

GROWING, HEALING, KNOWING, AND SHARING: THE COMMUNITY MUSEUM OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE OF HUANCOLLO, BOLIVIA EXHIBITION REVIEW

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The community museum of traditional medicine is in the centre of Huancollo, in the Bolivian Altiplano. The building, a repurposed single large room made of adobe (fig. 1), is next to both the Andin Spa, a health facility for traditional Indigenous remedies, and the community's meeting building. As an ayllu originario, Huancollo holds a status unique for Indigenous communities(1) in Bolivia, meaning that the community, though dependent on Tiwanaku municipality, practices a form of Aymara government based on rules, procedures and collective responsibilities (Ayllu Originario Huancollo, 2013). Huancollo's community museum was created through adhering to the Qhapaq Ñan(2) network of community museums.

Huancollo community museum gives us the opportunity to examine rootedness in three ways. The first are the literal roots, the plants collected and used by the comunarios, the community members, for healing. The second foundational roots are Huancollo's role resisting the erasure of ancestral knowledge and preserving it through its healers. The third are the interdependent roots through which the museum was created, that is the present-day international heritage sector, and the precolonial roads and communications that have shaped Andin cultures and ecosystems for centuries. By examining the displays in the museum, I will analyse these three roots in the context of Huancollo and its museum.

To begin, I will examine the use of medicinal plants in the museum. In the middle of the museum, a display of harvested plants floats over the visitors' heads. Inside transparent cylinders, plants have been dried and labelled with their name and use (fig. 2). Next to this installation, there is a panel shaped like a colourful wheel picturing plants and their medicinal uses (fig 3). Andin plants such as wira wira and muña are displayed next to more common ones, like garlic and peppermint. The museum focuses on the knowledge behind the uses, regardless of origin or how common the exhibited plants are. By not distinguishing in the museum narrative and objects between what would appear as 'authentic' and 'ancestral' and the 'contemporary' and 'every-day', the community shows its long history and interaction with plants and knowledge that have travelled and enrooted themselves, through trade or colonisation, in the Bolivian Andes.

To become museum objects, the plants go through a process of conservation and exhibition. Huancollo museum uses tools of display that spotlight them, inviting visitors in, while keeping at an appropriate distance. This contrasts with the second part of the visit, where one leaves the museum space to go next door, to the Andin Spa, guided by its doctor. The Andin Spa is a treatment centre, created in 2009 through the national government with international financing (Los Tiempos Digital, 2009). Officially, it is not an exhibition space, and conventionally, a museum visitor would not expect to be taken there. However, visiting it provided a different type of relation to the plants and their users (doctors and patients). Behind the counter of the Andin Spa's pharmacy (fig 4), there are multiple bags full of leaves, roots and bark. The doctor/guide takes a handful from a random bag, says what it is and answers any questions the visitors have – 'Where does it grow?', 'What is it used for?', 'Will it heal me?' This tactile action, which differs from the normative distance in museums between people and objects, enables a closer encounter between visitors and guides mediated by the healing plants. The medicinal plants become agents that assign the community as healers, custodians and transmitters of knowledge.

The fact that community guides blur the line between exhibition and healing space during visits(3) demonstrate that the theme of the community museum, traditional medicine, is rooted in Huancollo's social practices. In the museum, the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine is presented mainly through panels of treatments for illnesses (fig 5) and spiritual practices. In the centre of the room a big conical panel states the name of the Law that recognised traditional Indigenous medicine in Bolivia in 2013. While Indigenous knowledge and spirituality has been consistently repressed and erased by colonial and republican authorities into the 2000s (Loza, 2010), it has also been the subject of scientific research and acknowledged as intangible world heritage (4). However, the museum does not narrate the acts of resistance, but focuses on the institutional recognition of traditional medicine.

The traditional ancestral knowledge represented by Huancollo museum is not unique to this community. It represents Aymara communities and is held by numerous healers. The guides explain that all families held this knowledge and transmitted it throughout generations. While the goal is not to exalt the uniqueness of Huancollo as custodians of traditional knowledge, the museum displays portraits of key members of the community in this area: Victor Nina (naturopath healer accredited by the Health Ministry), Amauta Lucas Quispe (spiritual leader member of the Tiwanaku Amauta council), and Maura Nayra Quispe Limachi (a chiflera (5) who has a stall in the city of El Alto) (fig6). Aymara collective knowledge is thereby locally embodied in the museum's portraits of Huancollo community members who serve as branches, connecting local knowledge at a national level.

