

5. Wisdom Networks

We are what we eat

From mid 2010 until the end of 2011 the community-based groups deepened their understanding of food sovereignty and affirmed it as a fundamental right. In other words, to produce and to know what is eaten, to continue to be people of the soil, living near the lake and the high mountains. In their action-reflection-action gatherings there was a growing feeling among them that eating potato, *olluco*, *mashua*, oca, quinoa, maize, alpaca meat, lake fish, drinking pure water from the springs, collecting seasonal food, and using rock salt substantially supports their cultural identities, their very lifestyles as Quechua, and Aymara.

They felt different from those whose eating habits rely on manufactured products, who dislike potatoes – or if they consume them, prefer high-yielding varieties that grow on big farms in the flat lowlands. Instead, the Quechua and Aymara were proud of consuming the food varieties they produced themselves in small plots on the Andean slopes. They recognised that the quality of food is in their hands, through maintaining local seeds and practising agriculture by calling upon the spirit of Mother Earth who protects and nourishes humans.

It was an invigorating year of deeper exploration into their own knowledge. This process was in contrast with the official stigmatising of the Andean peasant-farmers as poor, hungry, ignorant folk whose food and agricultural systems are deficient. Men and women of the wisdom networks gave birth to ideas which empowered them since they were able to recognise themselves in these mental constructs deeply ingrained in their natural environment. They discovered and shared their particular views, personal meanings and reflected how they had acquired these ideas and wondered why there was so little social resonance. They were determined to do justice to their knowledge on their own initiative.



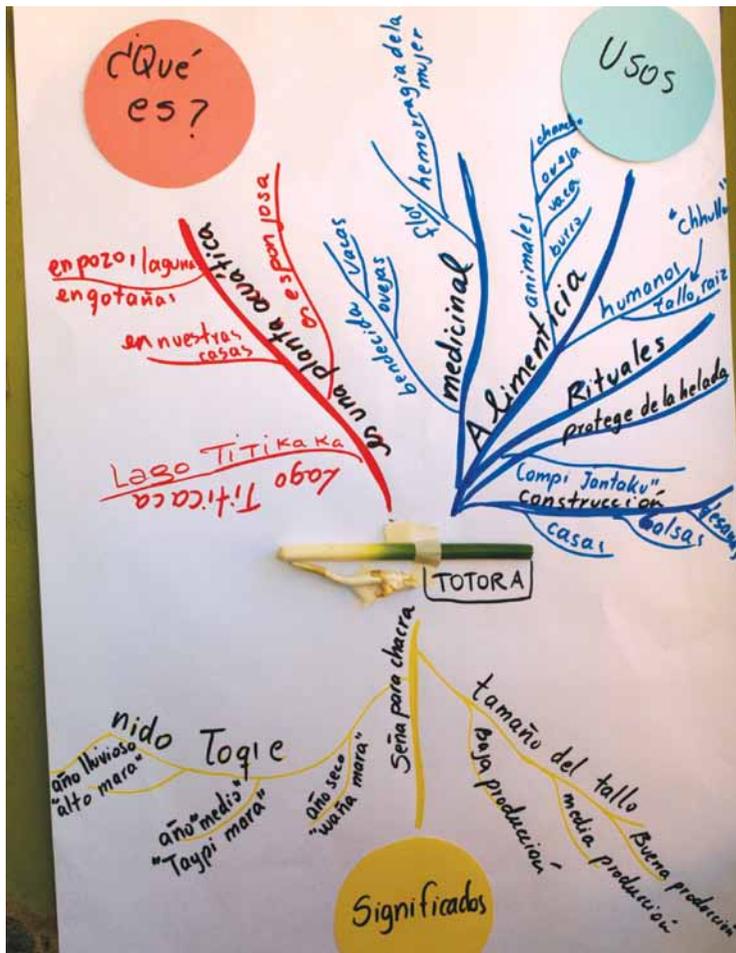
This awareness motivated the wise men and women to concentrate on topics with vital relevance to exercising their right to food sovereignty. They engaged in a dialogue first with scientists, aiming to construct and find a new balance to democratise knowledge. Thinking in terms of an ongoing dialogue was an innovative way of entering into a long-term interaction with scientists on the basis of mutual respect. In this relationship, the Andean farmers would act as knowers who would generate an imaginative repertoire of research and action agendas regarding the production and consumption of food that would guarantee the dignity of eating excellent produce. Gaining the friendship of scientists by developing commonalities would be a first step in a long journey that requires common interests, effort and emotions in defence of healthy sovereign food. Such dialogues were to be a peaceful method to shift from the unilinear development of industrial food systems to a plurality of ways of understanding and farming, doing justice to knowledge systems that nurture different lifestyles.



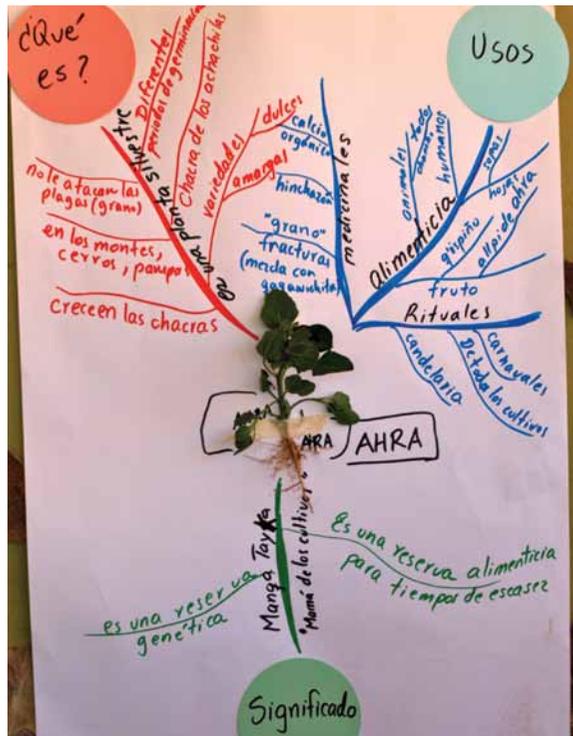
Food is more than just food

The Andean concept of food reveals an intellectual-spiritual construct interwoven with an emotional sensibility. What follows are some examples of these personal ways of understanding food in the wisdom networks.

