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Gratis

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CONTENTS

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EDITORIAL

Few countries have debated their national identity as much as Bolivia. Formerly known as the Republic of Bolivia, the country was renamed as a Plurinational State in 2009 by a historical Constituents Assembly that rewrote the symbolic foundations on which the country was built.

Enshrined in the Constitution is the idea that the country is not made up of one, but thirty six different nations, each with unique forms of social and political organisation. This recognition of the country's diversity is surely laudable, but far from solving the problem of national identity, this idea poses new questions which arguably complicate an already-sticky issue.

Timewarp back to Bolivia's foundation in 1825 to imagine a vast and sparsely inhabited land, crossed through by rivers, textured by mountain ranges and breathing through dense jungles. Back then, integration between the regions was almost non-existent. Travelling from the Andes to the Amazon could take months and the different peoples and tribes that inhabited the country -presumably many more than than the 36 that today remain- were largely unaware of each other.

The landmass which became known as Bolivia was a country only by name; a construct which existed primarily on maps and was used to settle border disputes. The independence of Bolivia likely took place without most of the country receiving the news until many years later. Well into the 20th Century, it is entirely plausible to imagine that many people were born, grew old, and died, without ever knowing they were Bolivian, or what this was supposed to mean in the first place.

As urbanisation spread throughout this landmass, these people started mixing in unimaginable permutations. Bolivians could then claim to have white or indigenous ancestry in different degrees and dilutions. With such a range of new ethnic and cultural gradations, the national identity (if there ever was such a thing) tended towards fragmentation instead of homogenisation. Bolivians became caught up in a process of ongoing mutation, with identity becoming a moving target. Yet, as the population became more literate and interrelated, it became urgent to understand who the country was made up of and whether it was possible to find unity and shared national pride within this diversity.

In the early '90s it wasn't too difficult, it seems. As former President Carlos Mesa told BX in an interview 'Bolivia's classification to the World Cup [in 1993] was a moment of true unity and of feeling Bolivian'. After this episode we began affirming diversity, via the Plurinational State and regional autonomies

The challenge Bolivians face today is being able to be something other than a skin colour, cheekbone structure, or a set of culturally and historically-ordained beliefs. In order to create an affirmative sense of who we are, it has become important to understand who we want to be in the first place.

One might, for example, decide to be a football fan, a K-Pop enthusiast, a car mechanic or a towering drag queen. One might, equally, refuse to be atomised and individuated, affirming a personal identity only in relation to a community, opting instead to form part of a social superorganism. And perhaps the answer to finding a Bolivian identity is learning to accept that we live among irreconcilable diversity, that our heritage can be simultaneously modern and ancestral, that what Bolivia is is not a given, but rather something we can take part in shaping and creating as we inhabit this land of riches.

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

ESTADO PLURINACIONAL DE BOLIVIA

BOLIVIAN AND INDIGENOUS

TEXT : INSKE GROENEN
PHOTO: KATYUSSA VEIGA

The European Union (EU) consists of 28 countries with 24 official languages and it has struggled since its inception to shape a cohesive European identity. In many of the 28 countries that are part of the EU, anti-EU parties are on the rise as people have become afraid of losing their national identity. According to a study by Lauren M. McLaren in 2004, between 40% and 60% of the people in many European countries are worried about losing their national identity due to their country's EU membership.

In the middle of South-America, there is a country in which 30 different indigenous nations live together and 38 officially registered languages can be heard. The country's plurality got underlined by its government on the 7th of February 2009, when Evo Morales' administration changed the country's name from República de Bolivia to Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia. This constitutional name change reflects Bolivia's project aimed at establishing a national identity based on the diverse indigenous roots of the people. But how can Bolivia shape a unified national identity while preserving the various indigenous identities? The situation in the EU makes this project seem troubling.

There are several reasons for the importance of having a strong national identity. Firstly, national pride tends to unite a given population behind the common goal of developing their country. Secondly, a shared sense of belonging can also help prevent conflicts between different ethnic groups inside a country. Given that Bolivia has many different ethnic groups, it is clear that in Bolivia's case finding unity in a collective identity is not only desirable, it is crucial. If the country manages to do so, Bolivians will have an increased interest in the progress of their country and feel strongly connected to their national soil.

