

# BolivianExpress

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# EDITORIAL

## ROOTED IN HISTORY

‘La tierra es de quien la trabaja’—‘The land belongs to those who work it’, proclaimed the Zapatistas at the turn of the 20th Century, as Emiliano Zapata spearheaded the historical movement which we now remember as the Mexican Revolution. 40 years later, this same slogan propelled Bolivian **campesinos** to demand broad socioeconomic changes in a country which hadn’t yet granted them basic citizenship rights, let alone recognised they made up over 70% of the country’s population. A broad-sweeping Agrarian Reform followed in 1953, giving these peasants unprecedented ownership and control over the land they worked on. The Bolivian Revolution of 1952 also enfranchised women and those considered illiterate (a convenient proxy for campesinos), causing a fivefold increase in the number of people eligible to vote.

These moves planted the seed for much deeper changes to come about; while campesinos and indigenous peoples were considered equals under the law after the Revolution, social attitudes took decades to adjust, if they can be said to have adjusted at all. The election of Evo Morales as Bolivia’s first indigenous president has brought with it processes of political revindication and a resurgence of identities lost in time, though race remains painfully equivalent to social class to this day.

Yet the relationship between Bolivians and the land, its soil, and what lies underneath it, dates back to centuries before the Revolution of 1952. The peoples who have inhabited the Bolivian territories over the decades and centuries have had much more than a socioeconomic relation to the land. The ancestral significance of what lies beneath the surface is cosmic and spiritual.

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EDITORIAL

The Pachamama is the name given to that which underlies and sustains all known existence (from 'pacha', which means 'world' or 'universe', and 'mama' which means 'mother'). Unlike Christian religions which look upwards, and beyond what is visible to the human eye, to understand their world and position within it, the inhabitants of the Andean plains have traditionally looked beneath them to the land that feeds them and on which they stand. They also look around them at the mountains—Tunupa, Illampu, Mururata, etc, all of which are gods—from where water flows down streams to irrigate the fields, and at the sun, Inti, which shines upon them and gives life to everything known upon this earth. Their existence and spirituality are thus deeply rooted in tangible manifestations of the physical world. It is for this reason that some see this set of beliefs as a cosmivision (worldview) instead of a metaphysical conception of the world (which has an undeniable immaterialist air to it).

Perhaps no crop captures the spirit of the region better than the potato, around whose harvest cycle communities in the Altiplano organise many festivities. In his research ethnomusicologist Henry Stobart documents the anthropomorphisation of these tubers. They are attributed eyes and even ears, which they need to listen to the huayño music that is played for them to encourage their adequate development. Potatoes are considered to follow the human lifecycle, and thus must be tendered as wawas (babies), in order to allow for a good harvest. Wilmer Machaca (see p.26) delves into the world of la papa to understand its local and international significance.

Yet there's a certain poetic over-simplicity to these pictures and it's easy to get carried away. We're invited to picture an austere campesino dutifully working on just enough land to sustain themselves and their family, or to barter their produce with neighbouring communities to achieve self sustenance. That image of the benevolent shepherd upon a cliff playing a flute in solitude against the elements.

Traditional methods used by farmers in these regions are experiencing a resurgence in the global economy. While in decades past the largest and most unblemished fruit were seen as the most desirable, during the mid-90s they started to cause suspicion, amid scares of the unknown harm that could come from genetically modified crops grown with the help of powerful pesticides. The organic standard thus became the norm among conscious customers, primarily in the rich countries. This brought markets back in time (or across the globe) to growers and producers who, due to ideology or lack of technology, didn't take part in the evils associated with new production methods. Danielle Carson (see P.18) conducts her research around producers and consumers to understand the impact of these

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**The solution** for high altitude sickness    **La solución** contra el mal de altura    **La solution** contre le mal d'altitude    **Die Lösung** gegen die Höhenkrankheit  
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global trends in the country. It seems the country's growers have little notion of what organic is, making the country's produce either accidentally organic, or far from this standard (read: full of pesticides), despite the archaic production methods.

The government and those who work with it to construct a new state vision, have capitalised on these vague ancestral notions to propose we should live according to a principle they call Suma Qamaña, which posits a philosophy based on 'Living Well' in contrast to 'Living Better' (which is taken to the capitalist ideal). As Ryle Lagonsin (see P.14) investigates, there are questions around whether these

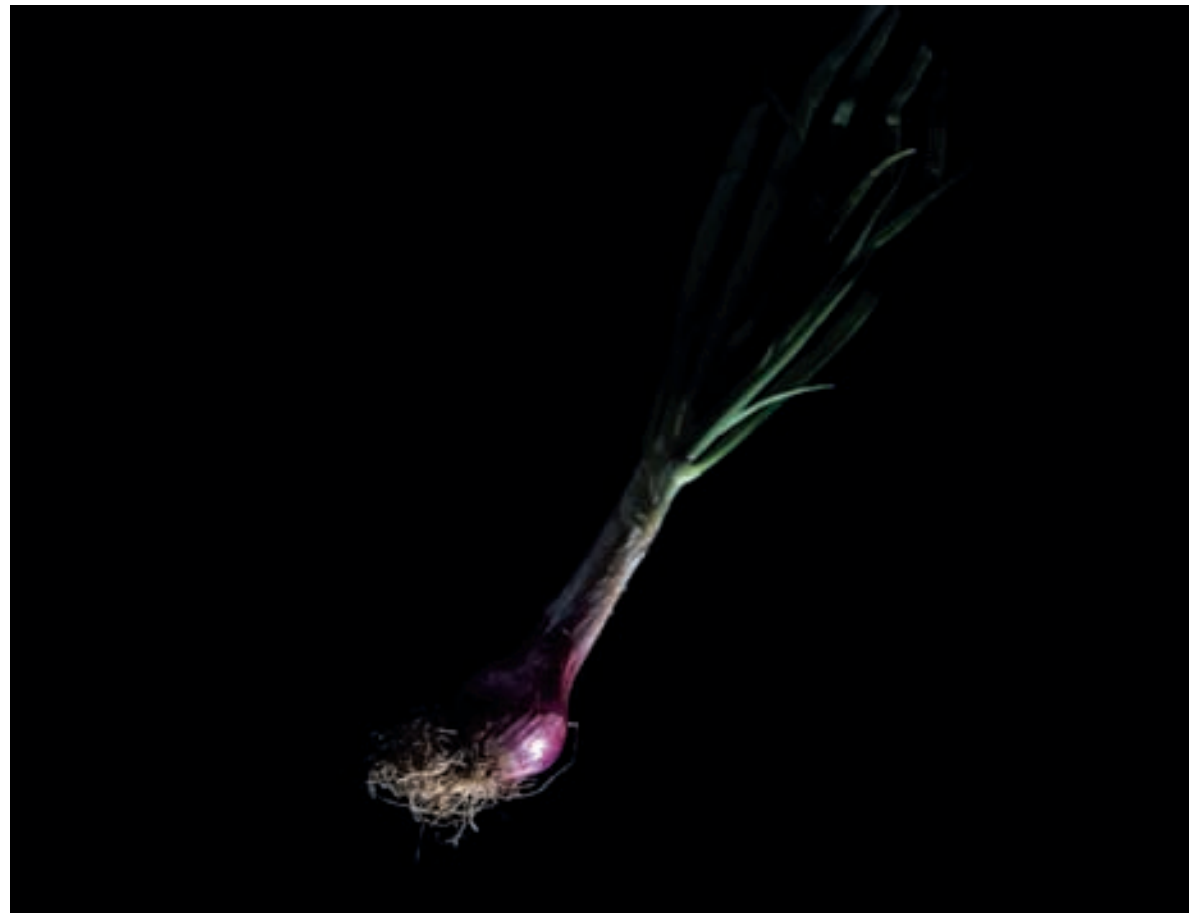


PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN/CACERES

ideas are genuine interpretations of the millenarian cultures which inhabited the region before colonisation, or whether they come with a dose of invention, or are even 'imagined', to use political scientist Benedict Anderson's terminology. The genesis of these ideas is certainly debatable, though the principles they capture certainly provide an interesting spiritual alternative which can prompt Bolivia and its citizens (or if the government has its way, even people from other countries) to rethink their values and priorities. In the meantime, it remains to be seen whether this paradigm can be translated into implementable economic policies. Not to mention the fact that, even if correct, this ancestral knowledge only captures the spirit and ideology of a portion of one or two nations in the country, out of the 36 which the government officially recognises in the constitution. Alexandra Meleán (see P.28) visits Uyuni during the winter solstice to examine the celebration of state-sponsored calendrical events, questioning to what extent they can be seen to represent the multiplicity of nations across the country. Perhaps the Andean-Amazonian construct is just that, a construct.

