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Style & Culture

In Peru, the Quechua Language Takes to Hip-Hop, Trap, and 'Q-Pop'

The Indigenous language of the Incas, still spoken by an estimated 10 million people, has found its footing in contemporary sounds.

By Sisa Quispe

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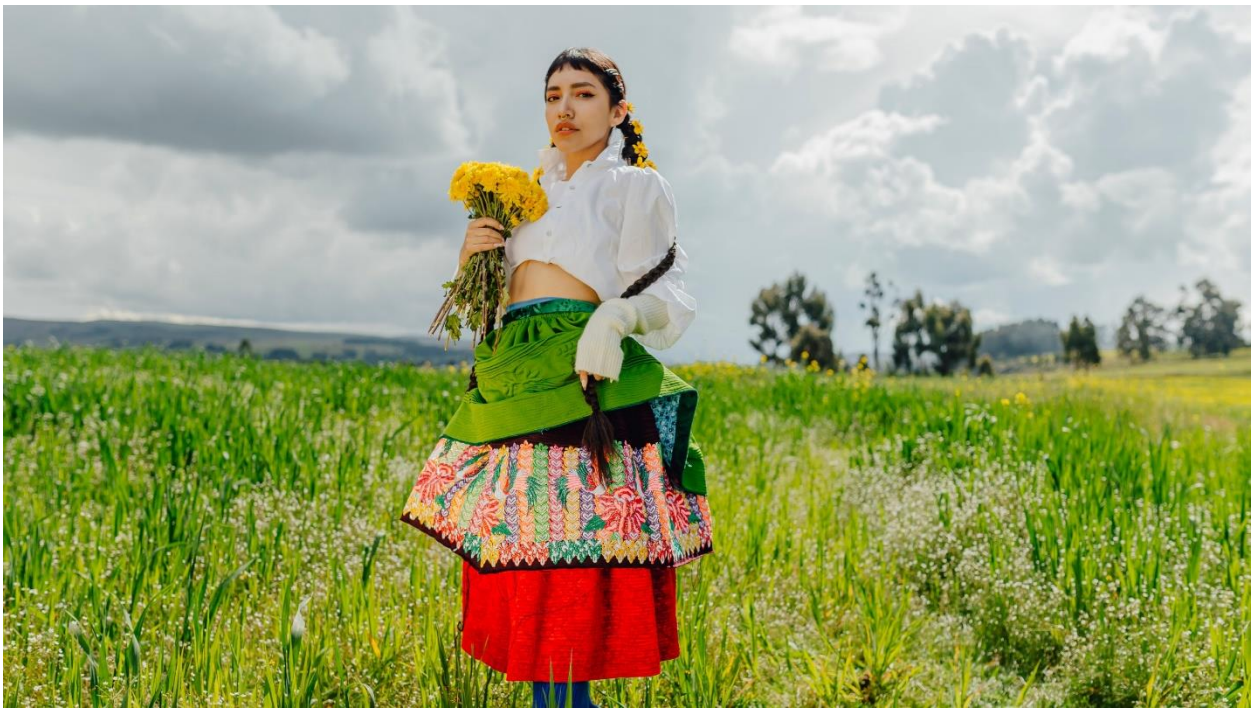


