

Bolivia's Uru 'people of water' try to salvage their language after losing their lake



Residents walk along a dirt road in the Uru del Lago Poopo indigenous community, which sits along the salt-crust former shoreline of Lake Poopo, in Punaca, Bolivia.

By Carlos Valdez

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Punaca Tinta Maria, Bolivia: For many generations, the homeland of the Uru people here wasn't land at all. It was the brackish waters of Lake Poopo.

The Uru — “people of the water” — would build a sort of family island of reeds when they married and would survive on what they could harvest from the broad, shallow lake in the highlands of southwestern Bolivia.

“They collected eggs, fished, hunted flamingos and birds. When they fell in love, the couple built their own raft,” said Abdon Choque, leader of Punaca, a town of some 180 people.

Now what was Bolivia's second-largest lake is gone. It dried up about five years ago, victim of shrinking glaciers, water diversions for farming and contamination. Ponds reappear in places during the rainy season.

And the Uru of Lake Poopo are left clinging to its salt-crust former shoreline in three small settlements, 635 people scrabbling for ways to make a living and struggling to save even their culture.

“Our grandfathers thought the lake would last all their lives, and now my people are near extinction because our source of life has been lost,” said Luis Valero, leader of the Uru communities around the lake.

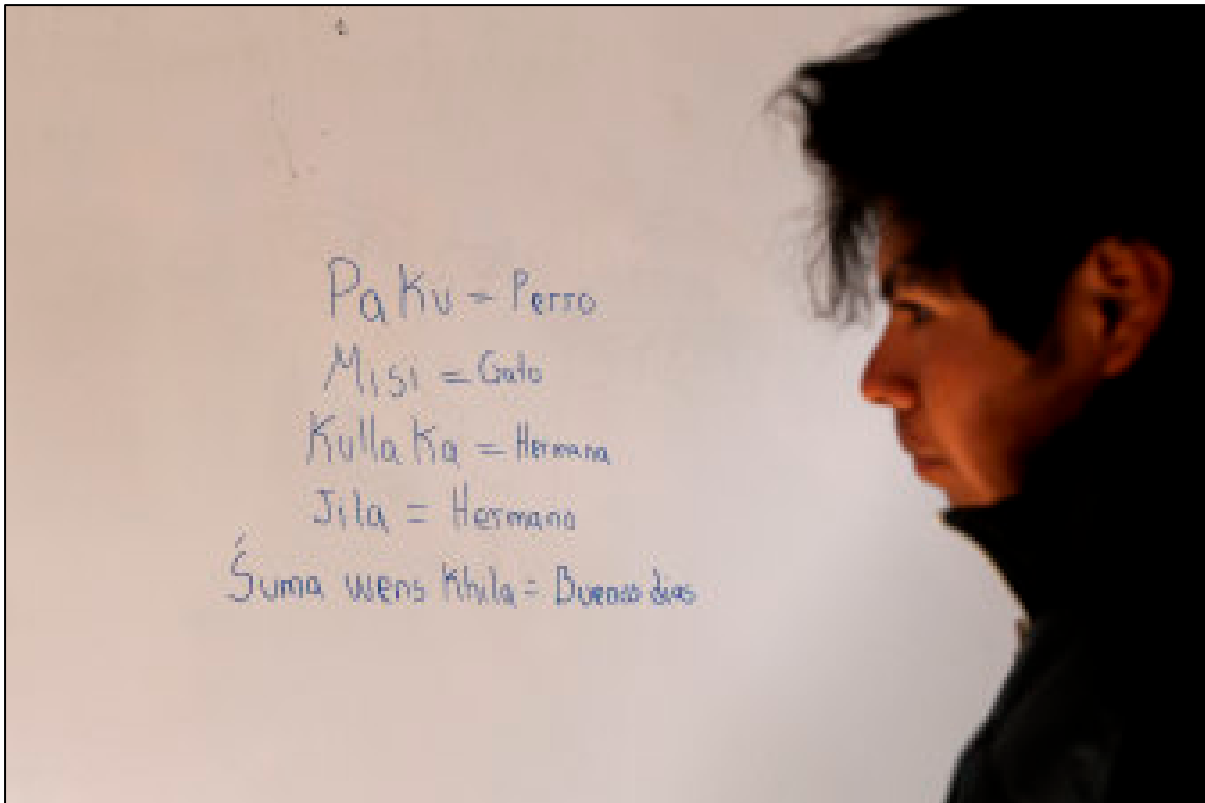


Members of the Choque family, from left, Jose, Evarista Flores, Rufino, Abelina and Abdon, in the Urus del Lago Poopo indigenous community, in Punaca.

Not long before the lake was lost, the language of the Uru-Cholo had perished as well. The last native speakers gradually died and younger generations grew up schooled in Spanish and working in other, more common Indigenous languages, Aymara and Quechua.

To save their identities, the communities are trying to revive that language — or at least its closest sibling. Aided by the government and a local foundation, they have invited teachers from a related branch of the Uru, the Uru-Chipaya near the Chilean border to the west, to teach that tongue — one of 36 officially recognised Bolivian languages — to their children.

“In these times, everything changes. But we are making efforts to maintain our culture,” Valero said. “Our children have to recover the language to distinguish us from our neighbours.”



Jose Choque stands next to words he wrote on a school whiteboard in the Uru language.

“The instructors teach us the language with numbers, songs and greetings,” said Avelina Choque, a 21-year-old student who said she one day would like to teach mathematics. “It’s a little difficult to pronounce.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has added to that struggle. The teachers have been unable to hold in-person classes during the pandemic, leaving students to learn from texts, videos and radio programs.

Punaca Mayor Rufino Choque said the Uru began settling on the lakeshore several decades ago as the lake began to shrink, though by then, most of the surrounding lands had been occupied.

“We are ancient [as a people], but we have no territory. Now we have no source of work, nothing,” said the 61-year-old mayor, whose town consists of a ribbon of round, plastered block homes along an earthen street.

With no land for farming, the young men hire themselves out as labourers, herders or miners in nearby towns or more distant cities.

“They see the money and they don’t return,” said Choque. Some of the women make handicrafts of straw.

The broader Uru people once dominated a large swathe of the region, and branches remain around Peru and Lake Titicaca to the north, around the Chilean border and near the Argentinian border.