It's not hard to romanticise this ancestral cosmovision while overlooking the real practices of the people who live on the earth and feed on these roots. Contemporary Aymaras are undoubtedly rooted in their customs, though their postmodern-day (read: present day) exemplars are better known for their business acumen, and can even be said to have colonised other regions in the country through capitalist means, spending their newly-acquired wealth in a frenzy of hyper-consumerism (find any **preste** for an example of this). The picture that emerges is not a colourfully romantic Mamani Mamani painting, but that of an uprooted country where syncretism, along with all of its contradictions, is the norm. It is the picture of a country looking for roots among all the diversity of its present, rather than one of a country able to find them within its past.

Yet in choosing roots as the central theme for this issue we haven't only wanted to explore the earth and its significance in the literal sense. Maricielo Soliz (see P.22) meets the Chinese owner of a restaurant to understand what it means to set down roots in La Paz coming from over 10,000 miles away from home. And Caterina Stahl allows us the privilege of accompanying her on her journey back to her origins as she returns to her birthplace of Oruro where she was abandoned and adopted 21 years ago. ✕

**N.B.** Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue. Their meanings can be found in our glossary

By Amaru Villanueva Rance



## LOST AND FOUND



Caterina Stahl was abandoned twenty-one years ago in Oruro, Bolivia, as an infant. Adopted by parents from the United States, she has lived there her entire life. She returns to revisit places only known to her through anecdotes and photographs, and in the process re-lives a past made present through fragments.

Life is marked by milestones: learning how to tie your shoes, getting a driver's license, getting accepted into college. All these moments, big and small, make up a timeline of who you are. My own personal milestones include one I can't always share. It's of being left behind. Being left to the unknown. Being transferred into the arms of strangers who would eventually become my everything—my family.

When I was growing up, the story of my early life sounded like a fairytale when my parents told me about it. In July 1992, I was left on the steps of a bank in Oruro, Bolivia, when I was only months old. The police were called around 9:30 am, and I was quickly transferred to a local orphanage. The authorities placed an ad in the newspaper *La Patria* with my picture, hoping that my parents would come forward and take me back. They never did. I lived in the orphanage until I was about 6 months old.

### ORURO: THE JOURNEY HOME

I used to picture myself as an infant, swaddled in a blanket in a small basket hidden amidst the chaos of Oruro streets. I am afraid at the noise that surrounds me. I do not like the unfamiliar surroundings, and I struggle for comfort, wailing for the loving hands—or maybe not loving, but familiar hands—that have just left me. But the world keeps going, and I, from this moment on, am lost forever, unidentified, and in the worst way, abandoned.

Fast-forward to the present. I find myself yet again consumed by confusion and chaos, but this time I'm at the La Paz bus terminal, and I am no longer an infant, but a 21-year-old woman.

“¡POTOSÍ! ¡ORURO! ¡SUCRE!”

Oh my, which way do I go? I couldn't remember what bus was the best to take. I run into a woman who immediately begins writing me a ticket. Zip, zap, zam, I run through a hidden door and trip over a few *cholitas*, then board a bus that's already moving.

I relax. I'm in my element. I'd grown up in constant movement. I traveled down the Death Road to Coroico with my adoptive mom when I was months old. I used to climb out of my crib when I was 2 years old. I'd climb anything to move ever higher and faster. I've chased everything from my dreams—boys, hockey pucks,

and moving buses in La Paz.

No surprise, then, that instead of staying in my comfort zone, I moved to La Paz during my last free summer before graduating college, before entering the adult world. I always knew I had to come back to Bolivia. It's where I began, where my roots are.

The bus drops me off on a street corner in Oruro. Panic takes over my body. I'm so alone, and I'm so American. I finally managed to find my hotel room. Sitting on my bed underneath the Jesus figurine nailed to the wall, I can't shake the outskirts of Oruro from my mind. The poverty in the surrounding towns is appalling. The broken and crumbling buildings look so poor, sad, dusty, and deserted. The city center, though, is much more built up than I'd imagined—there's even a large digital billboard in one of its streets!

I feel like I'm looking into a goldfish tank. I thought that I would be inside the tank here, with everyone else. In La Paz, I didn't mind being a typical tourist, peering inside the tank. But in Oruro, I expected to be inside the tank. I find myself looking at everyone from the outside, the same way I feel in the United States sometimes. I am an American—I have American dreams, an American accent, an American passport—but when I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror I look alien, different from my family and friends. And here, too, in Bolivia, I might look similar to everyone else, but when I open my mouth it's clear I don't belong. I feel like I'm caught in a limbo of sorts—love from my family and friends surrounds me back at home, but a desire to know more crushes me. Here I am now, though, looking for answers, looking for the truth to set me free.

### RETURNING TO MY ROOTS

I finally find the courage to leave my hotel, and I walk on autopilot to the place where I was abandoned: La Plaza 10 de Febrero.

I'd always pictured this place as cold, all stone and dull grey, but it's the opposite. Gardens are scattered around the plaza, and gold statues of animals and cherubs

decorate the fountain at the center. Kids climb the statues, couples lounge on the benches, and people flow like traffic in all different directions, entering and exiting the plaza.

The bank where I was left—now a Banco Bisa—looks simple. It's a brown and white building with little traffic on the outside. The emotion I feel isn't so much

## WHEN YOU DREAM ABOUT SOMETHING FOR SO LONG, IT BECOMES A FUZZY PICTURE IN YOUR MIND TO FILE AWAY WITH PAST FANTASIES.

from seeing the bank, but knowing that twenty-one years ago my mother or my father walked these streets with me. Maybe they sat on the bench I'm sitting on now, waiting for my new fate to unfold. Maybe they walked away quickly with eyes like two shining stones at the bottom of a deep well, crying for the baby that would never again be theirs.

I sit in the plaza trying to let go of an anger I'd been in denial about throughout my whole life. I never wanted to be mad. I've had a better life than my birth parents could ever have imagined. It's hard to know sometimes which is better: to be in poverty but still a direct growth from my original roots, or to have that second chance, like pollen blown away by the wind to germinate and grow, lay down roots elsewhere so very far away.

I could have been the little girl I see running through a field of trash, collecting anything reusable. I could have been that cholita begging for money on the street, whom passersby ignore. A kid with a wad of pink balloons runs across the road. Life goes on.

### THE DISCOVERY

It's the morning of June 30, and I've found nothing but dead ends. I get hit on instead of helped out, I can't find any of the offices that might have information. I am losing faith. I feel like a pinball, bouncing from location to location through the town in a pointless search for clues to

CONTINUES ON PAGE 10

my past. People start to recognize me as I pass by them again and again throughout the day. I'm hungry and discouraged; the clues to my past that I picked up in La Paz have led nowhere. The signs are te-

What catches my eye is the name 'Gota de Leche'—'Drop of Milk'—a specific orphanage for children ages 6 and younger. My parents had told me I was left in an orphanage fitting that description. I

At first I'm too overwhelmed to tell her anything. Finally, I produce my adoption paperwork and lay it on the table and begin to tell her my story. Before I know it, I have an address for Gota de Leche,



ling me to give up.