Finally, reframing Huancollo museum in terms of heritage-making, it has chosen to exhibit traditional medicine, that is intangible heritage, but has relied on material heritage for its creation. Huancollo intersects with two Bolivian World Heritage Sites: the spiritual and political site of Tiwanaku, and the Qhapaq Ñan Andin road system. It is through the latter, by means of the network of Qhapaq Ñan community museum, ASOREMUC-QÑ, that Huancollo's community museum opened (Paton, 2020). The proliferation of rural community museums in Bolivia in the 21st Century may correspond to the development of communities as political institutions with public services and public budgets (Klein, 2021), the expansion and consolidation of global community museum initiatives (Brown et al., 2024) and their recognition in the Bolivian Heritage Law of 2014. In Bolivia, these initiatives intend to cover heritage preservation needs as well as become tourist attractions for national and international visitors, but they struggle to recognise themselves as the former, and are not visible enough for the latter.

In Huancollo community museum, international heritage-making strategies appear in panels as fertilisers that intertwine the social practices of traditional medicine with complementary cultural heritage nutrients. The first panel displays a list of names and organisations that have made the museum possible, and the second one displays a map of South America showing the complete road system (fig7). Though Huancollo does not appear in the map, a picture labelled "Tiji Punku mountain in Huancollo" on the side may imply it represents the road within Huancollo territory. It is hard to represent a centuries- old path, whose traces are subtle or that has transformed into a modern road. It comes to life through its use by the comunarios of Huancollo and their relations with the other communities along the road, in this case, through heritage management. The historical ties of these Aymara communities are rebound through the community museum network, in training, fund-raising and the organisation of inter-community meetings (APC Bolivia, 2023)

Huancollo community museum of traditional medicine embodies a cultural heritage forest that seeks to connect the foundations of Indigenous knowledge with its visitors, mainly urban Bolivians, as myself, who seek unique, historical and alternative ways of being in the increasingly consumerist Bolivian society. It shows the potential coherence between Indigenous knowledge and present-day heritage-making strategies partnerships and national policy. Finally, through the encounter with community museum guides, it encourages visitors to cultivate more spaces to connect, collaborate and care for cultures. And it is in this spirit that Huancollo Museum of Traditional Medicine became a case study for my doctoral thesis⁶.

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Figure 1. The entrance to Huancollo community museum



Fig.2 Exhibition of medicinal plants

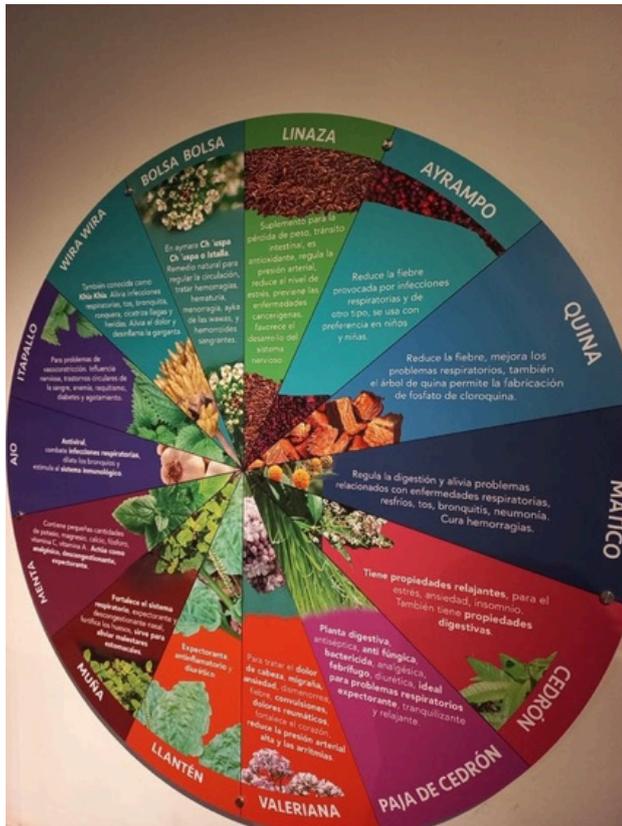


Fig. 3 Diagram of medicinal plants and uses



Fig. 4 Pharmacy inside the Andin Spa, full of medicinal plants



Fig. 5 Exhibition panel presenting ailments and treatments



Fig. 6 Panels and installation of a chifler's stall



Fig. 7 Panel displaying the map of the Andean Road System, Qhapaq Ñan

Notes

1 In 1994, the Bolivian State recognised rural Indigenous communities as Organización Territorial de Base. Through this status they receive public funds and govern themselves through their traditional practices.

2 Qhapaq Ñan, is a precolonial road system that traversed the Andes. In 2014, it was inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage list by Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador. The Bolivian route inscribed goes from Desaguadero to Viacha.

3 The author has visited the community museum four times from Nov 2023 to May 2024. Each time, the visit included the Andin Spa.

4 Andean cosmivision of the Kallawayá was inscribed in the Intangible Heritage List in 2008 (originally proclaimed in 2003).

5 A chiflera is an Aymara expert in traditional medicine, who sells traditional healing and ritual products. The thesis is ongoing and due to be submitted in October 2026. This exhibition review is based on a visit that took place in November 2023 while doing exploratory fieldwork.

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