faced the difficult problems of deep-seated poverty, social unrest, and illegal drug production and trafficking. By the mid-1990s, Bolivia accounted for about one-third of the world's coca production that was being processed into cocaine. Bolivian law allows the cultivation of approximately 40,000 acres of coca to supply the traditional demand among the nation's indigenous people, where the chewing of coca leaves and coca tea are age-old customs used to mitigate the effects of high altitude in the central highlands. In recent decades the Amerindian peoples have significantly heightened their participation in the country's political structure as a means of slowing the encroachment upon their lands and cultures.

Many of the Amerindian peoples, especially the Quechua and Aymara in the western highlands and the Guaraní in the south, have retained their traditional animistic religions, although most would also declare themselves Roman Catholics. These indigenous religions are polytheistic and tend to see the earth as populated with spirit entities (animism). Religious leaders, who function variously as shamans (*chamanes*), healers (*curanderos*) and divines (*brujería*), keep the largely oral traditions alive and have become increasingly important as symbols of cultural persistence.

Beginning in 2006 the populist government of President Evo Morales (an Ayamara) of **Movement Toward Socialism (MAS)** began to stress a revival of traditional Amerindian religious beliefs and rituals, which now occasionally precede official government events. Some government officials attend both Catholic Masses and indigenous religious rituals in the course of their official functions. Since taking office, Morales' controversial political and economic strategies have exacerbated racial and economic tensions between the Amerindian peoples in the Andean highlands and the non-indigenous communities (*mestizos* and whites) in the eastern lowlands.

Roman Catholic Church

The Spanish brought the **Roman Catholic Church** with them, and Bolivia was incorporated in a new Diocese of Cusco (Peru) in 1537. The first Amerindian groups to be Christianized were the Parias and Chacras. Over the next century and a half the **Franciscans** and **Jesuits** established a number of missions, with the Jesuits developing their well-known cooperative villages among the Moxos and Chiquitos. Through the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church had a virtual monopoly on organized religious life, but because of a shortage of trained priests many Amerindians are nominally Catholic while continuing their allegiance

to traditional animistic beliefs and rituals in various admixtures (religious syncretism). Through the twentieth century, the Catholic Church was slow to produce Bolivian priests and had to rely on foreign-born clergy and religious workers.

The Catholic Church of Bolivia is led by the Archbishop of La Paz (established as a diocese in 1605 and elevated to an archdiocese in 1943). In 1986 the Catholic Church was reorganized into four archdioceses (La Paz, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba and Sucre), six dioceses, two territorial prelatures, five apostolic vicariates that serve various Amerindian peoples, and one military ordinariato. There were approximately 750 priests, most of whom were foreigners, and the lack of priests significantly limited the effectiveness of church activities. For example, in 2004, the Archdiocese of Sucre only had 83 priests to minister to the needs of an estimated 474,000 Catholics (1:5,710) in 44 parishes, dispersed over 50,000 km.

The Catholic Church retains its role as the official State religion, although other religions are now allowed some degree of toleration and freedom. The permeation of Catholicism into Bolivian society also means that both lay Catholics and priests are found across the political spectrum.

Diverse tensions arose within the Bolivian Catholic Church during the 1960s and following years, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. *Traditionalists* wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s). *Reformers* generally supported the Church's modern, post-Vatican II stance. *Progressives*, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming Bolivian society and establishing social justice through peaceful democratic means. *Radicals* adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the various military dictatorships and creating a Socialist State that would serve the poor marginalized masses. *Charismatic agents* sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues"), rather than by political and social activism.

In 1970, Father Francis MacNutt (a Dominican priest) and Methodist pastors Joe Petree and Tommy Tyson from the USA arrived in Bolivia to share their experiences in the **Charismatic Renewal** movement, both among Catholics and Protestants. MacNutt and his team led a retreat near Cochabamba with the participation of about 70 people.

MacNutt stated that the CCR in South America began with his visit to Bolivia and Peru in 1970; however, there is evidence that the Argentine Renewal Movement that began among Evangelicals in 1967 soon spread to Roman Catholics in Buenos Aires and other parts of the country during 1968-1969. As in Argentina, the CCR movement in Bolivia expanded mainly among middle and upper-class Catholics and not among the lower-classes as did the Church's Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base). MacNutt and several members of his team visited Bolivia again early in 1971 where they addressed groups of priests and nuns who could understand English, many of whom in turn became charismatics and began to organized small groups of laypeople for prayer and Bible study. These charismatic groups began to multiply among Catholics spontaneously.