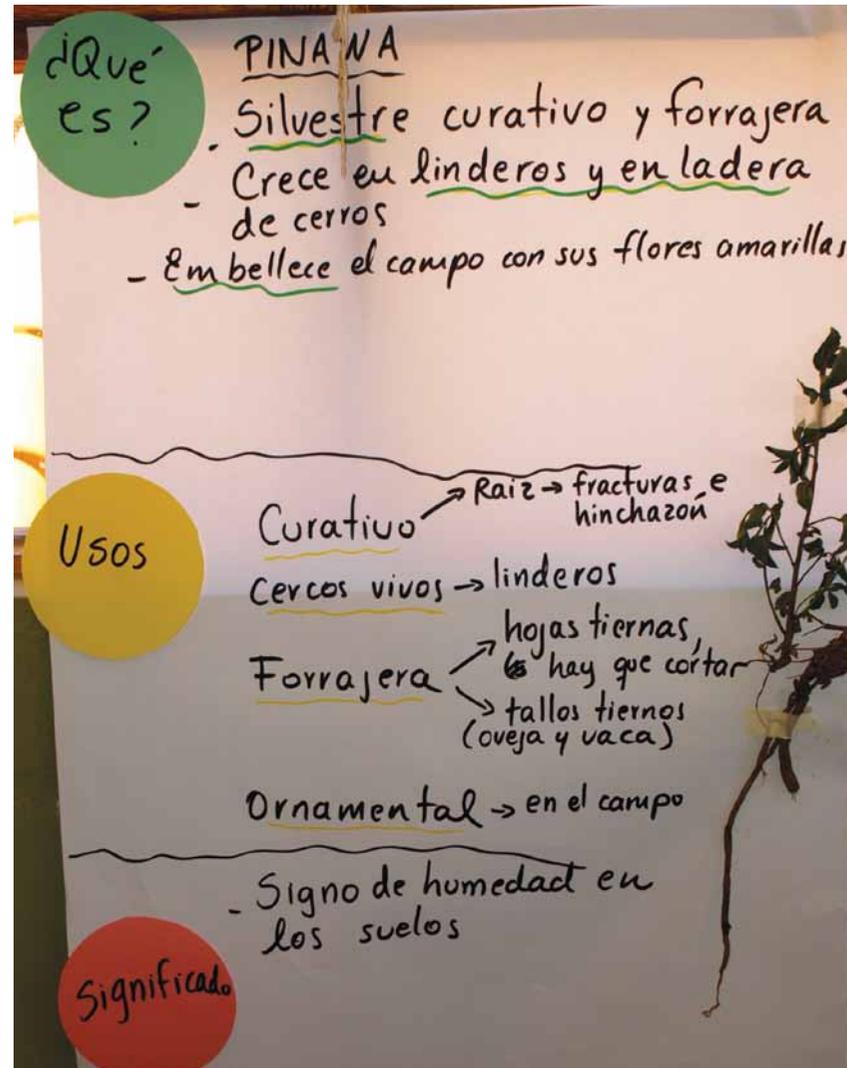
Don Rufino, for instance, refers to totora, cattail, an aquatic plant that grows along the borders of Lake Titicaca, sometimes near wells or surrounding small natural ponds. It can be eaten as a vegetable and is also used to stop haemorrhaging in animals and women. It is equally useful for thatching roofs, making bags and building rafts. Cattail protects against frost and is always present in each ritual.



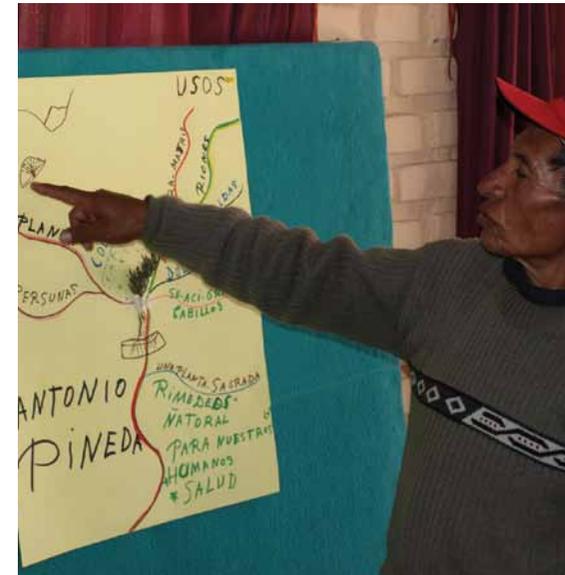
Pancho and Elizabeth present *Ara*, the wild quinoa variety, greyish, solitary, powerful and sacred. *Pacos* and *Yatiris* – Andean spiritual guides – venerate it and put it on the ritual table.



Grimanesa concentrates on *Pinana*, a wild plant that is found on the borders of fields. Its roots are used to mend fractures and soothe swellings. Animals eat it and its yellow colour embellishes the landscape and tells us that the soil holds moisture.