After a moment of weakness and self-pity I realize there's no other option but to continue looking. I remember someone told me that orphanages in Oruro are not referred to as orphanages but 'hogares de

find a second article from last year about plans to renovate **Gota de Leche**. There is hope!

I run to the fancy hotel in town, hoping someone might speak English. 'Does anyone, anyone around here speak

## THE FENCED-IN AREA OUTSIDE THE HOGARES DE NIÑOS IS DUSTY AND GREY; LAUNDRY HANGING FROM CLOTHES LINES AND COLORFUL PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT OUTSIDE MAKE IT LOOK LESS OPPRESSIVE, ALMOST FRIENDLY

niños.' With the help of Google I find a newspaper article that will change my life.

It's an article about the seven orphanages in Oruro, written three years ago.

English?' I beg the hotel staff. They end up sending me to the office of tourism. No one there speaks English either. I'm sent out of the building to another office. That's where I find my angel, Alejandra Soliz.

and a possible lead on Marcela, the matriarch of the orphanage who cared for me. Alejandra tells me that it is common in Oruro for babies to be abandoned in trashcans and on the streets. 'For religious reasons mostly', she says. 'The mother almost always disappears immediately after. Even the police can't find them.' Fate can sometimes be kind, and Alejandra is proof of that. Before I know it, she puts me in a cab to the Gota de Leche orphanage. 'Make sure you come back after and tell me how it goes', she says as the cab door shuts.

### FINALLY FREE

When you dream about something for so long, it becomes a fuzzy picture in your mind to file away with past fantasies. My dad had told me he remembered crossing a set of train tracks

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on the way to the orphanage located on the outskirts of town, the same tracks that my cab is now crossing, and my dream begins to wash over me again.

The orphanage looks just as my parents had described—a barbed-wire fence surrounds it and an old playground in the courtyard. Matron Marcela is no longer there, but **hermana** Jhaana is supposed to help me. 'Estoy buscando a la hermana Jhaana', I say.

I find her sitting in an office piled high with papers. I know, somehow, that I'm in the right place. I take out my documents again and begin to sob. Hermana Jhaana knows what is happening. She knows I've wanted this moment for so

time there. There are two rooms for the infants to sleep, and one big room with rows and rows of beds for the older children. The floors are very shiny and the hallways tall, illuminated by big windows. The fenced-in area outside the **hogares de niños** is dusty and grey;

**I'M HUNGRY AND DISCOURAGED; THE CLUES TO MY PAST THAT I PICKED UP IN LA PAZ HAVE LED NOWHERE. THE SIGNS ARE TELLING ME TO GIVE UP.**

laundry hanging from clothes lines and colorful playground equipment outside make it look less oppressive, almost friendly.

All the babies are resting in a little room sprinkled with toys and sunlight. Julia

abandoned like I was, or left in hospitals after their births. Some have been taken away from mentally ill or alcoholic parents. There are also horror stories of babies left in trash cans and much worse. If the kids are not claimed by age 6, they are transferred into a foster system until they are 18. I've been given so many opportunities by living in the United States, so it makes me happy to hear that the kids

who don't get adopted can find success in life (teachers, doctors, architects) when they leave the system as young adults.

**THE 'WHY?'**

Being a journalist, I'm always looking for other peoples 'why?'—why they are they way they are, why they've followed one or another particular route in their lives. Why they live the way they do. It's always fascinated me; I've always had to know more, always had to know how the book ends before even reading it.

Through unexpected dedication and kindness of current and past employees of the Gota de Leche orphanage I finally found my 'why?' I've learned that Marcela now lives in La Paz, she remembers me, and I will be reunited with her soon. I'm also told by Doña Ely Blass, who worked at Gota de Leche thirty years ago, that all the babies in 1992 were adopted. They went to France, Argentina, and the United States, and, like me, many have come back to Oruro, searching for their beginnings, their 'why?' I find it comforting that I'm not alone in the way my life began. I am happy. I am finally free.

I close my story with these words directed to my birth parents.

*For whatever reason you had to say goodbye, I know that you left me with a gift. Your final gift, other than life, was to give me a world full of opportunities that would have been but a distant thought, setting on the horizon of my life, forever darkened by night. And now, because of you, the light of the sun keeps my dreams alive, and as long as I'm living, you are living with me too.✕*



long I've begun to believe it would never happen. She holds me and laughs with me at the impossibility of it all.

Fate is again in my favor when I discover an American volunteer, Julia, who helps me bridge the language gap. 'I can't believe you found this place', she says to me. 'No one ever finds this place—it's almost impossible.' Julia shows me where I lived during my

tells me everyone has a connection with certain children there, just like Marcela had with me. Each baby looks healthy and strong. It's like looking into a past I can't remember, but that's somehow right in front of me, like I'm looking back two decades at myself.

My story, I find, is all too common in Oruro. It's humbling to learn the stories behind each child. Some have been

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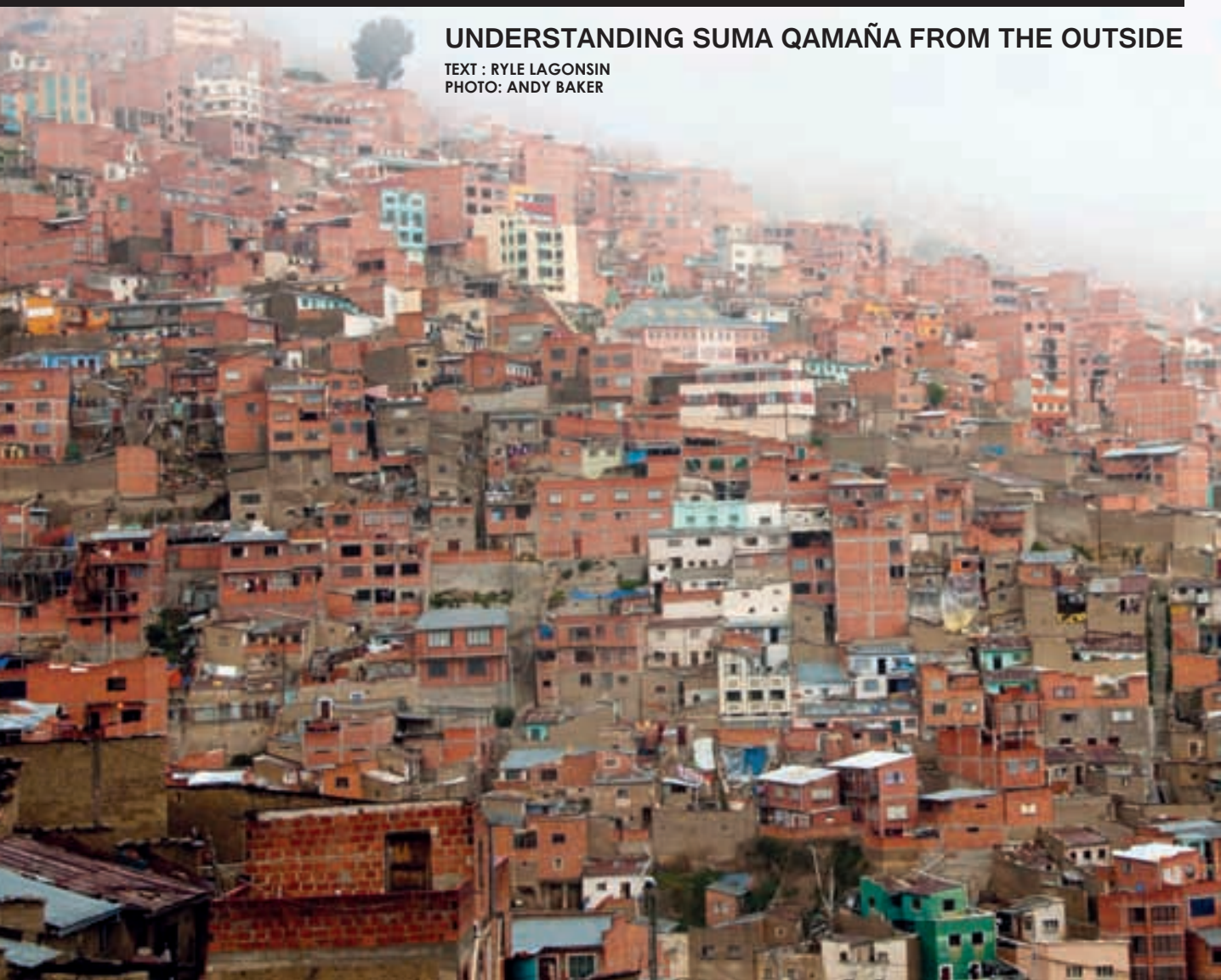
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# THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