The remarkable ministry of a young Catholic layman, **Julio César Ruibal Heredia**, began in La Paz during 1972 after he returned to his homeland from the Los Angeles, CA,

area where he had been studying and came into contact with the famous Pentecostal faith-healer Kathryn Kuhlman (1907-1976), under whose ministry he experienced a personal conversion to Christ and was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

In Bolivia Ruibal began to share his new-found faith in the homes of his family and friends and in local Catholic parish churches, where he began to preach the Gospel and heal the sick and the oppressed. His first public meetings took place in the parish of San Miguel Arcangel on the southside of La Paz, where numerous healings occurred. Between December of 1972 and February of 1973, Ruibal held a series of impromptu three-day crusades at soccer stadiums in La Paz, Santa Cruz and Cochabamba with over 200,000 people in attendance, according to news reports, and with remarkable results. In January of 1972, Ruibal preached to a crowd of 25,000 in the Hernando Siles Stadium in La Paz, where many were touched by his message and allegedly experienced supernatural manifestations, such as glossolalia and physical healing, which were reported widely in Bolivian and international news media.

In May 1974, a group of about 300 persons organized an autonomous congregation under Ruibal's leadership in La Paz, which was incorporated in June of 1975 under the name "Ekklesia Misi3n Boliviana." Between 1976 and 1986, Ruibal and several of his leaders ministered in Colombia while others expanded the ministry to other Bolivian cities, such as Santa Cruz. However, in 1995, after Ruibal was murdered in Colombia, the leadership of the movement he founded was continued by his disciples under the administration of pastoral teams in many parts of Bolivia. Currently, this independent denomination has a strong presence in the nation, with affiliated churches in at least ten countries, and is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals of Bolivia.

In January 2001 the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement** claimed an estimated 40,000 participants nationwide. Its lively worship services often resemble an evangelical tent revival and are controversial among traditional Catholics because of the similarities to evangelical practices.

The Catholic Church in Bolivia tries to resist encroaching alternative religions. Television priests are competing with Protestant televangelists, and Catholic bookstores sell decals to display on home windows that read: "We are Catholics and are not interested in changing our religion. Please don't insist."

The Protestant Movement

Occasional Protestant missionary activity in Bolivia was conducted by **British and American Bible Society** colporteurs after the establishment of the Republic in 1825. However, the first permanent Protestant activity was initiated in 1895 by the **Christian Brethren** (the open communion branch of the **Plymouth Brethren** movement), the Canadian Baptists arrived in 1898 and the American Methodists in 1901. Early mission work by the latter two missions centered on the building of schools and membership growth was relatively slow. However, these missions developed into the **Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia** and the **Bolivian Baptist Union**, two of the more prominent Protestant bodies.

Through the twentieth century a wide spectrum of Protestant mission agencies and denominations arrived, primarily from the USA. The nondenominational **Bolivian Indian Mission** (now called the Andes Evangelical Mission) opened work among the Quechuas in 1907. It was joined in 1937 by the **Evangelical Union of South America**. Together they collaborated in producing a Quechua New Testament and finally merged their work in 1957 as the **Evangelical Christian Union**, the third-largest Protestant denomination in the country.

The **Seventh-day Adventist Church** opened its now extensive work among the Aymara people in 1907. A people movement occurred among the Aymara around Lake

Titicaca between 1915 and 1934 that greatly increased Adventist adherents. After World War II, the Adventists responded to a call from the Aymara to build schools (heavily subsidized by foreign funds) among them, and that action led to a mass movement into the church as well.