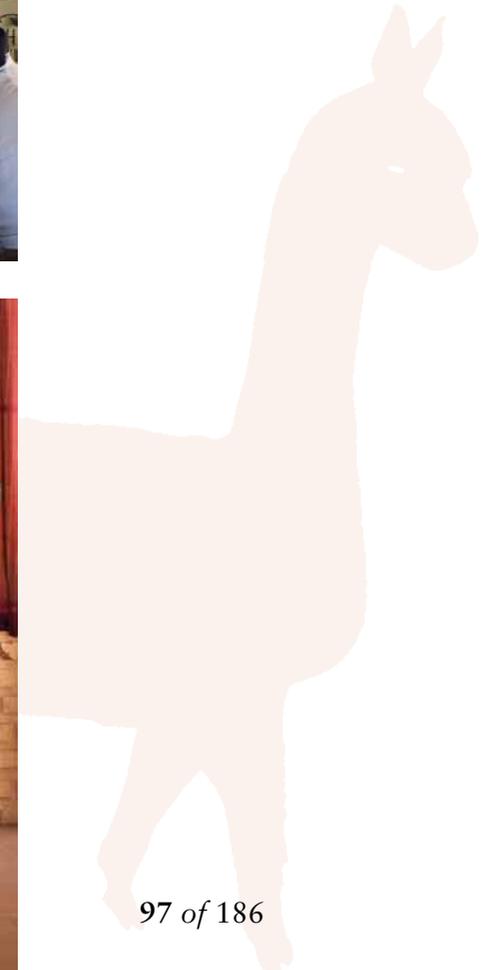
Don Antonio collected horsetail, which he recommends as medicine for pregnant women and to cure kidney stones. When he collects the herbal medicine he talks to the plant and treats it like a person, only then can it cure.



Basilía draws *Siwyrú*, a plant that grows between the rocks in the high plateaus. If one suffers from the evil eye or from perspiration, one takes a bath or drinks an infusion of *Siwyrú*. It is medicinal and associated with health.



Finally, Gerber presents *Illa*, which is any stone you feel attracted to, no matter where it is, near the lake or by the fields. It is considered sacred, especially during the sowing and harvest rituals and animal ceremonies. Holding an *Illa* nurtures you, makes you feel stronger, encourages the seeds and the animals since an *Illa* contains the pulse of this earth.



Food is our companion

“Food accompanies us throughout all phases of life, before we are born and after death. Pregnant women and newborns enjoy special diets. There are some food taboos and from early childhood we prefer to eat food that is natural, that makes us stronger and healthier. Mother Earth also eats, these are special moments of the agricultural year.” (Basilia)

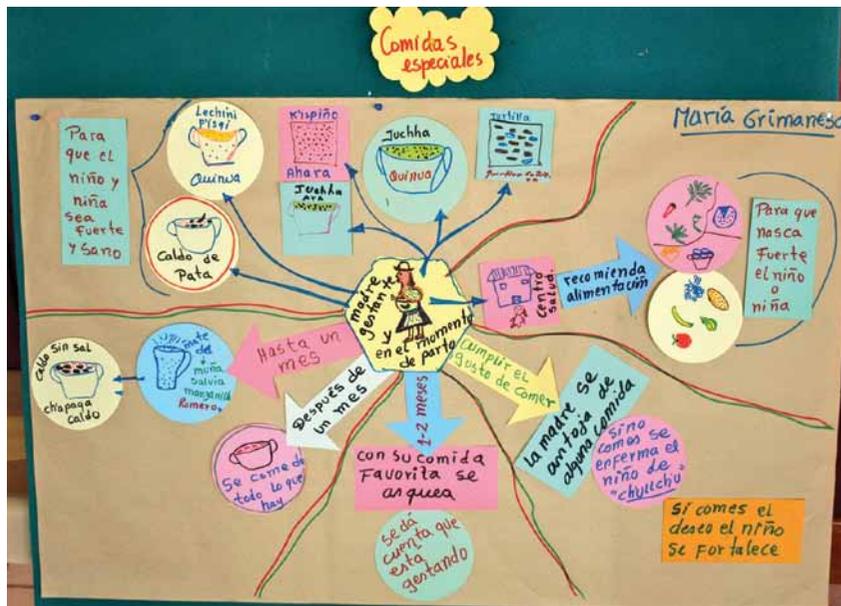
“Food preferences are acquired before birth. Mothers eat what comes from the fields, the high plains, near the wells, lake shore; they prepare good soups with foraged herbs and the unborn begin to like them. Children at the age of three months eat everything that the adults produce and collect.” (Florentino)



Yerbas del Campo

que	Para que	Daparo	Ara	Kifa Colloco	Kafa	Jancaya	Layo	Siqui	Huñia	cabra
Para que comemos que	Consumo humano									
Florentino Lydia	Medicina									
	Comida para Animales									
	Ceremonia Rituales									
	Fresco	Fresco		Fresco		Fresco	Fresco	Fresco		
	Caliente			Caliente						Caliente

“Pregnant women get special food from the first moment they begin to reject their favourite food. That is the evidence of pregnancy. After two months they are longing for certain foods; it is the baby, who wants to be healthy and strong. The health centre recommends fruits, vegetables and cheese, but pregnant women prefer soups, p’isqi and jucha made of quinua, quispiños made of wild quinua, and cañihua pancakes. Upon delivery, and a month after birth, the new mother should take soups without salt and drink herbal teas, mint, rosemary and sage.” (Grimanesa)



“The climax of the agricultural cycle coincides with Carnival. Those days we feed the plants, with dances, music and prayer to the Apus” . (Basilia)



“When somebody in the community dies, food continues accompanying the person on his or her transition to the new life. On November 2 the family cooks the departed one’s favourite foods and takes it to the cemetery. There, dead and alive enjoy a good feast.” (Juan Vilca)

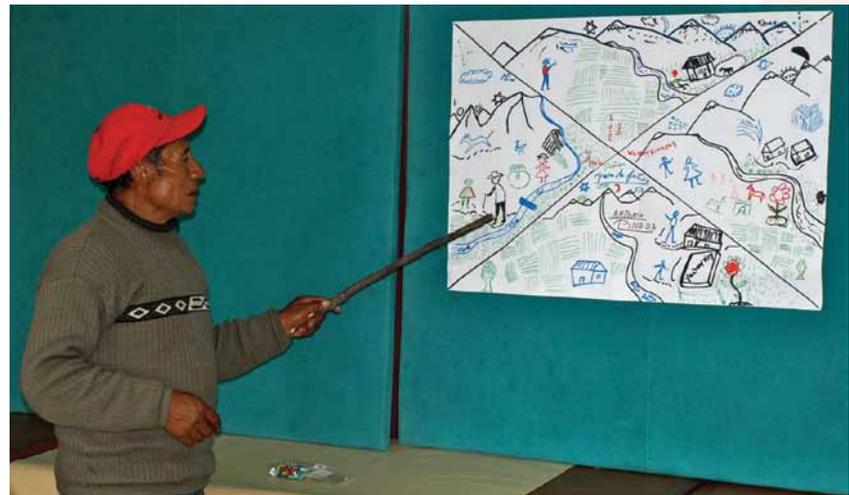


We know what we eat

“My dearest *chuño* is announced in the sky, when the stars and moon are shiny and the temperature of the air is telling me that frost is coming. It is time to harvest the bitter potato ... but (only if) they have confirmed that they are ready or if they need to grow more.” (Basilía)



