

Research Article

Ancoraimes, Vestiges of the “Qhapaq Ñan” and Pre-Inca Tradition in Bolivia

María Verónica Solares Gantier* 

Department of Architecture, Bolivian Catholic University San Pablo, La Paz, Bolivia

Abstract

This study examines the cultural, historical, and architectural significance of a segment of the Qhapaq Ñan, or Great Inca Road, located in the municipality of Ancoraimes, in a small community named Ispaya Grande, in Bolivia, and evaluates its current state of conservation. The Qhapaq Ñan formed an extensive pre-Hispanic transportation network that interconnected political, economic, and ceremonial centers throughout the Andean region. Therefore, the segment analyzed here represents not only a physical route but also a cultural axis deeply embedded in the collective memory and territorial identity of Aymara communities. Ethnographic observation of communal practices further reveals the continued ritual use of the road through ceremonies and collective gatherings, highlighting its function as a living cultural space rather than a static archaeological vestige. These practices reinforce social cohesion, affirm territorial belonging, and sustain cultural continuity within the Aymara population. However, the research also identifies progressive deterioration of this segment of the Qhapaq Ñan, primarily due to changes in vegetation, the accumulation of solid waste, and climatic stressors that have compromised its original structure. Despite these impacts, the road’s sustained symbolic and functional relevance maintains its outstanding heritage value and underscores the urgent need for curative conservation measures and community-engaged management approaches.

Keywords

Qhapaq Ñan, World Heritage, Pre-Inca/Inca, Network of Roads, Trade and Communication, Ispaya Grande, Ancoraimes

1. Introduction

The Qhapaq Ñan is a communication network connecting administrative centers from the pre-Inca and Inca periods. Over time, it has become a historical, cultural, and political expression of great value.

During their peak, the Incas demonstrated remarkable territorial organization, using these routes to facilitate transportation, the exchange of goods, and the spread of knowledge. Likewise, the Qhapaq Ñan reveals the impressive construction skills of the Andean peoples, highlighting their ability to adapt

to adverse climatic, topographical, and technological conditions [1].

The route varies depending on the region it goes through, but all of them share an exceptional heritage value within a distinct landscape characteristic [2]. The perfect combination of nature and human intervention becomes evident, creating a visually harmonious effect in each functional element, allowing admiration of the styles and technology used in each path.

*Correspondence: María Verónica Solares Gantier (msolares@ucb.edu.bo)

Received: 14 October 2025; Accepted: 29 October 2025; Published: 16 May 2026



2. The Archaeological Heritage of the Member States

In general, the Qhapaq Ñan demonstrates a remarkable mastery of engineering, skillfully adapted to the complex Andean landscape. It encompasses the construction of diverse infrastructural elements such as roads, bridges, stairways, ramps, ditches, canals, retaining walls, and curbs. For this reason, it is also known as *the Great Inca Road*. [3].



Figure 1. Roads of Qhapaq Ñan in Peru. Source: (Trips).



Figure 2. Roads of Qhapaq Ñan in Peru. Source: (Pérez Rodríguez).

Originally based on pre-Inca routes, these paths were later modified and expanded by the Incas over many centuries to enhance communication, transportation, trade, and imperial defense. Over time, the network grew to an estimated length of about 30,000 kilometers and remained in active use until the 15th century, continuing to extend across the Andean mountain range. [1].



Figure 3. Qhapaq Ñan Map. Source: (ResearchGate) 2025.

In Argentina, the Qhapaq Ñan extends across seven provinces: Jujuy, Salta, Tucumán, Catamarca, La Rioja, San Juan, and Mendoza. In Chile, the network covers the regions of Arica y Parinacota, Tarapacá, Antofagasta, and Atacama. In Bolivia, it is registered in the departments of Potosí, Oruro, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and La Paz, where identified routes are oriented northward toward Quito as their final destination, and southward, suggesting a projection of conquest and territorial expansion [4]. In Peru—the country where the largest portion of the network is located—the road crosses Cusco, Lake Titicaca in the Puno region, Vilcashuamán, and Pisco. In Ecuador, it begins at the Nudo del Azuay and continues north through Cuenca and Quito, eventually reaching Pasto [5]. Finally, in Colombia, the route extends from Ipiales (Guáitara River) to Pasto, passing through the towns of Potosí, Gualmatán, El Contadero, Funes, Yacuanquer, and Tangua.