Apolo Bautista/Courtesy Renata Flores

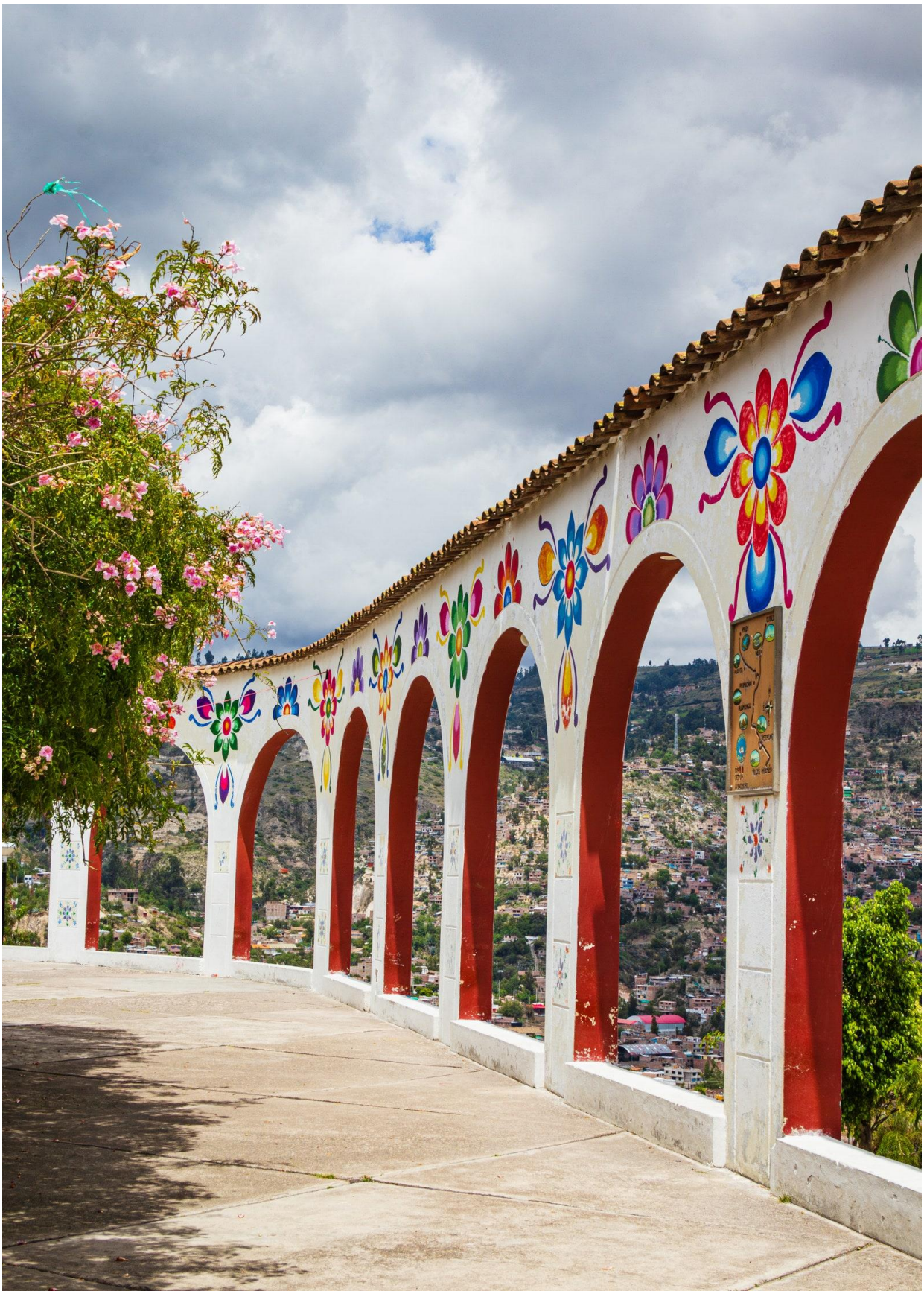
This is part of Global Sounds, a collection of stories spotlighting the music trends forging connections in 2024.

I still remember my first trip to Cusco in the Peruvian Andes as a kid. My grandmother was speaking a different language with a women in the market, which surprised me. It didn't sound like Spanish, and every time my grandmother spoke it, she did so with warmth and affection. Like my grandfather, she was born and raised in Cusco, and the Indigenous tongue of Quechua was her first language—but the rest of my family wouldn't use it anymore.

We weren't unique: The 2017 Census in Peru (the most recent) showed that 22.3% of the population aged 12 and older identified as Quechua, though only 13.9% of Peruvians spoke Quechua as a first language. Peru continues to be a country where systemic racism and discrimination against Indigenous non-Spanish speakers are is rampant—it's little surprise that many Quechua speakers have resisted teaching their children the language.