“What I know about working in the fields is because I understand the language of the *Apus* and the rivers; they speak to me constantly, that I have learned from my father.” (Don Antonio)



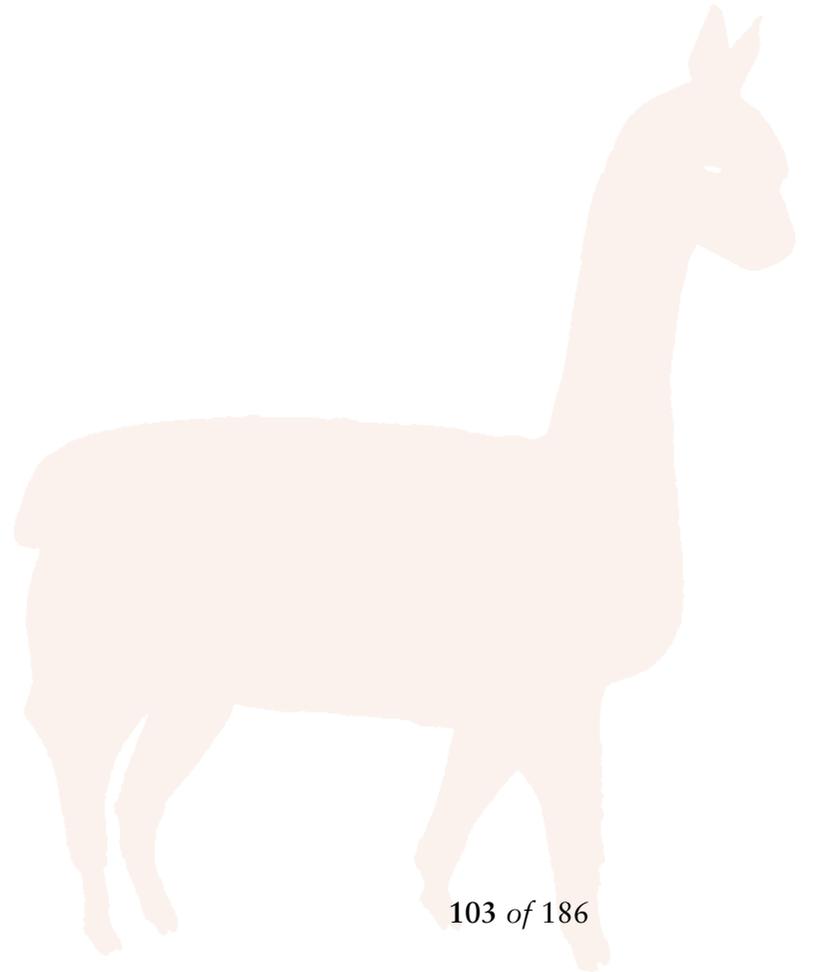
Vital knowledge for the dialogue

Wise men and women recognised themselves as an epistemological community due to sharing ways of understanding, producing and consuming food. Further elaboration of their own knowledge made them realise that their way of thinking was very different from that of the scientists, technicians, agronomists and nutritionists. The awareness of differences was focused on the following research topics, which preceded the dialogue:

- The colours of and natural treatment of alpacas
- The diversity of 'sweet' potatoes
- Re-populating Lake Titicaca with native fish
- The agro-pastoral life
- Maize is sometimes a person, mother, daughter or daughter-in-law.

The wisdom networks tackled these topics, which enabled them to generate a body of knowledge that supported their interactions with the scientists. It was a long and sinuous path stimulated by hope for a democratic opening.