Below is a map created by the UNDP that highlights, in red, the documented segments of the Qhapaq Ñan.

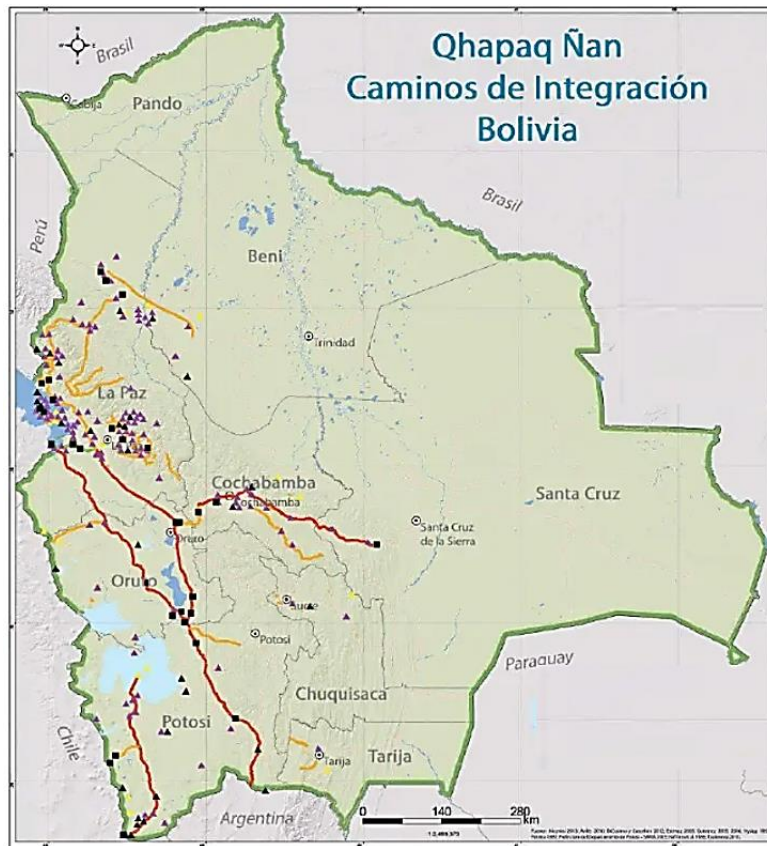


Figure 4. Qhapaq Ñan Map. Source: (Bolivia).