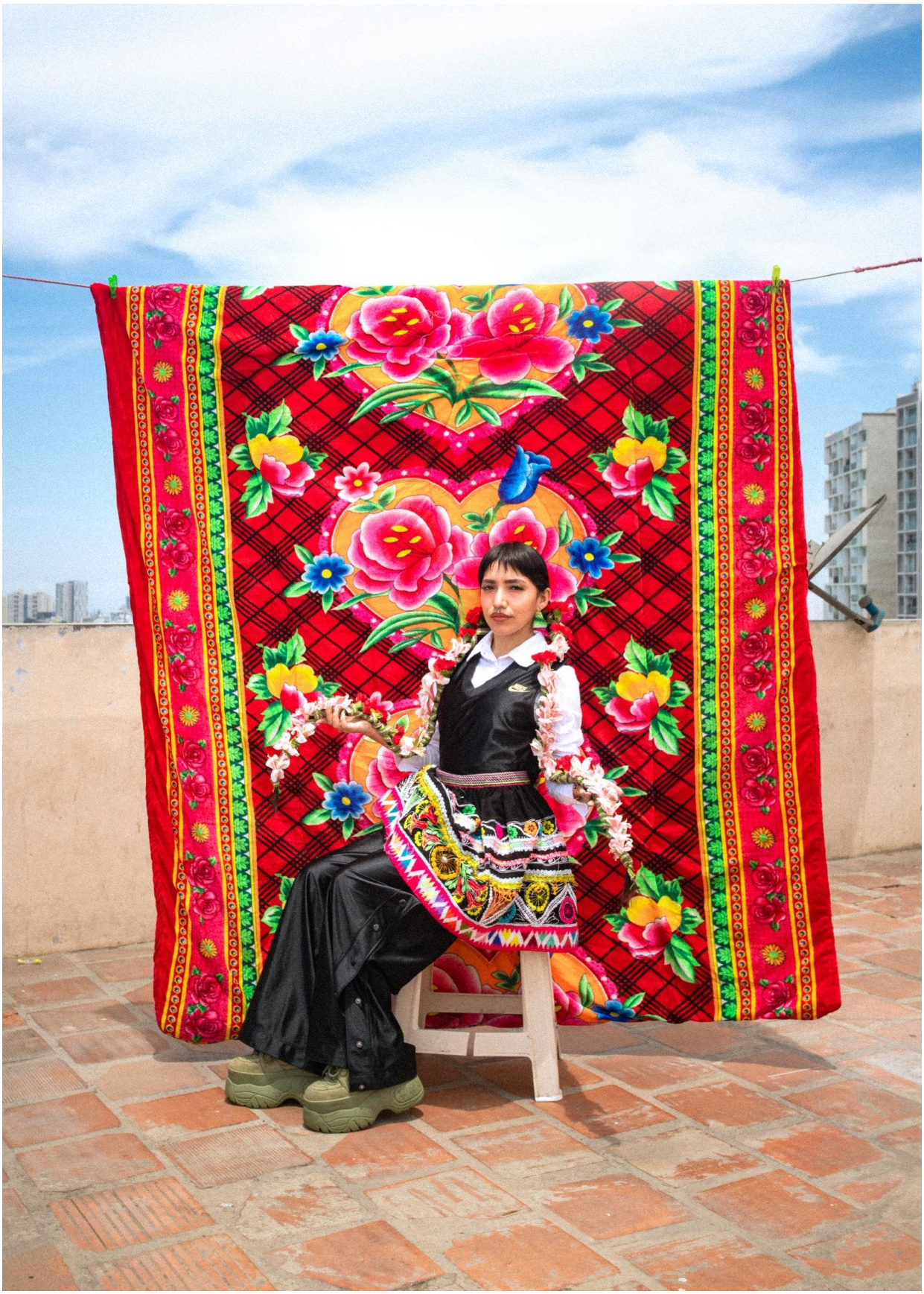
It wasn't until the pandemic, 20 years after that day in the market, that I felt encouraged to learn Quechua. When I asked other speakers how I could reconnect with our native tongue, the answer was always the same: music.