UNDERSTANDING SUMA QAMAÑA FROM THE OUTSIDE

TEXT : RYLE LAGONSIN  
PHOTO: ANDY BAKER



*'We, the indigenous peoples, only want to Live Well, not better. Living Better is to exploit, plunder, and to rob, but Living Well is to live in brotherhood.'*

- Evo Morales

In the cold Andean regions of Bolivia—the Tierras del Altiplano—when a man and a woman form a union, it is customary to hold a great feast to formalise the **matrimonio**. The celebra-

tion, filled with music, dance, and drinking, is a way of revering and thanking the gods, and of publicly recognising the bond. After a moment of reflection and marital advice, the community wishes the pair well-being — that they do not only live well within their own world, but that they live well within all other worlds.

This was how I understood Simón Yampara's first explanation on the origin of the Suma Qamaña concept. It was an ideal, he told me, a desired state that not

only meant good life, but the accomplishment of holistic well-being.

Sitting across the table and shifting his gaze from his hands onto me, the Aymaran sociologist, who is credited as the primary proponent of this concept, talks with ease as I struggle to get all of his words onto my notebook. As he delves into history, he introduces me to a breadth of Aymara terminology which, for the sake of not interrupting him, I decide not to ask him to repeat. His second explanation was

arguably more interesting.

'I was not convinced by the Marxist Theory of class struggle,' he said. 'So, I went back because I wanted to find out what these concepts and what the economy meant in an Andean setting. But then, I found out there is no Aymara word for "economy." The closest idea they had was actually more all-encompassing, and that was Suma Qamaña.'

I will admit I do not know much, if anything at all, about Bolivian politics and economics. I may have shallow knowledge about some issues, though I know two months in this country is not enough to learn about them in detail. However, having come across one of the more interesting and, perhaps, controversial topics to spring from none other than this country - the issue of 'Vivir Bien' - I decided to take advantage of my stay here to at least acquaint myself with this intriguing 'new' idea.

*El Proceso de Cambio* is the name given to the broad-reaching social and political changes the government credits itself for putting into motion during the presidency of Evo Morales. According to the administration, necessary changes must be made for Bolivia to attain true nationhood; and these, so far, have included the nationalisation of energy resources, dismissal of foreign firms, the banishment of the United States ambassador, and most recently, the expulsion of USAID, the US aid agency.

But what has arguably been the most striking governmental action attributed to this process, was Morales's denouncement of neoliberal economic models and his proposal of an alternative paradigm. In declaring capitalism as the 'Path towards Death,' he presented a set of commandments that would supposedly serve as a means to save not just Bolivia, but humanity and the planet. The tenth, and last, of these being a 'revolutionary' concept that allegedly takes its roots from the ancient Andean Cosmovision.

This paradigm, supposedly based on respect, reciprocity, and harmony with beings in coexisting worlds, is the Morales Administration's proposed replacement to the selfish and destructive Western models of development. Achieving growth through the revival of the indigenous relationship with Pachamama, or

Mother Earth, is the 'Path to Life,' according to Evo Morales. This is *El Vivir Bien*. This is Suma Qamaña.

Admirable as it may sound, however, there have been several reservations regarding Suma Qamaña's viability as an alternative to capitalism and/or 'traditional' socialism, within the country and outside. Though certainly ideal as a theo-

**REAL ANDEAN COSMOVISION IS MORE LINKED TO PROGRESS AND THAT IS WHAT THE INDIGENOUS, LIKE MOST OTHER PEOPLE, WANT FOR THEMSELVES,' HE SAYS.**

retic construction, it seems far too vague for realistic application, and its origin and translation leave much to be answered as well.

'Indigenous Bolivians are principally pro-development,' says Pedro Portugal, director of the Bolivian newsletter *Pukarra*. 'They want to produce, they want to work. But the government romanticised the image of the indigenous peoples and made it inconsistent with reality. The people described in this Suma Qamaña could never be found anywhere because there is no such place. Suma Qamaña cannot even be found in indigenous political history. It just suddenly emerged.'

According to him, the Suma Qamaña presented by the government — the communitarian utopia occupied by 'good indigenous people' who consecrate nature and whose dedication is mainly on the preservation of their ancient way of living — is a myth. Real Andean Cosmovision is more linked to progress and that is what the indigenous, like most other people, want for themselves, he says.

'The indígenas are communitarian due to survival, not for its intrinsic virtue. The same people who are communitarian in the *campo*, when they go to the city and encounter economic and social changes, inevitably become *individualistas*,' he continues.

The government's basis for this developmental paradigm may not just be weak, but made up altogether. In fact, the vision it advances may not even be all that diffe-

rent from prevailing economic systems. At least, not as it would seem from what the government is actually doing. Judging by the fact that a large portion of Bolivia's national income still comes from the extraction and exportation of non-renewable resources, the internal contradictions are not at all hard to make out.

'Suma Qamaña is what the government

uses in discourse, but in reality, the Bolivian economy works under the classic system of capitalism. The government sells raw materials — for example, gas to Argentina and Brazil. It sells to anyone who wants to buy. It takes place under real economic mechanisms. The problem of the government is that it has to get out of its own contradiction with reality. Anything the government does is bound within the limits of the classical world. It has to stop distorting practice and discourse,' declares Portugal.

'Suma Qamaña is a paradigm of life,' according to Simón Yampara. 'But there are different kinds of good living for every type of person. Every horizon needs to be respected.'

Emphasising that the application of this idea as an economic concept would be equivalent to reducing its essence, he adds that the scope of Suma Qamaña goes beyond just this world. As far as it is concerned with material well-being, it also involves an important spiritual dimension. It never covers only one aspect.

So does this ultimately mean the government is not actually adhering to the paradigm it is supposedly reviving? Perhaps. The main problem is that the idea by itself remains too abstract and its lack of specificity makes it inevitable for action to contradict words. It is an arguably valiant cause to strive for this ideal, but as we might have known by now, what is good differs for every person. Who is to say, then, what is involved in Living Well and what Living Better consists in?x





The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? [...] We are part of the earth and it is part of us. [...] This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all.

*EXCERPTS FROM CHIEF SEATHL'S SPEECH ADDRESSED TO US PRESIDENT FRANKLIN PIERCE IN 1854*

PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES

# TRADITION UPROOTED

WHILE CONSUMERS HAVE BECOME MORE AND MORE CONSCIOUS, PRODUCERS ARE FIGHTING TO MANIFEST THIS CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE FOOD THEY PRODUCE. TRADITIONAL PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES ARE SIMPLE, AND AGRICULTURE JUST ISN'T SIMPLE ANYMORE. NEVERTHELESS, GROUPS HAVE SPROUTED ALL OVER LA PAZ THAT SEEK HONEST FOOD AND AIM TO CONSUME CONSCIOUSLY.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: DANIELLE CARSON

Upon exploring La Paz, it becomes apparent that definitions of conscious eating and humane production here are as diverse as Bolivia itself. In a country where the fruits and vegetables colour the streets, and cows that graze in the nearby mountains are being stuffed into Tucumanas days later, it would be expected that agricultural and consumption perspectives around conscious food differ greatly from the highly transgenic, yet veg-enthusiast United States.