**ESTIMATED MEMBERSHIP FOR LARGEST
PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS IN BOLIVIA, 1960-2000
(Sorted by estimated membership in 2000)**

DENOMINATIONAL NAME	1960 MEMBERS(1)	1967 MEMBERS(2)	1990 MEMBERS(3)	2000 MEMBERS(4)
Assemblies of God	800	1,431	15,000	43,100
Seventh-day Adventist Church	5,815	15,143	25,000	38,000
Evangelical Christian Union	2,166	7,000	10,000	32,100
Friends National Evangelical Church (Oregon Yearly Meeting of Friends)	2,062	4,700	5,500	16,800
Friends Holiness Bolivian Mission (Holiness Friends Mission)	400	800	1,750	14,200
Bolivian Baptist Union (Canadian)	1,200	2,475	8,500	13,000
Church of the Nazarene	856	1,398	4,000	12,100
Evangelical Methodist Church	1,400	3,680	5,000	11,500
Bolivian Evangelical Church of God (Anderson, IN)	250	1,500	3,750	9,350
Mennonite Church	150	1,700	3,500	7,970
Christian Brethren (Plymouth Brethren)	60	1,200	3,300	7,070
Evangelical Lutheran Church	250	1,500	3,000	6,560
Bolivian Holiness Church (Methodist)	100	950	2,000	5,670

SOURCES:

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- (2) William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso and Harmon A. Johnson. *Latin American Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1969; plus estimates by PROLADES.
- (3) Lausanne Bolivia Country Committee. *Bolivia: A People Prepared*. La Paz, Bolivia: Lausanne Bolivia Country Committee, 1989; plus estimates by PROLADES.
- (4) Brierly, Peter. *World Churches Handbook*. London: Christian Research, 1997.

The Peniel Missionary Society (an independent Holiness body that merged with World Gospel Mission in 1949) arrived in 1911; the **Salvation Army** and the **Oregon Yearly Meeting of Friends** in 1920; the **South American Missionary Society** (Anglican) in 1922; Lutherans from the independent **World Mission and Prayer League** established a mission among the Aymara people in 1939, which has grown into the **Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church**; the **Church of God (Anderson, IN)** arrived in 1944, and the **Church of God (Holiness)** and **Church of the Nazarene** in 1945. Several nondenominational mission agencies began work during the 1930s-1940s: **New Tribes Mission** in 1934, **Gospel Missionary Union** in 1937, and the **World Gospel Mission** in 1943.

Mennonite settlement in Bolivia began in 1954 when 12 families from Paraguay relocated near Santa Cruz. During the following years German and Russian-heritage Mennonite settlers arrived from Canada, Mexico, Belize and elsewhere. All Mennonite settlements in Bolivia are located in the Santa Cruz region of the eastern lowlands where the new settlers established self-sustained farming communities out of the thick forest, thereby helping to create a new agricultural frontier. Most Mennonites came to Bolivia with more

experience in colonizing than in similar ventures elsewhere. Rainfall and temperature are especially favorable for soya bean, corn and wheat, and Mennonite farms produce a large percentage of Bolivia's cheese. Today multinational companies rely on their soybean and sunflower harvests to produce cooking oils and animal feed. These exports have transformed Bolivia's 40,000 Mennonites into a bloc of relatively prosperous landowners who mainly reside in 42 agricultural colonies.

Pentecostalism, though not as prominent in Bolivia as in some neighboring countries, is represented by mission agencies from most of the more notable USA denominations, including the **International Church of the Foursquare Gospel** that arrived in 1928, the **Assemblies of God** in 1946, the **Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)** in 1960, and the **United Pentecostal Church** in 1974. Also, Pentecostals from Sweden, Norway, Trinidad, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Brazil have initiated work in Bolivia since the 1920s. In addition, non-Pentecostal evangelical groups from Switzerland and Latvia have also begun missionary work in Bolivia. In turn, these diverse denominations have become the seedbed for scores of Bolivian-based national church bodies.

In 1960, twenty-seven Protestant missions and denominations reported 34,219 adherents in Bolivia. Along with church planting and leadership training they carried on various social programs, especially in health and education. Today, more than 130 Protestant denominations are reported to exist in Bolivia.

The **National Association of Evangelicals of Bolivia (ANDEB)** was founded in 1966 with 28 institutional members, but has since experienced a division between groups that were more ecumenically-oriented and associated with the **World Council of Churches (WCC)** and the more conservative evangelical groups. Today, the latter dominate ANDEB (membership includes 83 evangelical denominations and service agencies), which is associated with the **World Evangelical Alliance**. Four small Protestant denominations are affiliated with the WCC-related **Latin American Council of Churches** (known as CLAI): the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the German-Speaking Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia, and the Methodist Pentecostal Church of Bolivia.