Quechua, also known as Runasimi (meaning "the people's tongue"), served as the official language of the Tawantinsuyu, led by the Incas. Today it is spoken by an estimated 10 million people in South America, throughout Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and parts of Colombia, Chile, and Argentina. Because Quechua is an oral language, songs play a critical role in its preservation. Peru has long been home to Andean music genres defined by their use of Quechua language—like waynos, a popular genre talking about love and heartbreak, or harawis, a pre-colonial poetic genre. But now there is also rap, hip-hop, and trap performed in Quechua, thanks to young artists who have chosen to both spotlight the sound, and use it to call out injustices to Quechua people.



The Arcos del Mirador Acuchimay can be seen in Ayacucho, Peru, a stronghold of Quechua culture, and the place where singer Renata Flores was born and raised.

Jorge Choroco/Getty



Flores, who has been called the “Queen of Quechua Rap” and sings in the Indigenous language, says rap allows her to be “straightforward” in her lyrics.

Courtesy Renata Flores

Renata Flores, dubbed the Queen of Quechua Rap by *The New York Times*, is only 23 years old but has already made a name for herself in the Peruvian music industry by showcasing her cultural heritage with pride and finesse. After going viral on YouTube for her Quechua covers of popular songs, like a particularly notable rendition of Michael Jackson’s “The Way You Make Me Feel” in 2015, she was drawn to make her own music several years later using modern genres like hip-hop. “I felt it was straightforward,” the young musician says of rapping, as we sat drinking coffee in the main square of Ayacucho, where she is from. “It helps me to find my voice, and be bold.”

Flores comes from a legacy of musicians who sing in Quechua. Her great-aunts made up the traditional Quechua singing group known as Las Bellas de Huamanga, and her mother, Patricia Rivera, is a former rock musician. Ayacucho, though, where she was born and raised, shaped her voice most, Flores says. “My family has told me stories of our resilience during the armed conflict in Peru,” she tells me. “I inherited all those feelings.” Ayacucho was hit hard by Peru's internal armed conflict from 1980 to 2000, which resulted in the deaths or disappearances of an estimated 26,000 people. Even though Ayacucho is known as the city that gave Peru its independence and as the living legacy of Wari culture, to its residents, its best distinguished by a history of fortitude, and the colorful art those struggles have inspired. “This is my legacy,” says Flores.