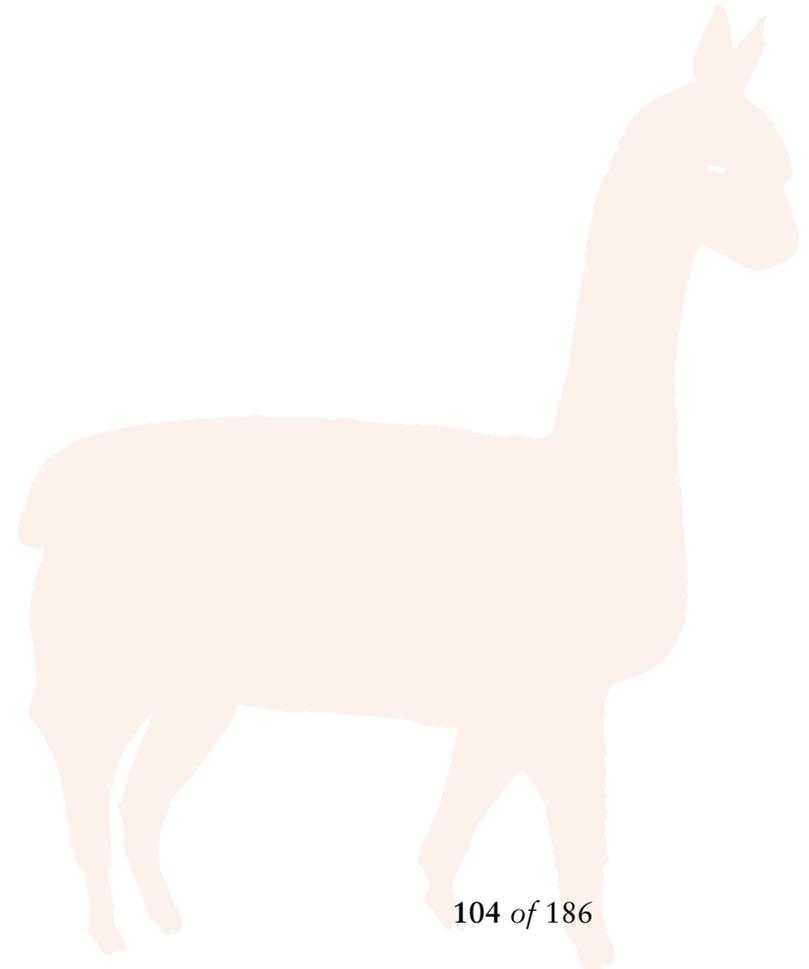


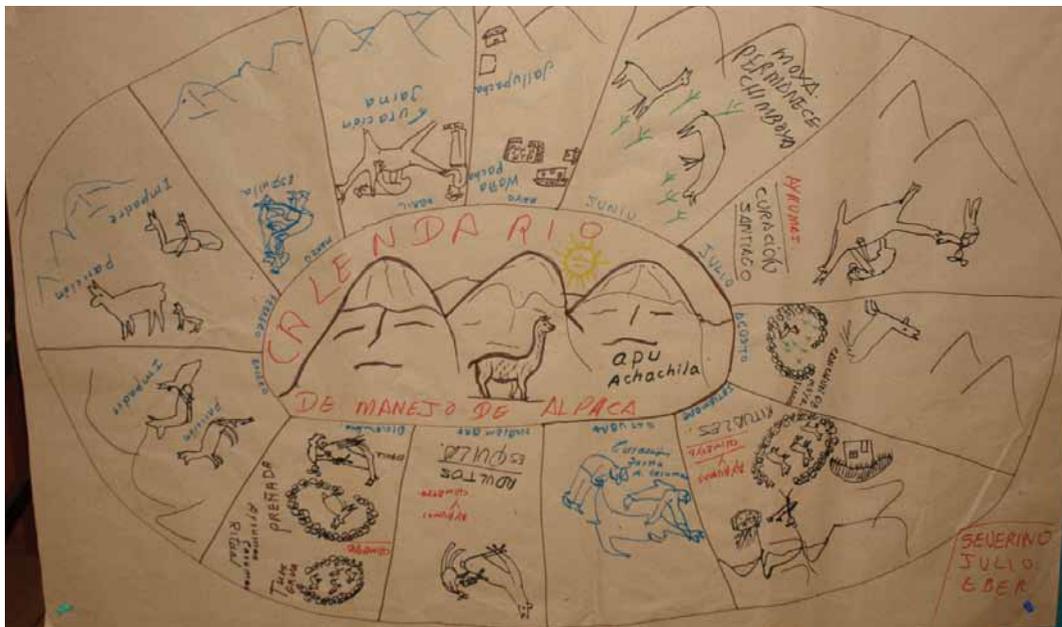
The colour and natural treatment of alpacas

The whitening of alpaca herds has been taking place for more than three decades, pushed by the big wool industry. White wool earns higher prices in the market since it is more suitable for uniform dyeing processes and large-scale manufacturing.

While white alpaca fetch a higher price in the market, they are also highly vulnerable to disease. They are not adapted to the high altitudes, are genetically weaker, and their abortion rate is higher. Scientific breeding methods do not fit with traditional alpaca raising practices. When white alpacas get sick, the herders' natural medicine is unable to heal them (neither can veterinary treatment at times). Meanwhile, Peruvian gastronomy has discovered alpaca meat and it is offered in menus of fancy city restaurants. This has created demand for large-scale alpaca meat production.

All these challenges shake the epistemological basis of traditional alpaca husbandry. The wise men and women from Ayrumas Carumas, living in the watershed of the Rio Blanco in a wide and endless mountainous landscape, the perfect environment for flocks of alpacas and llamas, decided to stand up for what they knew. First, the varied colours of alpaca wool have a sacred dimension since they emanate from deep underground water sources. Second, breeding alpaca is not a simple technological matter, but requires the knowledgeable management of a highly complex combination of natural and ceremonial factors. In order to talk to scientists, the Andean alpaca breeders want to organise what they know, hoping to arrive at an understanding to develop natural methods of healing and breeding so that alpaca meat does not lose its flavour and nutritiousness, which derives from clean pasturelands and pure mountain air.