Other Religions

Non-Protestant marginal Christian groups include: the God is Love Church, Growing in Grace International Ministries, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now called the "Community of Christ"), Israelite Mission of the New Universal Covenant, Light of the World Church, Unity School of Christianity, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Voice of the Cornerstone, etc.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, Utah – Mormons), which claimed a national membership of 158,427 with 245 congregations for 2007, have established their presence throughout the country and have a particularly large following in Cochabamba, where their temple is one of the largest Mormon temples in the world. By contrast, the **Jehovah's Witnesses** only reported 17,843 "peak witnesses" and 208 congregations for 2005.

The first **Jewish** residents settled in La Paz about 1905. The very small community grew measurably in the 1920s with the addition of Russian immigrants and, after 1935, German refugees. Today, there are some 640 Jewish residents, the majority of whom still reside in La Paz. *Círculo Israelita* is the national representative Jewish organization.

A wide variety of non-Christian religions have come to Bolivia since World War II, including **Shinto**, **Mahikari** and Mahayana **Buddhism** brought by Japanese immigrants who found work in the rubber and mining industries. The **Baha'i Faith**, first incorporated in

Bolivia in 1947, now has nine local spiritual assemblies nationwide. **Afro-Brazilian spiritism** (Umbanda and Condoblé centers) also are present. Other small religions include **Hinduism, Islam, Ancient Wisdom** and **Spiritualist-Psychic-New Age** groups (50 esoteric groups are listed in the official government registry, 1970-2000).

Because of the Catholic Church's weak presence in rural areas, the vast majority of Amerindians have developed their own brand of **folk-Catholicism**, which is far removed from orthodox Christianity. Indigenous rituals and fragments of Roman Catholic worship were interwoven in the elaborate seasonal fiestas that are the focus of village social life.

The contemporary cosmology of the Amerindians (approximately 35 ethnolinguistical groups) is a mixture of Catholic and preconquest animistic religion. A deity identified as the virginal daughter of the Inca sun god was incorporated into Catholic ritual as the Virgin Mary. Many of the supernatural forces are linked to a specific place, such as a lake, waterfall, river or mountain. The earth mother, Pachamama, and fertility rituals play a prominent role as does Ekeko, a traditional indigenous god of luck, harvests and general abundance, whose festival is celebrated widely on January 24. The Aymara New Year, the *machakmara*, is celebrated with music and offerings by crowds of people who ritually await the first rays of the sun on the morning of the winter solstice in the southern hemisphere. Some Amerindian leaders have sought to discard all forms of Christianity; however, this effort has not yet led to a significant increase in the number of "indigenous-belief only" adherents.

There are numerous holy places (shrines and sanctuaries) in Bolivia honoring Catholic saints and Amerindian deities (or a mixture of both), including: the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Candelaria in Copacabana, next to Lake Titicaca, contains a statue of the Virgin Mary (called the "Black Madonna") allegedly carved by an Inca craftsman in 1576, which is believed to work miracles and is the most important pilgrimage destination in Bolivia between February 2-5 and during Holy Week; and the festival of the Virgin Mary of Urkupiña in Quillacollo, also in the department of Cochabamba, is celebrated from August 14-16, which draws together pilgrims from all over Bolivia and the neighboring countries. One of the most popular annual folk festivals in the country is the "Carnaval de Oruro," celebrated in Oruro, the folklore capital of Bolivia. This carnival, which lasts for 10 days each year before Lent, marks the *Ito* festival for the *Uru* people, whose ceremonies stem from preconquest Andean customs. The ancient Amerindian invocations are centered on *Pachamama* (Mother Earth, transformed into the Virgin Mary via Christian syncretism) and *Tio Supay* (Uncle God of the Mountains, transformed into the Christian Devil, hence the famous masked "devil-dances"). Christian icons are used to conceal portrayals of Andean gods, and the Christian saints represent other Andean minor divinities. The festival features music, dance and crafts; and it is highlighted by a ceremonial parade lasting 20 hours and covering four kilometers, and involving 20,000 dancers and 10,000 musicians.

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