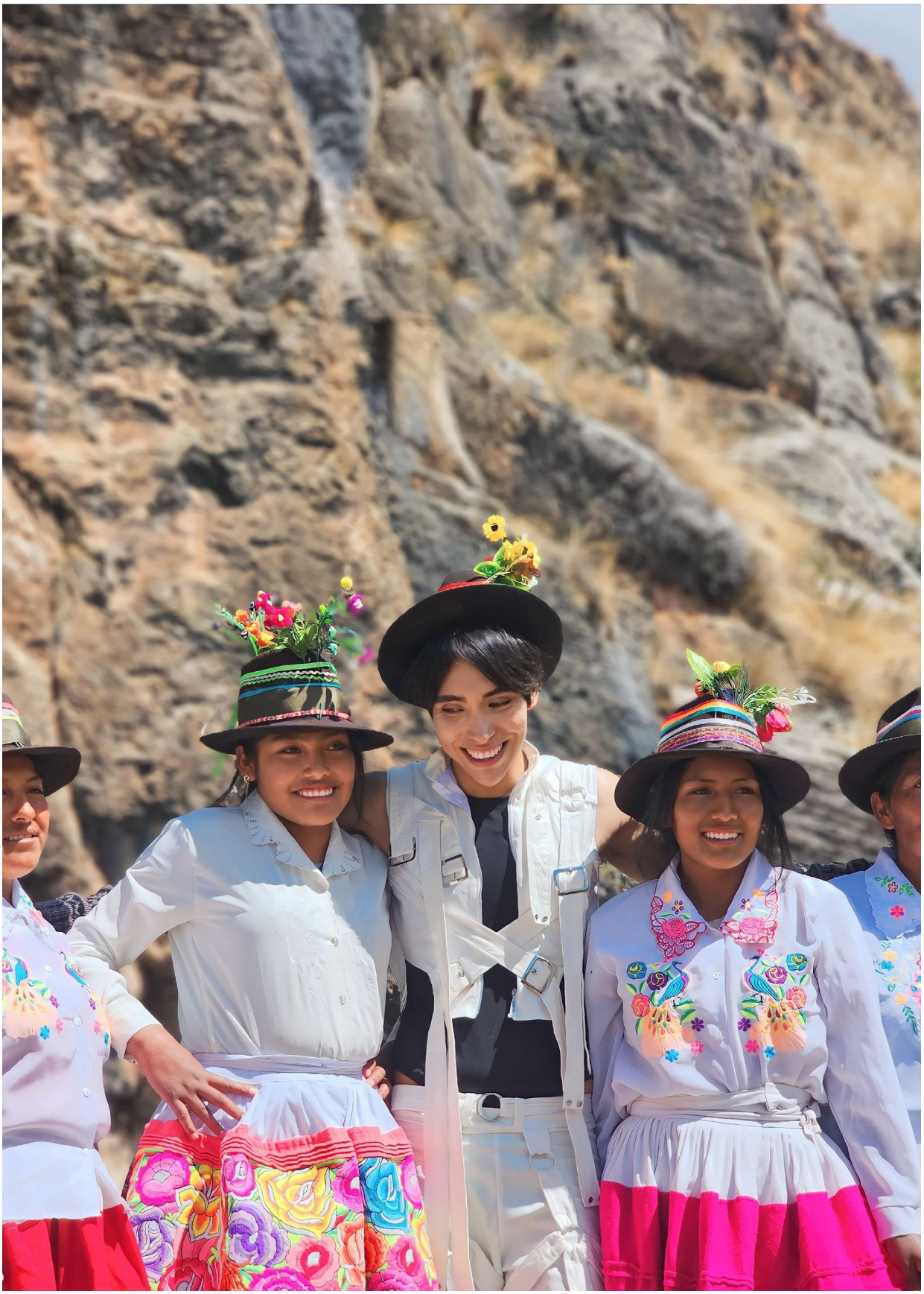
Renata Flores in the music video for her song “Niña De La Luna (Killapa Llullu Warmi),” filmed in Vilcashuaman, Ayacucho.

Flores, distinguished for her soft yet blunt voice, is now best known for her blend of hip-hop, trap, and rap music, but her work isn't limited to those genres. She has topped charts with her songs like “Akakaw,” a collaboration with Los Mirlos, a widely known Peruvian cumbia band, and “Killapa Llullu Warmi” a love song inspired by ancestral stories. In every genre, her messages largely come back to the challenges and resilience of Quechua people.

“My family has always spoken out against oppression, and now it's my turn,” says Flores. In response to Peru's political turmoil and protests in December 2022, in which many Indigenous people from the Andes and the Altiplano reacted to both the controversial ousting of President Pedro Castillo and ongoing sense of political disenfranchisement, she produced her latest album, *Traficantes* (*Traffickers*). “I called it *Traficantes* because we are going to be dealers of the truth,” says Flores. *Traficantes* is set to be released in September 2024.

The political events of 2022 and 2023 and their ongoing fallout (two human rights groups have requested the International Criminal Court to hold Peru's government accountable for crimes against humanity during this time) also inspired artist Lenin Tamayo to release his latest EP, *Amaru,* a reference to the sacred Andean serpent. It's not his only source of inspiration: Drawing on South Korea’s popular

music K-pop, using similar beats and fashion, Tamayo is credited with creating the genre now known as Q-pop, short for Quechua pop.



