La Paz, Bolivia - As the global climate change discourse heated up in Doha at the COP18, the lived reality of climate change was becoming more apparent in some of the world's most vulnerable ecosystems. In Bolivia, a country unfortunately well acquainted with the effects of global warming, the COP discourse is more relevant now than ever.

Villages nested in the craggy peaks of the Cordillera Apolobamba of Northern Bolivia house the centuries-old Kallawaya healing tradition. A few weeks ago, I was conducting field research in the Apolobamba region of Northern Bolivia, walking from village to village and discussing agriculture and climate change with locals.

When asked about why he thought the river next to his village was dry, Rámon Alvarez, a traditional Kallawaya healer, teacher, and elder, lamented that the river was only an omen for what was to come. For the past few years, the potatoes were being harvested earlier. They looked the same, tasted the same, but Alvarez could feel in his body that he was dying. His bones told him that he would not live as long as his father because the weather is warmer, the river is dryer.

In addition to hearing story after story about how climate change is taking its toll on the region, it was hard to ignore the crumbling abandoned homes and wasted gardens that dot the

landscape. As global warming becomes more of a reality in the region, the art of Kallawaya healing – one of Bolivia's oldest indigenous heritages – may be in danger of disappearing.

Inscribed by UNESCO as Representatives of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, Kallawaya healers trace their origins to the pre-Inca period.[1] Because of their intensive knowledge of animal, mineral, and botanical resources across the High Andes, the Kallawaya healers were the chosen healers of the Incan empire and accrued international fame for their unparalleled malaria remedies given to workers digging the Panama Canal. They rely upon complex ecological knowledge of the High Andes and the surrounding ecosystems to create elaborate healing ceremonies across many South American countries.

The Kallawaya cosmovision is based upon thousands of years of experiential knowledge about their environment and shared among many other communities across the High Andes. [2] At the center of the cosmovision is the notion that humanity must live in harmony with the environment. Illness is the result of a spiritual dissonance caused by some sort disconnect between a person and his or her environment. One of the main tenets of the Kallawaya cosmovision is an ethic of reciprocity that is applied equally to people, communities, and the environment. In order to heal a person, the Kallawaya medicine man utilizes various medicines to restore spiritual equilibrium to the person as well as environment, ensuring a healthy balance between the two.

Despite the Bautista Saavedra area being in one of Bolivia's poorest provinces, the home of the Kallawayas hosts a unique ecosystem situated between the peaks of the Cordillera Apolobamba and the semi-tropical climate of the Yungas. This unique confluence of ecosystems is why the Kallawayas call this region home. At the center of the Kallawaya pantheon lays *Pachamama*, Mother Earth or World (depending on the translation). However, the distinctive geography of the *Cordillera Apolobamba* plays an important role in the Kallawaya tradition.

The mountains are thought to house spirits that protect those living near the mountains from misfortune. The communities in the *Cordillera Apolobamba* are often nested precariously on the sides of the mountains, depending mostly on terrace-style agriculture for sustenance.

As the world gets warmer, mountain ecosystems are the first to feel the impact. Many of Bolivia's rapidly melting tropical glaciers are located in this region. Because of the Kallawaya healers see people as inherently linked to the land, the rapid disappearance of the glaciers – once permanent fixtures – have a symbolic as well as physical impact on the communities living below them.

The communities in the region are usually divided into three altitudes, each one growing certain crops. While the communities depend on these agricultural zones for food, they also symbolize representations of body. The low, central, and high levels are analogous to the legs, trunk, and head of the human body. This metaphor regulates daily life in the communities and also highlights the intrinsic relationship between the land and the communities that live there.

Although the Kallawaya healers are known as traveling healers, visiting places as far as Panama, the villages around the *Cordillera Apolobamba* are their home. After traveling it is important for them to return to this region in order to maintain the farms that make up the three levels of the human/cosmic body.

For Kallawaya healers, people who depend on agriculture for not only physical sustenance but also for spiritual sustenance, climate change is especially detrimental. The dry season is longer and dryer, interrupting the now shorter wet season. This climate fluctuation is unprecedented in the thousand-year experiential legacy of the Kallawaya tradition. Because the crops are changing and the seasons are unpredictable, the art of healing is undergoing change.

As a result of the crops changing (in addition to the general urbanization of Bolivia) many children are leaving the villages to work in the cities, leaving the thousand-year-old mountain terraces to the trace the landscape from the river valley to the unbelievably high peaks of the High Andes barren and wasted.

Keeping in mind the Kallawaya comsovision, the decline of the environment is directly linked to the physical and spiritual well-being of the communities that live there.

At the UN General Assembly 67th Session (September 2012), Morales made several promising statements in regard to the infamous last day of the Mayan calendar – December 21, 2012. [3] He announced that on that day the world of *Macha* (selfishness) will end, and the day of *Pach a*
(brotherood) will begin. On that day, he will be host a special international meeting on the sacred
Isla del Sol
that will address various issues including the climate crisis with regards to the relationships between humans and nature, awareness of Mother Earth, and the recovery of ancestral customs among other topics.

However, as evidenced by ever-worsening TIPNIS conflict and the countrywide protests concerning natural resources after nationalization, the popularity and effectiveness of the Morales government seems to be in question.[4]

Despite having gained international recognition because of the pro-indigenous, pro-Mother Earth Morales government, Bolivia still remains a land of contrasts. Still considered the poorest nation in South America, Bolivia's historically oppressed indigenous rural population remains at the bottom rung of Bolivia's social ladder. Now, these issues of race and class are being exacerbated by the growing threat of climate change. The intermingling of these issues, if not taken more seriously, may spell out the end of one of Bolivia's oldest and most renowned indigenous traditions.

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Notes:

1 - http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00048

2 - http://www.theglobalist.com/storyid.aspx?StoryId=7730

3 - http://webtv.un.org/search/bolivia-general-debate-67th-session/1863127442001?term=Bolivia

4 - http://upsidedownworld.org/main/international-archives-60/3974-latin-americas-left-turn-collides-with-indigenous-movements