

Memo:

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Captions: PAULA ARAB PHOTOS:

At the Salineras **salt** fields, or "pans, " mining methods date back to the 15th century. Lorenza Pena, a 72-year-old mother of seven, owns 15 **salt** pans but poor health has forced her to retire. **Dateline:** MARAS, **Peru**

By Paula Arab

Text: MARAS, **Peru**- For generations, the **salt women** of **Peru** have been brought together by the land of sodium chloride.

Their bond is deep, their traditions rich and alive nearly 600 years after the fall of the Incas.

Angelica Paucar is 16. She and her mother own 12 small fields, or pans, of **salt**. Paucar speaks in Spanish and dresses in modern but modest clothes: slacks and a hooded cardigan.

In sharp contrast, across the courtyard of this indigent town of 2,000, sits Lorenza Pena, 72. She knows only Quechua, the endangered native tongue of her Inca ancestors. There is more gray than black in her long braids, and the once vibrant reds of her top hat and traditional full skirt have all but faded away.

These peasant **women** of the Sacred Valley are unique in **Peru**, for they have inherited the **salt** of the earth.

While most village **women** are at home looking after the children, the **salt women** bundle up their babies in colourful blankets they carry on their backs and head to the mines. There, they sometimes find dignity and a rare independence in this machismo-dominated culture.

Though Pena's earnings have always gone into the family pot, she wants it known that her 15 pans are in her name.

"My father gave the land to me. My husband does not have plots. It's mine, " she says, listening intently to the translator, a big grin on her tanned face.

"It's not a matter of I save the money for myself, it's to help the family. I feel proud."

Salinas, also known as La Salineras, is an hour's climb from Maras, situated near Urubamba in the Sacred Valley. We see a sign that says Cachi Rackay, the Quechua word for **Salt** Mountain. An arrow points up.

Thousands of white fields, iced in chocolate mud, glitter in the sun. From a distance, the **salt** could be mistaken for snow but for the pungent, distinctive smell.

On these 80 hectares of land, between 100 and 300 [women](#) from Maras and another nearby community mine for [salt](#). Each is responsible for working and maintaining her own plot.

In total, there are about 5,000 [salt](#) pans in the co-operative, roughly five square metres each, staggered like steps on the side of the mountain. They produce three grades of [salt](#).

One pan produces a maximum 80 kilograms of top-grade [salt](#) a month, fit for human consumption but sold for a paltry one sole per kilo -about 50 Canadian cents.

Lower grades of [salt](#), used for animal feed or fertilizer, fetch even less. This [salt](#), which has dirt mixed in it, is also offered to the gods in ancient ceremonies that remain an important part of modern agriculture.

Even dirtier [salt](#) is buried.

While a woman is lucky to get 800 soles a month for her [salt](#), that is nearly twice as much as the 448 soles a month a city dweller gets after working eight hours a week at minimum wage, points out Esther Mendoza, director of studies at a nearby language school that organizes class trips to the [salt](#) mines.

In the West, technology has transformed the way [salt](#) is mined. Two major methods are used in Canada: underground mining and brining.

But in Salineras, rich in history and legacy, the methods date back to the 15th century. That was when the Incas discovered the natural spring laden in sodium chloride, says Mendoza.

Advanced in irrigation techniques, the Incas built the ancient canals still used today to funnel the water into the pans. The water evaporates after about three weeks in the sun, leaving behind the [salt](#).

The [women](#) mainly work during the first week, cleaning the pans, and the last week, bagging the mineral. The wet season in November ends the work year.

For Pena, a mother of seven, her [salt](#) mining days are over. A serious fall a few years ago resulted in a broken foot, an operation and retirement. She no longer even visits.

"I can't walk there, " she explains. "I don't miss it, no. I am tired."

Nowadays, men help with the heavy work, such as lugging the bags for shipment by donkey to market. But the burden still falls on the shoulders of the [women](#) because their husbands are busy farming the land.

As the only girl in a family of three, Paucar automatically becomes her mother's business partner. The [salt](#) pans have been passed down through matriarchal

hands in her family "for so long, nobody knows, " says Paucar, who attends high school.

Her two days a week at Salineras is meditative, spiritual and well spent with her mother.

"It has helped our relationship, " says the shy teenager, old enough in this culture to live on her own if economic circumstances dictated. "It depends on each family, but if I was not working with my mother, our relationship would not be as close. I might have to work in Urubamba or Cuzco (several hours away) if I wasn't here with my family."

Near or far, young or old, the [salt](#) is in their blood.

Pena's black eyes dance as she taps a memory bank that can't go back to a time before the [salt](#). Salineras has always been there. She remembers playing at the mines as a child of 4 or 5, waiting to come of age at 10.

"As long as I have memories, I have Salineras, I have been in this place, " she says. "So for me, I love it. It is part of me."

Paula Arab is a Toronto journalist who has spent the past six months in South America.

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