Lenin Tamayo, middle, fuses Quechua language with the beats and fashion of K-pop to make Quechua pop, or Q-pop.

Yolanda Pinares/Courtesy Lenin Tamayo

The Andes Mountains, rich with Quechua cultural heritage, are also known for iconic natural sites like Vinicunca (commonly called the Rainbow Mountain).

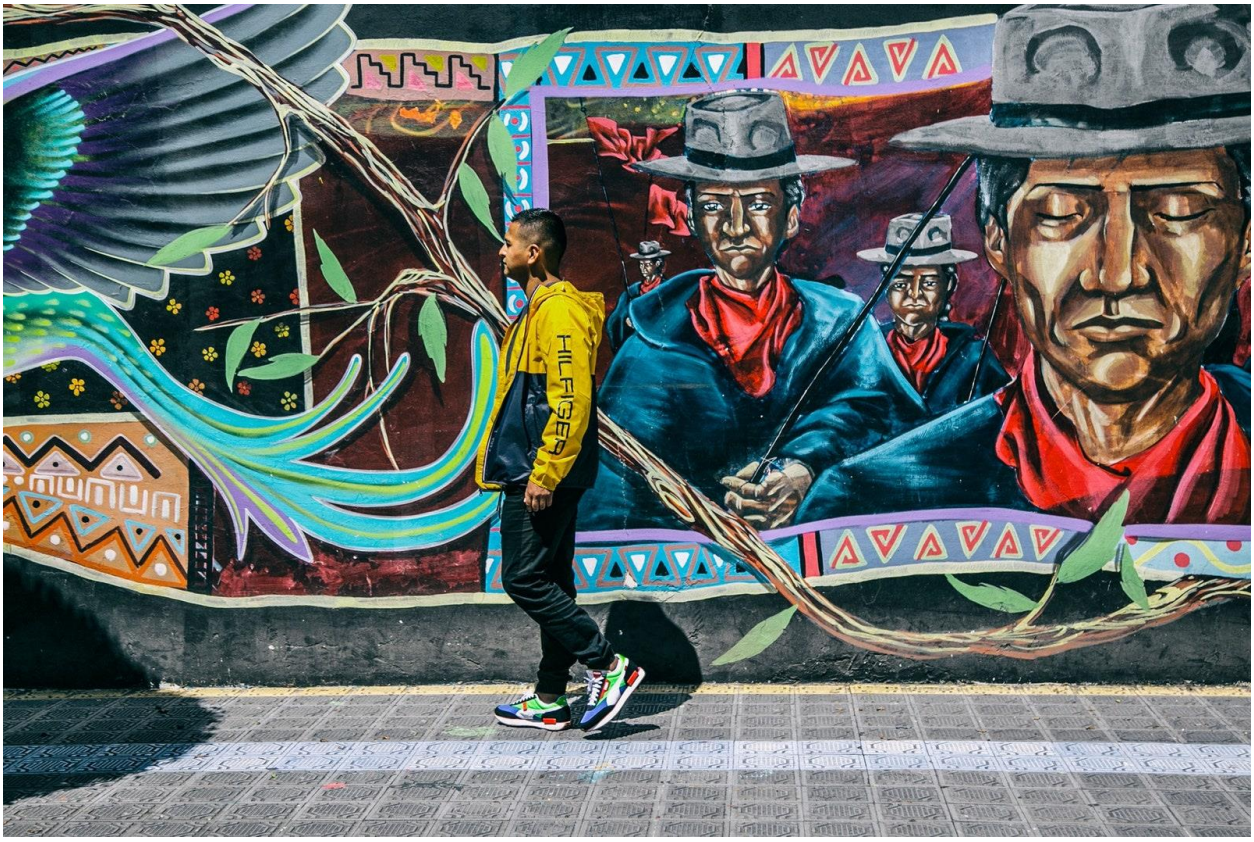
Maico Presente/Getty

“I found a connection to K-pop as a way to fully express myself through singing, dancing, and performing,” says Tamayo. Though his first album was just released in August of 2023, his music videos regularly reach half a million views online, and he has millions of likes on TikTok.