As a vegetarian, I have always sought out soy products, whose meatless goodness made being vegetarian both easier and more enjoyable. Being told that vegetarianism is close to nonexistent in Bolivia, I was pleasantly surprised to see plenty of soy products and meatless options at food shops. In the United States, soy is widely

produced and perceived to be the Dorothy to meat's Wicked Witch From the West.

Soy, however, is not all it's cracked up to be. Bolivia has made me scrutinise soy as a transgenic product that causes damage to the Pachamama (Mother Earth), whose rights Bolivians are now constitutionally compelled to respect.

## PACHAMAMA TRANSGÉNICA

A transgenic is a genetically modified organism, a living thing, such as a plant, to which a new gene has been introduced, resulting in a change of its genetic makeup. This gene could be that of another plant or even another animal. Don't be irked; your vegetables don't have eyes.

For example, DNA is extracted from an organism, such as a tomato. A gene is

likewise extracted from the other organism in the form of the desired protein to implant into the tomato. The tomato gene is modified and fragmented, and a piece is then replaced with one from the new organism. In laymen's terms, genetic modification creates organisms that cannot be obtained in nature. It creates plants that are super resistant to weather, larger and more numerous. They're super plants.

Article 255 of the Bolivian Constitution prohibits the production, importation and commercialisation of GM foods. A set of laws reiterates this principle. The law specifically prohibits the introduction of packages that involve genetically modified seeds for a product that grows native to Bolivia. If non-native crops are introduced to Bolivia, such as soy, rice, tomatoes, cotton, corn, there will be standards established for their

production. In 2005, Resolution N° 135/05 freed maize from any possibility of transgenic contamination. In 2009, Supreme Decree 181 (art. 80) prohibited the State from purchasing GM foods, and bans their use as part of school meals. Similarly, the Law of Mother Earth establishes 'the right to preservation of the differentiation and variety of beings that make up Mother Earth', banning their genetic modification and any artificial modification of their structure. In its 24th article, this law further establishes the implementation of necessary measures for the gradual elimination of GM products from the country and its markets.

All of the above would make us reasonably believe that Bolivia is safely protected from any GM presence on its soil or in its domestic market. Yet according to TUNUPA, an informational magazine from Funda-

ción Solón, in 2010 Bolivian land contained 0.9 million hectares of transgenic soy, ranking it as the 11th country in terms of transgenic crop production, and placing it in the category of 'mega-producer', despite its status as a developing country,

Sources close to the Vice-Minister of Rural Development deny the above data, although admitting to the possibility of insignificant amounts existing in Bolivian markets.

In the first week of June, the Bolivian government announced the importation of flour from the US, prompting broad speculation of this flour being genetically modified. Yet the government sustains that it comes from corporations that work with such crops. The mystery still remains.

## CROPS AS LEECHES

Truth is, genetically modified crops have not been proven to do significant harm to humans (though they do in mice, which seem to develop tumors from anything if administered in excess). The most prominent worry is that the implanted gene may be a hidden allergen to the consumer. Conversely, transgenic plants have been known to boost nutritional value in some foodstuffs.

According to researcher Manuel Morales Álvarez, the issue is not that transgenic food is unlabeled, but rather that the most significant harm this food does occurs before it hits the shelves. Homogenising the land that is naturally diverse harms the biodiversity that helps plants grow naturally in the first place, leaving the once fertile Pachamama depleted and useless.

The law seems to specifically protect Pachamama who, like a woman, cannot feed her children beyond what comes from her body. While those crops that are native to Bolivia, such as quinoa, chia, sesame and amaranth, are easily organically produced, crops such as soy that have been forcefully introduced have caused significant damage to the land. The cultivation of soy absorbs the fertility of the earth, and combined with the pesticides and fertilisers, makes the soil near useless. In Bolivia, 100,000 acres of land have been degraded due to soy.

Álvarez says that compared to other countries, Bolivian food products are not hugely genetically modified. Brazil and the United States shadow Bolivia as far as GM landmass is concerned, with 30 and 70 percent more hectares of transgenic crops, respectively, while Argentina follows closely behind. Over the past 30 years, around 80% of the South American continent has become involved in the production of soy, prompting Miguel Crespo from Probioma to consider this the creation of a 'Republica Sojera', a trans-border territory he calls a 'Soy Republic'.

In some ways, transgenic crops have helped farmers. According to Álvarez, the climate in Bolivia is so variable, and the soil often so unyielding, that a little modification in the plants' genetic properties helps farmers by increasing the volume and quality of produce. However, farmers are inconvenienced by their newfound dependence on transgenic seeds, as the price has risen drastically. In 2007, the cost of cultivating one hectare of GM soy was \$300, compared to \$450 in 2012, a 50% increase.

El Instituto Boliviano de Comercio Exterior have voiced their concerns around this set of laws, claiming that transgenic crops should be allowed due to the economic necessity for exporters to remain competitive.

According to Enrique Castañón of Fundación Tierra, exporters of transgenic crops have been disproportionately affected by this law. This is because transgenic seeds are increasingly expensive to purchase, and continually more expensive to produce as some of farmers' profits must go towards the source of these super seeds.

## TRANSGENIC MEANS OUTSOURCING

According to Miguel Crespo of Probioma, transgenics are deeply enmeshed in an international trade dynamic, resulting in **extranjero** control over some Bolivian resources. He estimates that 80% of the resources used in soy production are imported from various countries and that 66% of the production of soy in the hands of foreigners. Enrique Castañón at Fundación Tierra similarly believes that Bolivia is 'losing its food sovereignty'.

Traditional farming techniques that define the country are being compromised due to external pressures. While farmers use

**HERE IN BOLIVIA THERE IS A TRADITION TO WORK IN HARMONY WITH THE SOIL, AND THE BEST WAY TO DO THAT IS THROUGH ORGANIC PRODUCTION,' MEJÍA AFFIRMS. 'THIS IS SOMETHING THAT COMES FROM HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, IT'S NOT NEW FOR US**

their manual tools as quickly as they can to produce a high quality, organic product, neighbouring countries are reaping and packaging products that multiply as rapidly as bacteria.

## KEEPING THE ROOTS ALIVE

Paola Mejía is the manager of CABOLQUI, which has been working since 2005 to increase organic production of major products native to Bolivia. She said that while Quinoa, their major focus, is grown more or less easily using traditional techniques, many products, such as soy, are more difficult to grow without the help of chemicals and genetic modification.

'Organic production is very difficult, for us its almost impossible to see how we can work with organic soy because all of the variables against this organic standard.'

Mejía said that CABOLQUI has worked closely with the government to produce organic quinoa, at least. While the government supports all its statues in the production, exportation and distribution of quinoa, Mejía could not comment on the government's work with soy and other potentially transgenic crops. Mejía estimates that around 80% of quinoa production in Bolivia is currently organic, with 12% GM and the remainder

in transition. According to Mejía, organic producers receive 25% more profit for their crops, as well as priceless health benefits as they avoid pesticides. Mejía said she predicts that in the future there will be an international standard for organic quinoa, stretching beyond Peru and Bolivia.

'Here in Bolivia there is a tradition to work in harmony with the soil, and the best way to do that is through organic production,' Mejía affirms. 'This is something that comes from hundreds of years ago, its not new for us.'

While working harmoniously with the soil is part of tradition, Mejía realises that maintaining tradition will not on its own bring food to the world's tables. She lamented that there is no way for traditional techniques to provide for the international market, which has been ravenously demanding organic quinoa. For this reason, new organic production techniques are being sought.