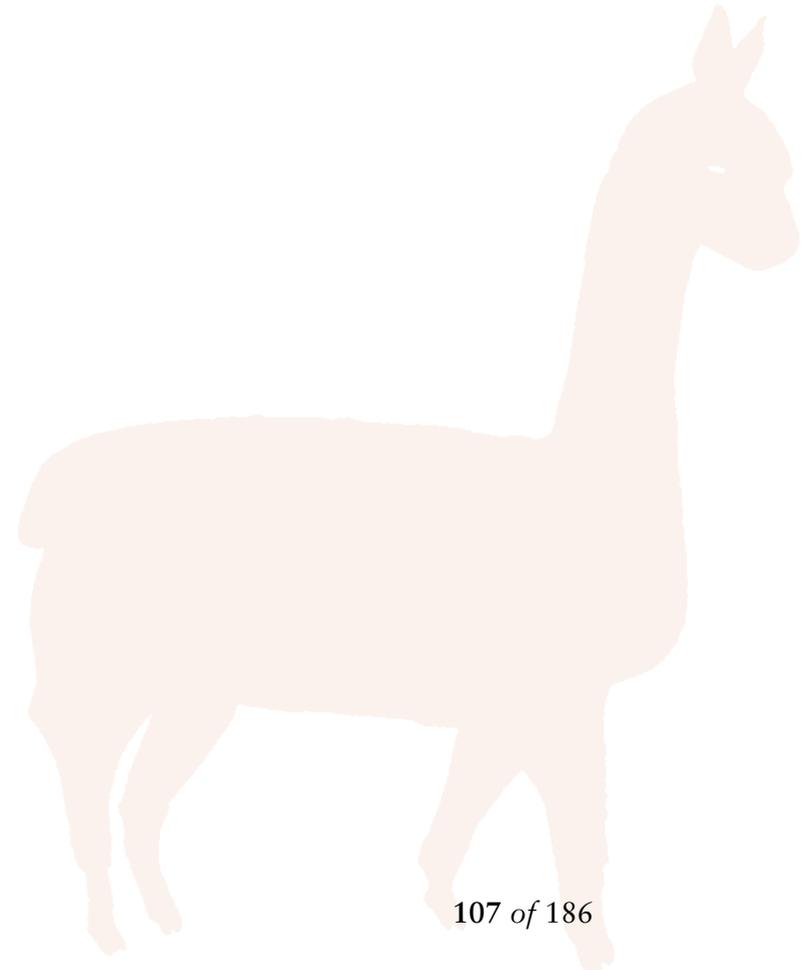


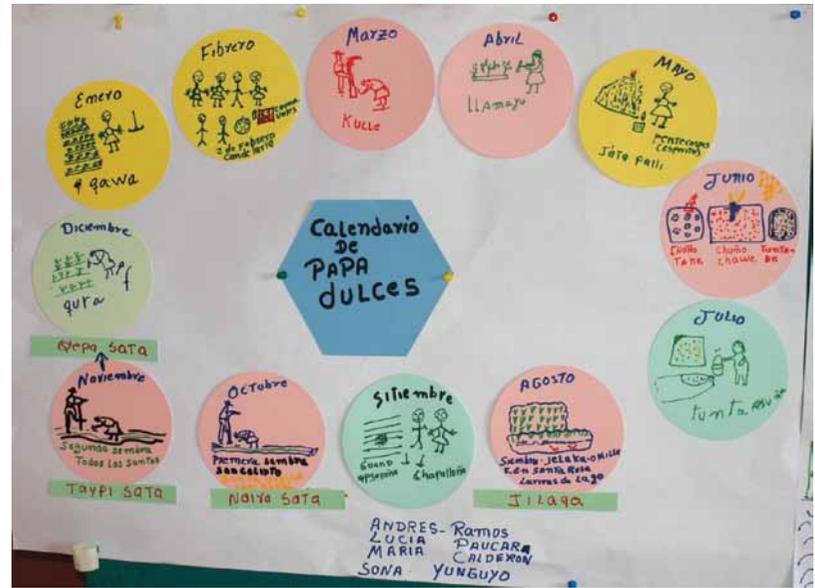
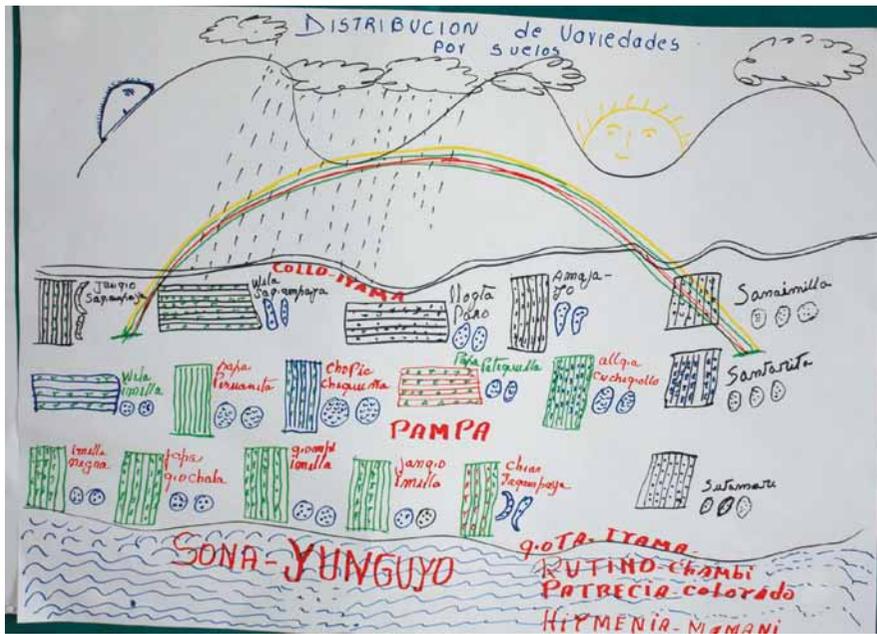


The diversity of potatoes

Since the 1950s, the Peruvian national extension service and the International Potato Centre (CIP) have been collecting genetic material from peasant communities to improve potato varieties. High-yielding potatoes are part of the National Agrarian Policy to promote market-oriented products for mass consumption and go along with the requirements of industrial agricultural technology. This policy is causing an alarming reduction of Altiplano agrobiodiversity as well as the contamination of soils and the human food chain due to the extensive use of agrochemicals.

The lacustrine area of Yunguyo, where the wise men and women come from, is the cradle of potato domestication. Modernisation has not convinced the people from this area to stop valuing diversity. They cherish the more than sixty varieties of potatoes they farm, a heritage that is constantly augmented through the exchange of seeds, most of all because the potato diversity is the matrix of a rich Andean culinary repertoire.