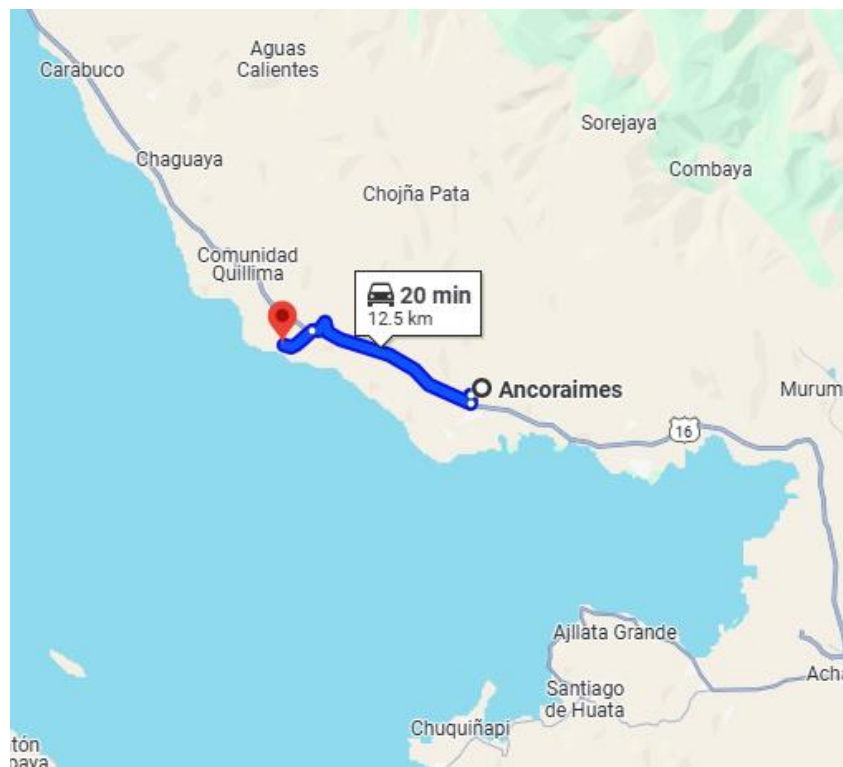


Figure 5. Distance from Ancoraimos to Ispaya Grande. Source: (Maps).

3. Archaeological Heritage and Pre-Inca Traditions in Bolivia: Ispaya Grande, Ancoraimes

Within the department of La Paz, the documented segment

of the Qhapaq Ñan extends from Desaguadero to Viacha, running along the shores of Lake Titicaca and traversing multiple communities and municipalities, including the case examined in this publication. One of the analyzed sections is situated in the community of Ispaya Grande, in the municipality of Ancoraimes, at an approximate distance of 135 km from the city of La Paz, the administrative seat of government. [6].



Figure 6. View of Lake Titicaca from the pre-Inca route of Ispaya Grande. Source: Own, 2019.

The community is situated on the shores of Lake Titicaca, at an elevation ranging from 3,858 to 4,008 meters above sea level. It is part of a subtropical montane region characterized by ecosystems whose flora and fauna are adapted to a cool high-altitude climate. The weather is generally cold throughout the year, although the months of November and December present comparatively milder conditions, making them the most favorable period for agricultural activities. [7].

The natural landscape of the region is characterized by low and resilient vegetation, adapted to the extreme conditions typical of the arid highlands of the Andean region. Among the most representative species are *khoa* (Aymara medicinal shrub), *kiswara* (Baccharis shrub), and *paja brava* (high-altitude Andean grass), all native plants that have developed survival mechanisms allowing them to endure water scarcity, low nighttime temperatures, and high solar radiation. [8].



Figure 7. Low, medium, and high vegetation in Ispaya. Source: Own, 2019.

According to a survey conducted on October 12, 2019, the community of Ispaya Grande has a population of approximately 60 inhabitants. The houses are dispersed throughout the territory, with distances ranging from 50 to 100 meters between

dwelling. The main communal facilities include an educational unit, a chapel, and a recently constructed building intended to function as an Andean community museum.



Figure 8. Chapel and School of Ispaya Grande. Source: Own, 2019.

His community culturally identifies as part of the Aymara people, preserving traditions, customs, and ways of life transmitted from generation to generation. Aymara is the primary language used in daily communication, reflecting a strong cultural attachment and deeply rooted collective identity. However, most inhabitants are bilingual, also speaking Spanish fluently, which facilitates interaction with institutions, services, and commercial activities.

Among the cultural practices that remain active in the community, traditional medical treatments are particularly significant, carried out by healers or commonly known as *yatiris* [9]. These practitioners of ancestral medicine play a fundamental role in community well-being, drawing on long-standing knowledge, careful observation of the natural environment, and a profound spiritual relationship with the landscape.

Therapeutic practices are based largely on the use of medicinal plants, among which the coca leaf holds a central place—not only for its curative properties, but also for its symbolic and spiritual value within Aymara cosmology.

The community of Ispaya Grande maintains a direct relationship with this heritage road, reinforcing both symbolic and territorial ties with Ancoraimes. For these communities, the road transcends its function as a transportation route: it is a living cultural axis that embodies identity, memory, and worldview (*cosmovisión*, the Andean conception of the inter-relationship between people, nature, and the sacred).