'We are very committed to this organic standard, yet the only way to increase supply is by increasing yield of this system of production.'

External pressures from GMO monsters such as Monsanto have set the bar high, forcing countries to give into transgenic crops. According to information from TUNUPA, an informative publication from Fundación Solón, some have no choice but to buy transgenic seeds, or worse, they have no idea that their plants are modified. What can be done with artisanal tools is no longer sufficient, and Mother Nature is not producing quickly enough to supply a hungry world. For bolivians, organic is tradition; their goal is 'vivir bien'. Sadly, while organic is always a part of indigenous, what is indigenous is not always organic.

## FROM THE FIELDS TO THE MARKETS

Of the many markets in La Paz, the market called 20 de Enero runs **Lunes** to **Lunes** in Chasquipampa, Zona Sur. These piles of fruits and vegetables are undoubtedly the herbivore's dream. According to Marcela Poma, much of the produce

simply leaves the farming region at the foothills of the Illimani to be sold at the market, she explains as she motions over her shoulder to the sun-drenched hills. The main purpose of the market is to cater to the surrounding community within a 15-mile radius.

But don't be fooled by the romanticised image of unwrapped, unmarked piles of fruit and women draped in shawls carrying sacks of produce on their backs. Vendor Alicia Arteaga sat in front of her piles of fruit, weighing each piece with her eyes and pricing them for interested shoppers. I asked her if the fruit was organic.

'Claro,' she said confidently.

When I asked her if chemicals and pesticides were used in their production, to my surprise, she also replied affirmatively. When I finally asked her to define organic, she subtly started a conversation elsewhere, avoiding any further questions.

## CONSUMPTION-CONSCIOUS COMMUNITIES

Although it becomes apparent that many locals have no concept of organic, the city has bloomed with organisations, stores and restaurants which share the goal of maintaining conscious forms of consumption, be it through abstaining from meat, transgenic products, or both. For many of these conscious communities, the objective is not simply for people to be conscious of their own health, but more broadly of the health of the environment.

Namas Té, a vegan restaurant, boasts 'the only vegetarian salteña in La Paz', while Tierra Sana, popular amongst foreigners and locals alike, offers a savory vegetarian lunch for two. While the menu at local vegetarian restaurants are completely meat-free, organic is not always guaranteed.

Centro Nutricional Ecológico opened on Calle Zolio Flores about ten years ago, and aims to sell whole wheat grain products, often infused with quinoa and soy. The products are entirely organic, and quite affordable as well.

'It's very difficult to acquire organic wheat,' tells me Rosemary Tintaya Pacheco, who runs the store. 'The price of organic wheat has increased'. Pacheco recognises that her clients prefer to



eat whole grains and organic produce. During our conversation she sells multiple bags of whole-wheat buns.

'It's healthier to consume organic, it prevents sickness,' Pacheco said. While she isn't vegetarian, she mainly eats vegetables—and always whole wheat. 'Not many people realise that transgenic food harms health', she adds.

On the same street, business owner Dominga Mamani has sold natural products sourced from the Andes since 2011. Surrounded by boxes of completely natural quinoa and grains, she said that the products go directly from the earth to the shelves.

However not all conscious eating efforts are grass-roots local initiatives. Herbalife is a California-based company which sells natural products and food supplements to customers in 88 countries, reporting net sales of over \$4bn in 2012. Giselle Zuleta, a local saleswoman for the company, believes that, 'Everything that comes out of the ground should be natural.' Paradoxically, Giselle wasn't sure if her product, imported from the US, was completely organic. She was only able to add, 'I don't agree with chemicals being added'.

2013 is the International Year of Organic Food, a year for the growing community of food-conscious people to celebrate the movement that, according to Mirna Fernandez of the Laboratorio de Comida Consciente, has grown

much over the past 7 years. 'Not only is it about eating vegetarian but also about asking where the food comes from,' she said. 'We are few, but we are growing.'

El Laboratorio para la Comida Consciente started about a year ago. Since, they have offered vegetarian meals, taught healthy cooking, and held discussions on controversial topics involving conscious consumption. Their aim is to change perspectives.

For these people, the push to eat consciously accompanies opposing foods that produce excessive greenhouse gases, climate injustice, and compromise human rights.

Through specific initiatives, they seek to change attitudes towards eating in a society known for its traditional approach to food. 'Avoiding meat once a day is a start. On this day, we invite everyone we can. No meat, no soya. Sharing the food is the soul of it all.'

Paola Mejía of CABOLQUI believes that the ripening movement in Bolivia mirrors trends from other places in the world, where people are willing to pay higher prices for food that is produced ethically, with a devoid of genetic and chemical impurities. For her organisation and its partners, roots are what matters. Western demand and innovations in methods of production are destroying cultural and biological diversity. That is what Bolivians, through seeking different approaches to food and conscious consumption, are resisting. ✕

# FROM THE GREAT WALL TO THE ANDES

Setting Down Oriental Roots in the Andes

TEXT: MARICIELO J. SOLIS  
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES



What does it mean to be Bolivian? Does it require listening to **Morenadas**, the Afro-Bolivian music from the Andes; eating **salteñas**; and drinking **Paceña**? Does one have to have Bolivian blood in their veins, Bolivian roots in their lineage?

There is not an exact answer to that question since many Bolivians have different views of what a Bolivian is. However, most people would agree that what truly makes a person Bolivian is the desire to feel like one. After all, people cannot embrace the traditions of

the country's culture if they do not see themselves as Bolivians in the first place.

This is the case of Lu Qing, a 50-year-old Chinese immigrant who, even though she was born in China, considers herself to be "muy paceña"—simply because she feels like one.

Lu Qing's story is full of adventure, with both failure and success. It's representative, too, of stories of many Chinese immigrants who end up in Bolivia and consider themselves to be Bolivians with Asian roots.

Chinese immigrants first developed their own communities in Bolivia during the late twentieth century. Job opportunities in mining and agriculture attracted them to Bolivia with the promise of a better life. As a result, Chinese immigrants settled in Bolivia and created a new home for themselves far away from their native country.

But unlike other countries in Latin America, Bolivia has received a relatively small number of Chinese immigrants. Peru, for example, has the largest population of Chinese migrants in Latin America, approximately 5,000,

and the number of Peruvians with Chinese ancestry is around 5 million.

In Bolivia, the number of Chinese immigrants is dramatically less. During the 1990s, there were just 500 Chinese immigrants living in Bolivia, and in 2001 the number increased only by a hundred.

'It has been sixteen years since I arrived from China', Lu Qing declared with a nervous smile and a candid look in the comfort of her beautiful classic looking Chinese restaurant located on Avenida 20 de Octubre in Sopocachi, La Paz.

Lu Qing decided to come to Bolivia with her family in 1997 to find work. She was 34. Her husband and uncle had bought some land in Bolivia, on which they wanted to develop a gold mine. But right after they arrived, her husband lost all the money he had invested in the mine. 'It was very hard for my family', Lu Qing says.

However, Lu Qing and her husband dusted themselves off and decided to open a Chinese restaurant—or, as they're known in Bolivia and Peru, a **chifa**. "I needed to pay for the education of my child," she says. 'I needed to survive, so I worked hard to open a chifa.'

The word **chifa** emerged in Peru during the 1930s. Originally from the Cantonese language, it means 'eat rice'. The popularity of **chifas** increased enormously during the nineteenth century, and later became part of the gastronomical tradition of Peru. As a result, the term became popular in other parts of Latin America.

**Chifas** in Bolivia serve a variety of dishes that contain noodles, rice, seafood and meat, just as any other Chinese restaurant. However, Bolivian traditions are mixed in. For example, minced **rocoto** pepper usually accompanies the soy sauce in Bolivian **chifas**, and typical Bolivian drinks, such as **mate de coca** and **chicha**, are served.