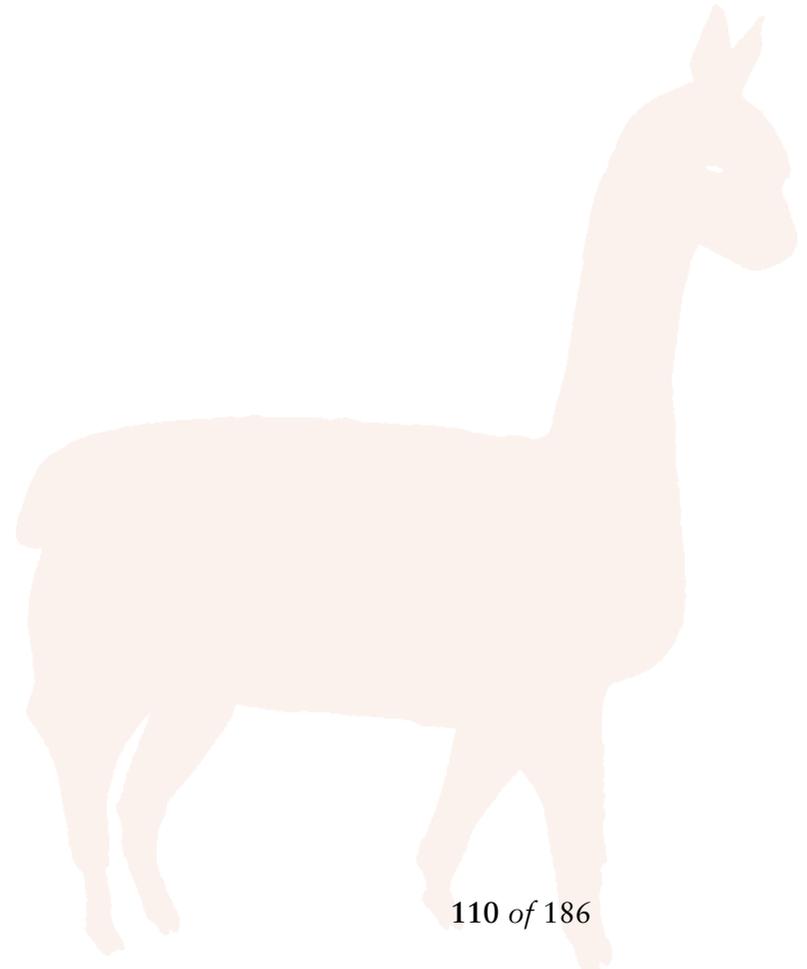


Repopulating Lake Titicaca with native fish

In the 1930s, a severe drought affected the southern Altiplano region. The level of water in the lake sank 5 m within a period of ten years. The livelihood of the lakeshore communities, agriculture and fishery, recovered with great difficulty. There is a memory of famine, of having to eat the last layers of stored potatoes. At the same time international specialists introduced foreign fish species in agreement with the governments of Bolivia and Peru. This was the initial stage of expanding the commercial fishery that has overwhelmed small-scale indigenous fishing culture and knowledge.

Since the introduction of trout and other big fish, endemic species like *qarachi*, *suchi*, *mauri*, *ispi*, *umuntu*, *punku*, *qhesu* have had very little chance of survival. As the wise men and women say, the community's fish authorities were replaced by government officials; their charismatic leaders, the *yatiris* and *paqos*, have embraced mercantile logic and do not respect the closed fishing seasons, and celebrate rituals at any time of the year more as an income-generating activity than to ask for permission to fish. Another concern is the pollution of the lake.

The network's elders want to share ideas with the fish scientists, to prevent a repeat of the crisis of the thirties. They foresee that a dialogue could be the basis of a sound natural approach to dealing with fish resources in the Lake and as a complement to small-scale agriculture. The natural reproductive cycles of endemic fish species as identified by tradition – *Pukaras* (spawning grounds) located in the deep lake waters could be a point of departure.



Agropastoral life

Zones located higher than 4,000 metres above sea level are normally perceived as extreme areas for human habitation: diurnal temperature changes can be as large as 30° C. One day in the Andes can be a sequence of the four seasons in other parts of the world. In such high altitude pastures there are special types of vegetation given the generic name of *ichu* and the trees are very small. The agricultural landscape consists basically of fields of potato varieties that the market has not yet discovered. From the point of view of infrastructure, the higher zones of the Carabaya region seem untouched due to their inaccessibility.

The communities of Aymaña and Chimboya are located at the foot of several snow-capped mountains. Climatic variations allow for the growing of a great diversity of Andean tubers and fruits; they also enable the long-term storage of food, such as *chuño*, used in a variety of Andean dishes for daily consumption. People from Ayumas Carumas also have hardy alpacas and llamas, which provide them with wool, meat and much else. Llamas transport all the excess produce from the altiplano to the lower zones once a year.