Like Flores, the 24-year-old artist has felt a responsibility to address social issues through his music—and much of that is tied to knowing who he is, and where he comes from. “I don't just sing in Quechua, I am Quechua, and talking about these issues is part of being Quechua,” Tamayo says, from the capital of Lima, where he lives. He credits this ethos to his mother, Yolanda Pinares, a contemporary Andean musician from Cusco with a nearly 30-year career of singing in Quechua. “You have the opportunity to have your voice heard,” he remembers his mother telling him.

In September and October, Lenin is heading out on a tour through Asia, where he'll make stops in cities far more familiar with K-pop—and likely unaccustomed to hearing Quechua—including Bangkok, Hanoi, and, of course, Seoul. It's a full-circle moment, and an inspiring nod to the reach of his music: He's finding international interest using a tongue so frequently looked down upon in the country he calls home.

But as these musicians travel, their roots remain strong. Ricardo Flores Carrasco, 31, also known as Liberato Kani, sees this new era of Quechua musicians like branches growing out of a long-standing tree. “I have been exposed to Quechua music since I was in my mother’s womb,” says Flores Carrasco, laughing. He's the son of El Picaflor de Umamarca, a renowned traditional Quechua singer from the Peruvian Andes. He grew up immersed in traditional genres like waynos and toriles, a type of Andean music characterized by the wind instruments used in ceremonies for cattle, but edgier sounds, including rock and rap, are where he has found his groove, with lyrics that meditate on social issues impacting his community.



Ricardo Flores Carrasco, known as Liberato Kani, builds on the legacy of his father, a celebrated singer from the Andes.

Courtesy Liberato Kani

“I take great pride in being from Andahuaylas,” says Flores Carrasco of his home city in the south of Peru. “[People in this part of Peru] are known as the Brave Chankas [an ethnic group that rivaled the Incas]. We have endured [so much] throughout history.”He lost his mother at the age of seven, leaving a significant void in his family, but he remembers her as a proud Quechua woman who encouraged that esteem in others. It was when he moved to Lima that Flores Carrasco was introduced to hip-hop. It was liberating, and acted as an outlet, a way to digest everything going on around him. He named himself Liberato Kani *(*“I Am Free”*)* to describe the sense of freedom he felt while performing.

Flores Carrasco, now well known for his song “Kaykunapi,” has gained fans with cathartic lyrics that are tempting to sing along to, regardless of whether you speak the language. He just released the album *Taki Ñan* (*The Path of the Singer)* in June 2024, made of 10 tracks featuring collaborations with several artists like Miki Gonzalez (a Spanish producer known for fusing rock with traditional Andean and Afro-Peruvian sounds), No Recomendable (a Peruvian alt-rock artist), and Fredy Ortiz (known for Quechua rock, blues, and folk). Flores Carrasco just returned from a tour in the US, and has a new tour and album on the horizon.

Liberato Kani's "Yakuchallay" music video, above, reflects on the damage being done to Andean communities by mining companies.

While discrimination against Indigenous people remains prevalent across the country, taking their music beyond Peru is a chance to find audiences who will celebrate it. Hopefully, they'll reposition the language domestically, and gain new respect for it, in the process. "This new wave of Quechua musicians are building up on what their parents did," says Americo Mendoza-Mori, who launched the Quechua Initiative on Global Indigeneity at the University of Harvard. "And, on the other hand, they are readapting and positioning the Andes as a center of art, creativity, and innovation, while contributing to both Quechua music and these genres globally."

Quechua people have never been a monolithic group, nor a static culture, but rather one shaped by 500 years of resistance since colonization. This evolution of Quechua music reflects that legacy—and provides a potential new future for the language and upcoming generations of speakers.