After much work and effort, Lu Qing and her family made it through some very difficult times, but eventually were able to run a successful **chifa**.

'It was my Chinese roots that allowed my business to become successful', Lu Qing says. She points to the fact that she grew up in China, where she was taught from a young age to be disciplined and punctual. She considers those qualities to be extremely important for everything she has achieved.

'My **chifa** always does well because it is punctual. It serves food of quality and it

has a responsible staff,' she says. 'I could not have done it otherwise.'

Although Lu Qing's Chinese roots are an important aspect of her life because they represent who she is, living in La Paz for so long has influenced her too. 'I love the food and music from Bolivia,' she says with excitement. 'I learned to speak Spanish in Bolivia, and I have so many Bolivian friends that I feel Bolivian.'

Lu Qing believes that her personal attention and interaction with her customers is fundamental to the prosperity of her business. 'I am a people's person,' she reveals.

Because Lu Qing decided to adopt the Bolivian culture as her own, instead of looking at it as foreign, it made her new life in Bolivia easier, and

it allowed her to assimilate into Bolivian society rapidly. 'I like to learn about the Bolivian culture because Bolivia is my home', she says. 'It is

the place where I live now.'

But the adoption of a new culture in Bolivia can also run the other way. The presence of Chinese people in La Paz has also motivated some Bolivians to adopt certain cultural aspects of the Chinese. 'Many Bolivian people like Chinese culture', Lu Qing says. 'Many of my clients like to practice **tai chi**, because it is good for the health, and others love to drink Chinese tea.'

The Chinese language itself is also becoming increasingly popular. 'Many students study Chinese in the schools and universities regularly now', Lu Qing says.

Looking at the small world that Lu Qing has built in La Paz for her and her family, it can be seen that many Chinese immigrants to Bolivia have created a new life far from home by adopting Bolivian culture.

However, in their quest, they had not forgotten their own roots; instead, they seek to integrate them within the Bolivian culture in order to break racial stereotypes and create an alliance that can improve the relationship between the Chinese and the Bolivian communities. ✕



ILLUSTRATION: GIELIZZA MARIE CALZADO

# RESEMBLANCE

TRAVELLING 20,000 KM FROM THE PHILIPPINES, RYLE LAGONSIN ARRIVES IN BOLIVIA TO FIND CHILLING PARALLELS BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES' REGIONALISM AND IDENTITY CRISES. CAN EITHER SET OF NATIONS DISENTANGLE THEIR CONVOLUTED HISTORIES AND PREJUDICES TO ACT AFFIRMATIVELY AS A COHESIVE WHOLE?

I am Filipino. When I leave my country for another one, my passport will always say I am Filipino. But within the Philippines, I am Tagalog. I am not Bisaya nor Kapampangan. Within my country, I am someone else. I have a specific identity.

But what does identity even mean? I can imagine Bolivianos, inside the country and out, asking themselves this same question.

For the last two months, Bolivia has become my temporary home; La Paz, specifically. And although at first, it felt as if I had hurled myself from one extreme to another, I have become quite used to this new environment. So much so, that it no longer feels like a completely foreign world to me. Because inasmuch as landlocked Bolivia contrasts the archipelagic Philippines, I have come to realise that these two countries share a resemblance deep beyond their stark physical differences.

A rich indigenous heritage, a long history under Spanish rule, a blessed and cursed wealth of extractable resources: these are obvious similarities that could

be noticed by anyone who has ever been to, or at the very least read about, both countries. Along with these, one could also say they share political and economic instability and, as probably known by more people, a lingering third world status.

However, none of these pertain to the kind of resemblance that has caught my attention. What I really mean by the word is a face: the shared face of an identity crisis.

Just recently, I went on a city tour of Bolivia's famous White City, Sucre. Wanting to impress my guide, I remember saying something along the lines of 'Bolivians are all called Paceaños, right?'. Ignorant assumption, apparently.

'No, I am definitely not **Paceaña!** I am Sucreñese!', was her response. Let me clarify, it was not said as severely as it looks like in print. The response was, in fact, followed by an I-understand-you're-a-tourist kind of laugh.

Whether and how much she took offense, I would not know. She *did*

warn me other people, specifically **cam-bas**, could take such a statement very seriously. Why? Historical rifts, stereotypes, government favoritism—the list goes on. The bottom line is that many Bolivians just don't want to be associated with other Bolivian groups.

The revelations from that day felt both interestingly and disturbingly familiar. Interesting, because of the stories my guide told me, especially surrounding the lingering bitterness between Sucre and La Paz (over where the government seat of power is located). That one sounded a lot like the history of Cebu and Manila, two important places in my country. Disturbing, because of her firm declaration that she was not Paceaña, but Sucreñese. That one sounded a lot like hearing a Tagalog firmly denying being a Bisaya. In fact, that one could have sounded a lot like hearing myself speak.

Why is this such a big deal to us, Filipinos and Bolivianos? Why is it so necessary for us to point out which group we belong to and disassociate ourselves from the rest, who are nonetheless of the same nationality?

One just needs to watch a YouTube video of some Fil-Am singer giving a good audition on American Idol, spurring thousands of comments that repeat the words "Pinoy (Filipino) Pride!" Or observe how an international Club Bolívar win rouses the entire country to proclaim 'Viva Bolivia!'

Yet, mistake a Quechua for an Aymara and watch them take it as an insult. And don't even think about straying from the

posh Metro Manila accent if you don't want to be the butt of jokes.

It is a fascinatingly ironic, and ultimately disappointing, mindset how people from these countries project a solid national union only in times of supposed pride in

front of foreigners, but crumble to their own factions within their own borders.

It would be pointless to blame the diversity of peoples in both Bolivia and the Philippines, but it cannot be denied either that with so many different customs, beliefs, and ways of thinking; disagreements and prejudiced conditioning *are* bound to happen.

Should this issue of lineage be reduced

## BECAUSE INASMUCH AS LANDLOCKED BOLIVIA CONTRASTS THE ARCHIPELAGIC PHILIPPINES, I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT THESE TWO COUNTRIES SHARE A RESEMBLANCE DEEP BEYOND THEIR STARK PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES

to a binary of inferiority or of superiority? White skin, light-colored eyes, and foreign accents—this is no less of a recipe for instant celebrity in the Philippines as it is in Bolivia. And, consciously or unconsciously, we all play a role in reproducing these biases.

Perhaps I have had the slightest privilege of personally seeing two sides of the world confronting the same social sickness. But as I said, its manifestation in both places is uncanny. For this reason, it is not hard for me to imagine the questions in my mind running within that of an ordinary Boliviano as well.

I am sure it would take long before either of us find a proper definition to our dubious 'identities'. But for now, I

say I am Filipino. And by me, this is to acknowledge that I am Tagalog, I am Bisaya, I am Kapampangan, I am of every indigenous Filipino group. I hope my Boliviano brother, too, would accept being every Boliviano as the answer to his own identity questions. ✕

# THE ROOTS OF THE ANDES

IN BOLIVIA, CULTURE, CIVILIZATION, AND THE ANDEAN MARKET ECONOMY REVOLVE AROUND THE CULTIVATION OF THE POTATO.

TEXT: WILMER MACHACA  
TRANSLATION: ALEXANDRA MELEÁN  
PHOTO: JUAN MANUEL LOBATON

All of the greatest cultures and civilizations have been built around a lake or a sustainable river', argues Alexis Pérez, my Latin American History Professor. This is certainly the case for many villages built around Lake Titicaca —such as the Tihuanacota, Chiripa or Aymara—which also share the commonality of growing a crop which has mythic significance: the potato.

The origins of the potato crop began around 8,000 years ago near Lake Titicaca. Several thousands of years earlier, communities of hunters and gatherers populated the south of the continent. Potato plants grew in abundance in the fields around the lake, even before the settlement of the first communities.