The road is regarded as a witness to their pilgrimages and as a sacred space where rituals such as *ch'alla* and *apthapi* are carried out.



Figure 9. View of Lake Titicaca and the Ispaya Grande Community. Source: (Bolivia).

The *ch'alla* is a ceremonial act of gratitude primarily dedicated to Pachamama, Mother Earth, who is understood in the Andean worldview as the goddess of fertility, productivity, and the generative forces of life [10]. During this ritual, coca leaves, incense, alcohol, sweets, and colorful decorations—such as streamers and small ornaments—are carefully placed or sprinkled on the ground or on specific objects that are to be blessed. Each element used in the offering carries symbolic meaning and is deeply rooted in ancestral tradition.

The ritual varies depending on the festive or communal context—whether during Carnival, agricultural celebrations, the commencement of construction projects, or as a general

invocation for prosperity and protection. It is also performed to bless new objects or to give thanks for abundance. The specific composition of the offerings may differ according to the region, as well as whether the practice takes place in rural or urban settings [11].



Figure 10. Example of a Ch'alla ritual. Source: (AFP).

Another ritual practiced along the pre-Inca route is the *apthapi*. This ancestral tradition, characteristic of the Andean region, brings the community together to share a collective meal. A specific place is selected for the gathering, ideally maintaining direct contact with Pachamama, which is why the food is often arranged directly on the ground. A large woven cloth is spread out, and the contributed foods are placed on it. Each participant brings a traditional food—such as different varieties of potatoes, chuño (freeze-dried potato), mote (boiled corn kernels), cheese, or eggs—which are then shared collectively among all those present. Through this practice, the community reinforces reciprocity, solidarity, and a sense of belonging rooted in ancestral Andean values [12].



Figure 11. Example of an Apthapi. Source: (Azafran).

This communal meal serves to strengthen bonds of cooperation and solidarity among community members. The act of sharing food transcends its practical function, fostering reciprocity through the exchange of giving and receiving, and reinforcing a sense of equality and collective unity.

In addition to these practices, this segment of the route in Ancoraimes continues to be used for processions, celebrations, and funerary rites. Its ongoing use demonstrates that these traditions—remarkably—have endured with minimal change over the course of several centuries [13].



Figure 12. Ispaya Grande pre-Inca road. Source: Own, 2019.

4. Composition and Classification of the Route in Ispaya Grande

As expected, this heritage remnant of the Qhapaq Ñan in Ispaya Grande is in a state of deterioration due to changes in vegetation, the accumulation of waste, and climatic effects that have damaged its original structure. For this reason, the UNDP launched a public tender in the pre-investment phase to conduct a technical survey and develop a Restoration and Conservation Project.

The consulting firm ATLAS, headquartered in La Paz, Bolivia, assembled a multidisciplinary team of specialists to visit the site and assess the condition of the route. After being assigned the task, the firm proceeded with an identification and classification study of the route, which was completed by recognizing three segments and five channels, as illustrated in the following image:

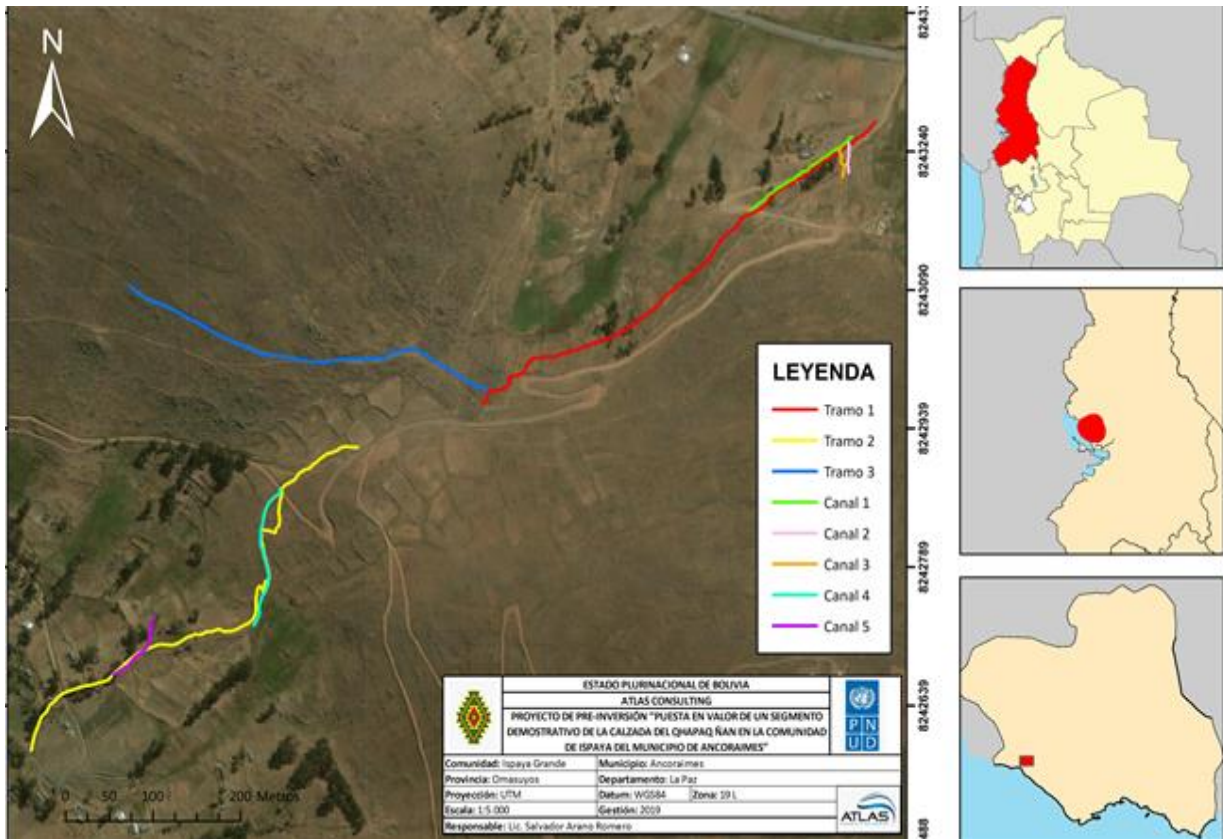


Figure 13. Pre-Inca routes and their classification. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

According to the illustration, the following elements can be identified [14]:

- 1) Segment 1 (red) and Segment 2 (yellow) are part of the primary route connecting the community with other remnants of the Qhapaq Ñan.
- 2) Segment 3 (blue) is a path that does not retain significant

construction characteristics and serves as a detour toward the nearby community of Ispaya Tuculi.

The construction typologies recorded along the Ispaya Grande section of the route [15] are described as follows:

First typology - Open path, identifying a clear route, free of obstacles, with no physical delimitation [16].



Figure 14. Open path. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Second typology - Open and marked path consists of a clean path or route, defined by rows of stones rather than walls.



Figure 15. Open and marked path. Fuente: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Third typology - Path bordered by walls refers to one or two boundary structures along the route, with continuous parapets marking the edges.

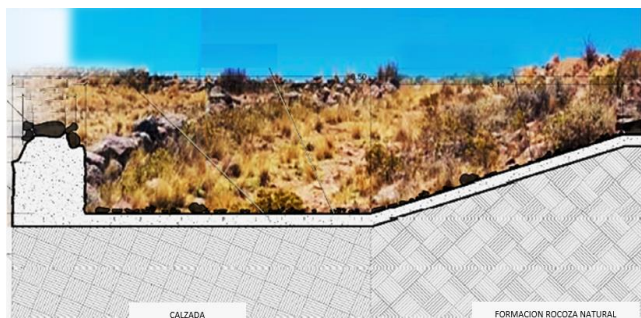


Figure 16. Road section delimited by a wall Segment 1. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.