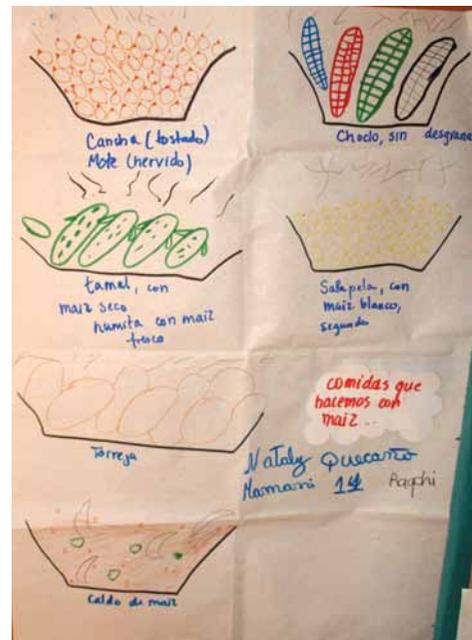
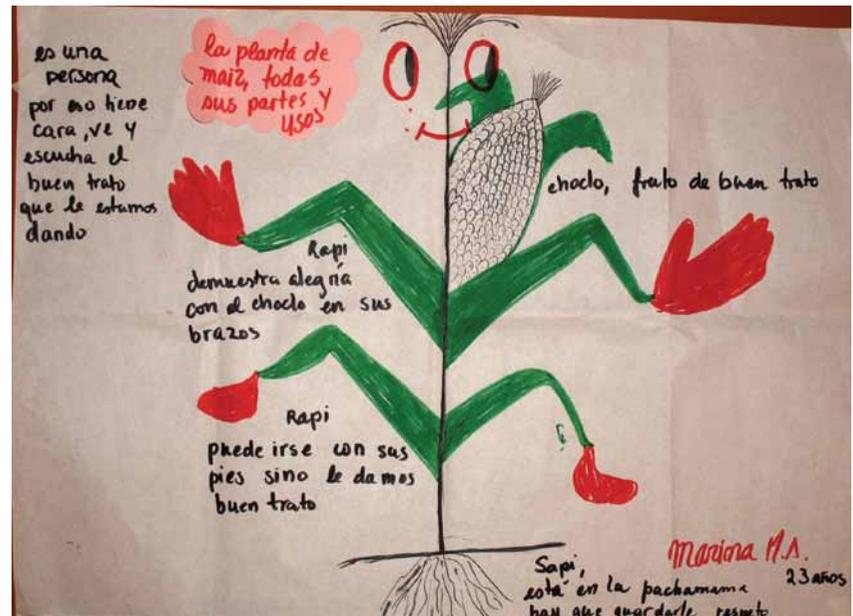
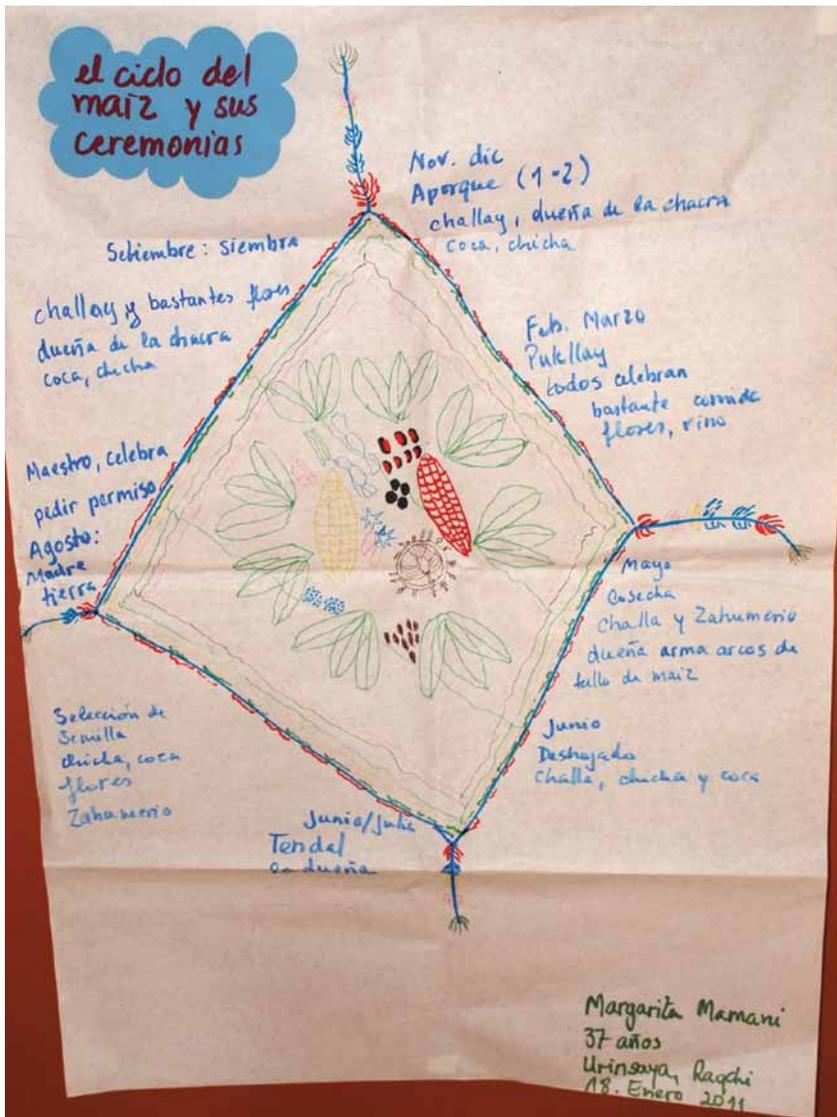
The wise men and women are motivated to enter into a dialogue with the scientists to talk about the perspectives of a semi-nomadic life in the context of climate change, which is being manifested in the higher zones as a general warming.



Maize is a person, sometimes a mother, a daughter or a daughter-in-law

The standardisation of maize to a few marketable varieties is a growing tendency in the communities of Cuzco that goes together with accelerated urbanisation of the traditional maize-producing valleys. The communities of Raqchi and Queramarca are worried about this loss of diversity. In Queramarca, the wisdom network is recuperating maize seeds, and their corresponding growing techniques, as a joint effort between families and individuals. They want to talk to the scientists about methods to regain the former diversity. In Raqchi the women's group is determined to stop consuming industrially produced food and revitalise their own production. They see that their fields have been left fallow too long, because they are so busy with tourism. But they are curious about agricultural methods, which are less labour-intensive, as well as ecologically and culturally sound.





Why the wisdom dialogue?



The situation presented in the role play (video) by the wisdom network shows a multidimensional gap, an interplay of personal, socio-economic and cultural factors. The highlights are the different lifestyles and knowledge of each participant. In one episode, the agronomist is an urban, government official who is interested in collecting genetic resources from the community for research and market purposes. He is part of the dominant system. He does not consult or ask for consent. On the other side we find a peasant, working in his fields following his tradition. When asked to explain what he is doing, he presents *Ara*, wild *quinua*, a sacred plant, and without any hesitation gives some seeds for the agronomist's collection. In his culture seeds are not private property and they can only be exchanged.

The agronomist goes back and the peasant continues to work. Nothing has changed.



This asymmetrical relationship legitimises the appropriation of peasant food, as in the cases of Andean grains and tubers, alpaca meat, and endemic fish, which undermines the epistemological basis of indigenous knowledge, practices and lifestyles. It reveals a democratic deficit, whilst science and the agro-industry decide the knowledge by which food is researched and produced for society; peasants, small-scale fisheries, and semi-nomadic lifestyles are underestimated as knowledge subjects.



Hence the dialogue – a peaceful way of creating a new power balance by means of a peer to peer interaction. It creates a new paradigm for cognitive justice without superiority of particular knowledge or lifestyles, but a mutual agreement of the validity of plural ways of knowing and living.

The dialogue in the context of food sovereignty is a chance for finding ways out of the emerging food crisis involving all actors.