Native stories about the potato's origin are varied and involve everything from illas and chullpas to condor societies, or versions involving toads, foxes, and of course the lake, around which extraordinary tales take place. Cultivation of the potato has not only determined the agricultural calendar in the Andean world, but its production has been tied to the Andean cosmovision, as well as to the Pachamama, linking it with the fertility of the land and the people.

The cultivation of potatoes requires rotation and rest. That is to say, their successful harvest depends on the quantity and frequency of rain, as well as an ap-

propriate period for the land to rest. It's indeed possible this very practice gave origin and sense to the rotation of **Ma-llkus**, as well as to the **Ayllu** system.

When the colonisers arrived, work on the land owned by the community in the **Ayllu** began to deteriorate, and the Spanish policy of the **encomienda** was established, producing serious damage to the social organisation of the Andean world. This schism destabilised local spatial relations, with an ensuing weakening of the ecological organisation. The destruction of the **Ayllu** generated total confusion in the Andean villages.

During the Republic, different reforms were implemented. The most transcendental changes took place in 1953 after a revolution which shook the socioeconomic order of the country. The revolutionary project aimed towards indigenous civilization through processes of 'mestización' (hybridization), 'castellanicación' (spreading of the Spanish language as a lingua franca), and the parcelling off of rural land. Many traditional values were transformed in the process. The market economy took over and came to govern the production of potatoes in the Andes. This brought about a peculiarly hybrid situation, a communitarian system working on parcelled land, and subject to market commercialisation.

The subsistence of Andean population has historically relied on the cultivation of this crop. Low estimates posit that 200 varieties have been domesticated, and according to research put together during the international year of the potato in 2008, there could be as many as 5000 varieties produced in over 100 countries. According to the Institute for the Development of Rural America (IPDRS), today the potato is the third most important crop in the human diet, after rice and wheat.

After the colonial era and successive waves of European migration, the potato

reached all corners of the world. Sailors and governors of colonies were among the first to appreciate importance of this tuber, as it fed them during long journeys. Missionaries and colonisers spread the cultivation of potato to all continents, which is how it landed in Europe and Africa in the 16th Century, followed by Asia and North America in the 17th Century, and continuing on to Australia and Oceania in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

In global terms, China is currently the largest grower of potatoes, followed by Russia, India and the United States. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 325 million tonnes of potatoes are produced each year. The world's demand is now only owed to its nutritional properties (being a

great source of calories, micro-nutrients and proteins), but due to its uses in medicine, the production of textiles and paper, as well as applications in pharmaceutical, mining and oil industries.

In Bolivia, it is not surprising to find the potato present

in a large proportion of national dishes. Without her, life would be more difficult in the Andean world. No Andean family will lack potato or its derivatives such as **tunta** or **chuño**. Neither can it be absent from parties, social or public events. I ask myself, would there be an **apthapi** without potato? I don't think so.

This is why the significance of the potato goes beyond its importance in the origin of Andean societies. It has been instrumental in feeding humanity as a whole. Paradoxically, colonisation allowed the potato to colonise the world, becoming one of the true legacies left by the journey Columbus embarked upon in 1492. Over five centuries later, the true riches weren't to be found in the gold which colonisers so recklessly sought. The true, renewable wealth of the land was to be found underneath the earth and initially hidden to their eyes: the potato. ✕

**ACCORDING TO THE INSTITUTE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AMERICA (IPDRS), TODAY THE POTATO IS THE THIRD MOST IMPORTANT CROP IN THE HUMAN DIET, AFTER RICE AND WHEAT.**

# UYUNI WILLAKUTI

Extending its reach beyond the sacred site of Tiwanaku, in 2013 the government has decided to hold further celebrations for the Aymara New Year in El Salar de Uyuni. In a move that transforms the touristic into sacred, tradition thus continues to be reinvented.

TEXT AND PHOTO: ALEXANDRA MELEÁN

**B**lood stains the pearly, white ground of the Uyuni salt flats, flowing from the necks of two decapitated llamas. Coca leaves adorn the fur of the two, as they lie bound and gagged, fatally compromised in a sacrifice to la Pachamama (Mother Earth).

I haphazardly scramble up *Isla Jithiksa*, a sharp, crumbly rock mass about the size of a carnival cruise ship. From the top, I have a bird's eye view of a government-organised festival held in honor of **Willakuti**.

Rumour has it that President Evo Morales will be here. Upon leaving La Paz, it is still unclear if he would choose Uyuni over Tiwanaku for the New Year's celebration. Traditionally, Tiwanaku has been the stage for this momentous occasion due to its archaeological status as a sacred site at the root of Andean culture.

Maybe he'll be here. And if he shows up, maybe he'll say a thing or two about the future of Bolivia's national treasure, its lithium. Perhaps he'll talk about international trade.

Over the salt flats, a dreamy pink horizon tints the sky. In the north, the sun rises, marking the beginning of the winter solstice. Music, dance and ritual follow.

Sunlight illuminates the Andean Mountains. An Aymaran priest lights a fire at the top of *Isla Jithiksa*. The burning kindle is an offering to *Tatainti*. '¡Jallalla!' he says, and

everyone follows.

Evo Morales does not show up, but his daughter Eva does. In keeping with an Aymara ritual, she pours alcohol onto the fur of the two llamas and takes a swig from the same bottle. Later, I walk up to her, kiss her cheek and shake her hand. She tells me Andean traditions can be preserved.

'Young people must come to events like these,' she says. 'They should share more

me a stage, a cultural platform representing Bolivia's plurinational identity. As of 2009, the Bolivian constitution states the country is, 'founded in decolonisation, without discrimination or exploitation'. Cultural rediscovery unifies the 36 indigenous communities in Bolivia that demand adequate representation.

'The Plurinational State of Bolivia, has to include all of our indigenous communities,' says indigenous leader Pascual Topo de Villaroel, 'like in the times of

Tawantinsuyo and Qollasuyu. Otherwise the Plurinational State of Bolivia does not exist'.

*I stare at a framed portrait of Tupac Amaru, the last Incan emperor before the Spanish colonised Bolivia, which lies at Villaroel's feet.*

Felix Cardenas, Vice Minister for Decolonisation proclaims, 'we have been submissive to

other traditions for a long time, but today is the Andean and Amazonian New Year. Thanks to our President we can keep moving forward toward better conditions in our country.'

*In the distance, the national Bolivian flag blows softly in the wind next to the national Wiphala flag. Felix and Eva dance to the sound of Andean drums and panflutes. In the rich salt flats of Bolivia, a new agricultural year begins for the indigenous Aymara nation.*

of their lives with our indigenous people'.

Quickly, the mood turns overtly political. In a matter of seconds, the salt flats beco-



## EVO MORALES DOES NOT SHOW UP, BUT HIS DAUGHTER EVA DOES



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# TRADITIONAL

LUNES	Monday	WILLAKUTI	"Return of the sun," in Aymara
CHOLITAS	Andean/Amazonian Indigenous women	CAMPESINO	Working native of a rural area
HOGARES DE NIÑOS	Orphanage	MATRIMONIO	Wedding
GOTA DE LECHE	Drop of milk	PRESTE	Big party offered normally by a wealthy member of a community, most of the time it is part of a larger celebration such as Gran Poder festival.
HERMANA	Sister	CAMBA	Colloquial term for someone from the eastern lowlands of Bolivia, more specifically from Santa Cruz.
MORENADA	Afro-Bolivian music from the Andes	EXTRANJERO	Foreigner
PACEÑA	A female who was born in La Paz	AYLLU	Political, social, economic, and administrative unit of the Andes
CHIFA	Chinese Restaurant	MALLKU	Meaning condor, it is the name given to community leaders in Aymara societies.
MATE DE COCA	Coca tea	APTAPHI	Andean buffet. It is a meal collected and shared in community, being it a group of friends, family or a larger organization.
CHICHA	A drink made out of corn		

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