Figure 17. Road section delimited by walls Segment 2. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Fourth typology - Path with retaining and containment walls consists of a route defined by structural elements that help level the terrain or provide containment.

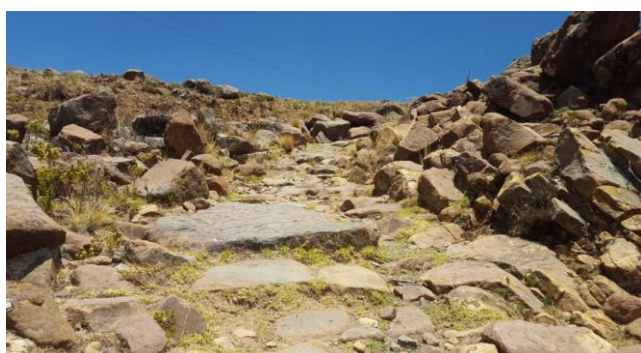


Figure 18. Road with retaining wall. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

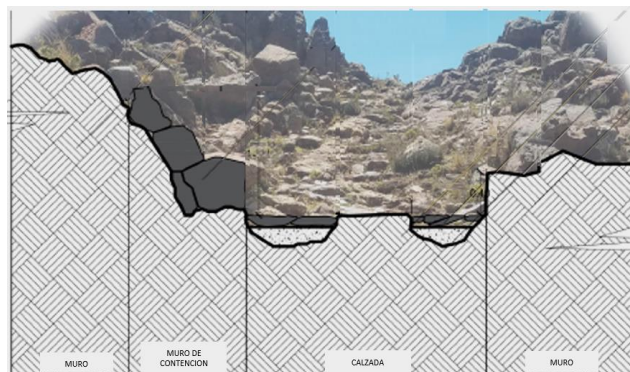


Figure 19. Road Section with retaining wall. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Fifth typology - Path with a slope is characterized by retaining walls that are adapted to the terrain's topography.



Figure 20. Road section with slope cut. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Sixth typology - Ramp-style path is used to overcome changes in slope and elevation.



Figure 21. Road with ramp. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Seventh typology - Stepped path consists of staircases designed to navigate steep inclines.



Figure 22. Stepped path. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.



Figure 23. Stepped path Section. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

Eighth typology - Path with drainage channels includes lateral or central elements in the roadway for water channeling. These may be open channels with stone lining, open channels at road level, or covered channels beneath the path. In the case of the route in Ispaya Grande, only open channels were found, as seen in the following sections.

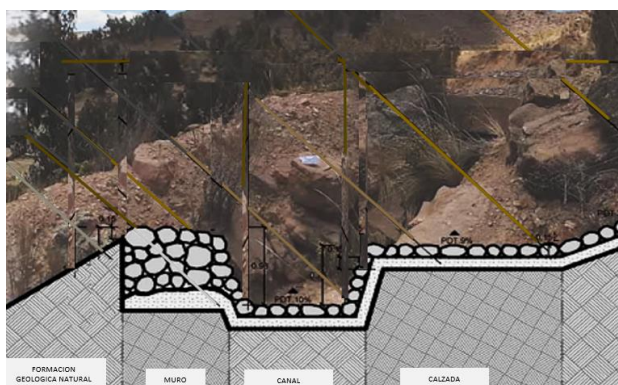


Figure 24. Path with drainage channel section. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.



Figure 25. Path with draining channel section. Source: ATLAS Consulting Project - Adjustment Annex 18-2019.

5. Conclusion

The Ispaya Grande section of the Qhapaq Ñan is in a state of deterioration due to the previously mentioned factors, such as changes in vegetation, waste accumulation, and climatic effects that have damaged its original structure.

Nonetheless, the community continues to use it as an active part of its cultural and spiritual life. Being inscribed on the World Heritage List, this site holds exceptional universal value, which places a collective responsibility on its preservation.

In this context, the UNDP's proposal for curative conservation intervention represents a fundamental step toward safeguarding this invaluable legacy.



Figure 26. Segment 2 path. Source: Own 2019.

