The subject of my first assignment will be the Bolivian Folk Song “Imillitay”. Due to the legacy of colonization, modern indigenous culture exists in a space where mainstream Latin American culture is the dominant culture. Modern indigenous music frequently utilizes elements of mainstream Latin American and international music, leftover remnants of European culture, as well as traditional indigenous culture. Modern indigenous music expresses this history of cultural contact and exchange and the song Imillitay is a great example of this.

Imillitay means “My girl” in Quechua. The song tells the story of a man who’s in love with a girl who doesn’t love him back. Imillitay is one of the Bolivian folk group los Kjarkas’s most popular songs. They’re a folk group that formed in the 1970s in Cochabamba, one of Bolivia’s largest cities and one of the country’s cultural centers. Bolivia is a country where an estimated 40-50% of the population is indigenous, the two largest ethnic groups being Quechua and Aymara. Los Kjarkas is a group that has advocated for the preservation of indigenous culture through music. They have toured worldwide to raise awareness about their music and established two schools of folk music in the Andes.

In the music video the Kjarkas are wearing ponchos, a garment that originates in the Andes. There is a chakana woven around the neckline of each poncho. The chakana, or southern cross is a popular motif in Andean art. The word literally means “staircase” or “bridge” and it was used as a symbol of the passage between different spiritual realms or areas. While it is still used in some religious and spiritual contexts, it has been adapted for wider use as a popular motif in indigenous weaving, jewelry, art, and other products. The Kjarkas are wearing ponchos on top of a turtleneck and slacks— a mix of western clothing with traditional indigenous clothing.

The song also contains instruments from a variety of backgrounds. The zampoña is a set of panpipes made reeds or canes that has a distinct, airy sound. There are records of this type of instrument being used throughout the Andes as early as 1000 AD. The charango by contrast is a more recent invention. It evolved following the arrival of the Spanish as the indigenous take on Spanish stringed instruments such as the lute. It’s a small guitar-like instrument with five or six pairs of strings traditionally made out of an armadillo shell. Since many armadillo species are endangered, making armadillo charangos is illegal or discouraged in many Andean countries, so most modern charangos, like the one in this video, are made of wood. It has a distinctive high-pitched, clear tone and is frequently strummed rapidly. Also used is the guitar, a European instrument originating in Spain. The instruments used in this song are also a great example of the cultural exchange that informs modern indigenous Bolivian music.

Dijiste que me querías
Pero no es verdad
Siempre jugaste conmigo
Y aún te supe amar
Vivo pensando olvidarte
Y no lo consigo
Tus recuerdos son espinas
Que hieren mi alma

You said that you loved me
But that’s not true
You were always playing with me
And I could still love you
I live trying to forget you
And I don’t manage to do it
Memories of you are thorns
That wound my soul

Muyuspa muyuspa imillitay
Qori q’uentijina
Muyuspa muyuspa imillitay
Saqerpariwanki
(Imillitay) saqerpariwankipuni
(Imillitay) saqerpariwankipuni

Spinning round and round, my girl
Like a golden hummingbird
Spinning round and round, my girl
You’re going to leave me
(My girl) You’re always going to leave me
(My girl) You’re always going to leave me

The lyrics to this song are written in Spanish and Quechua, in a format that makes them accessible to largely bilingual (Quechua/ Spanish) Quechua speakers in addition to a larger Spanish-speaking Latin American audience. The lyrics in Quechua contain lots of repetition, which makes them more palatable to a non-Quechua speaking audience. In addition, the Spanish-language lyrics sum up the meaning of the song, even though the Quechua-language lyrics offer more detail. The Spanish-speaking listener will still get the gist of the song and understand the principle motif— the universal concept of unrequited love. However, the Spanish lyrics don’t contain any specific cultural references or hidden meanings.

The Quechua lyrics by contrast contain one cultural reference— the hummingbird (Q’ori q’enti), a native Bolivian bird that can be interpreted to represent harmony, good luck, sacrifice, as well as a variety of other concepts. Here the hummingbird is used to portray the girl that the man is in love with as indecisive and unfaithful. The word “Q’ori q’uenti” is also uniquely Bolivian— both the use of the phrase “q’ori q’uenti” (literally golden hummingbird) as a term for hummingbird (instead of just q’uenti or quenti as the word for hummingbird) as well as the use of ejectives (q’ori q’uenti instead of qori quenti). Another notable aspect of the Quechua used in this song is the grammatical feature of interactions in the word “saquerpariwanki” (you’re going to leave me). This particular verb is conjugated using a conjugation that marks both the actor and the recipient of the actor used most commonly in Bolivian Quechua. It is one of many unique words or grammatical constructs in Quechua that provides additional information about interpersonal relationships. The existence of these words and grammatical constructs in the language indicates importance placed upon interpersonal relationships. Another unique grammatical construct evident in this song is the verb suffix “-puni” indicating a sense of inevitability or sureness. It’s used at the end of the Quechua lyrics in the verb “saquerpariwankipuni” (you’re always/ definitely going to leave me). Grammatical markers of sureness are another unique feature of Quechua, which indicates a cultural emphasis on accurate communication. There is nuanced information in the Quechua-language lyrics that is not communicated to the Spanish-speaking audience, but the main message of the song is still accessible in the Spanish lyrics.

While this song is about a universal theme— unrequited love, the language, musical elements, and cultural context of the musicians make it uniquely Bolivian. It’s also an example of the history of cultural contact and exchange that continues to influence indigenous Bolivian music today