Abbreviations

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
IISAH	Research Institute on Human Settlements

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] UNESCO. *Main Andean Road—Qhapaq Ñan*. World Heritage Centre. n.d. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1459>
- [2] Ramírez Serpa, I. *Valoración y gestión integral del patrimonio paisajístico: Encuentros y desencuentros teóricos y prácticos* [Assessment and integrated management of landscape heritage: Theoretical and practical convergences and divergences]. *Devenir: Revista de estudios sobre patrimonio edificado* 2018; 4(8): 134–158. <https://doi.org/10.21754/devenir.v4i8.160>
- [3] Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD). *Qhapaq Ñan: Caminos de integración. Plan maestro 2017–2020* [Qhapaq Ñan: Integration routes. Master Plan 2017–2020]. 2017. Available at: <https://www.rutaqhapaqñan.com>
- [4] Ministerio de Culturas y Turismo. *Qhapaq Ñan: Caminos de integración — Bolivia* [Qhapaq Ñan: Integration routes — Bolivia]. Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia; 2018.
- [5] López, M. *El Qhapaq Ñan o Camino Real del Inka en Bolivia: Aproximación arqueológica* [The Qhapaq Ñan or Royal Inka Road in Bolivia: An archaeological approach]. Ministerio de Culturas; 2011.
- [6] Loayza, A., & Victoria, S. *Qhapaq Ñan: Caminos sagrados de los Inkas* [Qhapaq Ñan: Sacred roads of the Inkas]. Producciones CIMA / Universidad Mayor de San Andrés; 2008.
- [7] Josse, C., Navarro, G., Cabrera, E., & Pozo, E. *Ecosistemas de los Andes del Norte y Centro: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú y Venezuela* [Ecosystems of the Northern and Central Andes: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela]. Secretaría General de la Comunidad Andina; 2009.
- [8] Trivelli, M., & Valdivia, V. *Alcances sobre la flora y vegetación de la Cordillera de los Andes* [Scope of the flora and vegetation of the Andes mountain range]. 2nd ed. Potencia Alimentaria y Forestal; 2009.
- [9] Fernández Juárez, G. *Médicos y yatiris: Salud e interculturalidad en el altiplano aymara* [Doctors and yatiris: Health and interculturality in the Aymara highlands]. Plural Editores; 1999.
- [10] Lema, F. *Rituales y fiestas en los Andes: Ch'alla, Inti Raymi y otros cultos* [Rituals and festivals in the Andes: Ch'alla, Inti Raymi, and other cult practices]. Plural Editores; 2010.
- [11] Vladi.jos783. *La Ch'alla* [The Ch'alla ritual]. Scribd; 2023. Available at: <https://es.scribd.com/document/836264147/La-Ch-alla>
- [12] Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores. *El apthapi: Diplomacia indígena y protocolos culturales. El “Banquete indígena” en la diplomacia de los pueblos* [The apthapi: Indigenous diplomacy and cultural protocols. The “Indigenous banquet” in the diplomacy of the peoples]. 2009. Available at: <https://biblioteca-repositorio.clacso.edu.ar/handle/CLACSO/249258>
- [13] Municipio de Ancoraimes. *Plan de Desarrollo Municipal de Ancoraimes* [Municipal Development Plan of Ancoraimes]. Municipio de Ancoraimes; 2012.
- [14] ATLAS Consultores. *Puesta en valor de un segmento demostrativo del camino del Qhapaq Ñan en la comunidad de Ispaya del municipio de Ancoraimes, Bolivia* [Enhancement of a demonstrative segment of the Qhapaq Ñan road in the community of Ispaya, municipality of Ancoraimes, Bolivia]. La Paz, Bolivia; 2021.
- [15] Vitry, C. *Propuesta metodológica para el registro de caminos con componentes inkas* [Methodological proposal for recording roads with Inka components]. Andes, Salta, Argentina; 2004.
- [16] Instituto Nacional de Cultura. *Terminología caminera del Proyecto Qhapaq Ñan* [Road terminology of the Qhapaq Ñan Project]. n.d.