Cancio Mamani López, head of the anthropology and ancestral knowledge and skills unit at the Ministry of Decolonisation, says that there is, in fact, a Bolivian identity. According to him, the identity is based on mutual respect for each others' cultures and on a common philosophy that involves the belief in pachamama.

In his book Identidad Boliviana: nación, mestizaje y plurinacionalidad, Bolivian Vice-President Álvaro García Linera also points out that Bolivia's identity is closely tied to its people's indigenous identities: 'We, the more than 10 million people that live in this country, are Bolivian and this is the fundamental principle of our unity and the way we choose to live in community, but some of us are Bolivian Aymara, others Bolivian Quechua, Bolivian Guaraní, Bolivian Moxeños, Trinidadians, Urus, etc., and others simply Bolivian. That is the principle of plurality and internal diversity that strengthens and maintains our country'. However, has the project to incorporate Bolivia's indigenous roots into its national identity been successfully completed? Is changing the name of the country all that it takes?

Surely, there are notable differences between Bolivia and the EU that make Bolivia's project more probable to succeed. The main problem in the EU is that the different European national identities are not a significant part of the European identity. The feeling of being both European and, for instance, Dutch is not as strongly advocated as, in Bolivia, being both indigenous and Bolivian is. Also, the EU is lacking a firm common language. Spanish is spoken by more than 80% of Bolivians, while barely a third of Europeans speak English.

So, what if the EU starts focusing on the plurality of the European identity united under a communal language? Will the EU then, over time, successfully form a European identity? The EU may just get answers to these questions by keeping an eye on how Bolivia's identity will take shape in Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia.

IDENTITY

Can its origin be found in Bolivia?

TEXT : INSKE GROENEN
ILLUSTRATION: PABLO RUIZ

Bolivians are as diverse as the landscape they live in. While one Paceño is lively and energetic like the dense Amazon, his neighbour may well be a quiet lamb who prefers the widespread altiplano. Even people that have the same temperament can hold distinctively different views. Each person has their own personal identity, unique in its kind.

The nature of unique personal identities that make us who we are is quite mysterious. Are we born with our identity or does it take shape as we progress in life? Do we keep hold of our identity our whole life? What about during our possible afterlife? It is in Bolivia that I go searching for answers to these complex questions.

QUECHUA

My first stop is Bolivia's lowlands, home to the Quechuas, who form the largest indigenous group of Bolivia. Quechuas believe that it is the soul that defines a person's identity. Every *runa* –human being– has body and spirit, with the latter consisting of the *animu* –breath– and soul.

According to the Quechua, the *animu* disappears when a person dies, but the identity that comes from the soul keeps on living. The soul departs

the body upon death, they believe, and remains on the earth for another eight days. During this period, the soul will do all those things the deceased did not manage to do; such as climbing Illimani. A good soul will go to God after the work is done, while a bad soul will turn into an animal or evil woman.

AYMARA

I then ascend to higher ground and reach Bolivia's altiplano, where the Aymara –the second biggest indigenous group in the country– can be found. The Aymara hold the belief that each person is born with three souls that together form a person's identity: *animu*, *ajayu*, and *alma*. Throughout a person's life, these three souls alternate in their level of influence over an individual's identity, leading the person to change and develop.

The influence of the *animu*, which gives you strength and spirit, is weak until adulthood. At times this can result in periods in which the *animu* is absent, causing a person to have little appetite, interest or energy. According to the Aymara, though, a temporary loss of *animu* can not lead to serious illness and the chance of it occurring once adulthood has been reached is slim.

Losing your *ajayu*, however, which represents reasoning and consciousness, is a lot more serious for your body and identity, the Aymara say. It can lead to severe cognitive illnesses and, in the worst-case, it can even lead to a person's death. But the attachment of the *ajayu* to your body is firm, which means that losing your *ajayu* can only be caused by an evil spirit.

A yatiri can help you recover your *ajayu*, but there is not one universal way to call back that part of your identity. Each soul has to be lured differently, depending on its specific preferences. If the soul is thought to enjoy wine, then wine will be used to get the soul back to its rightful owner.

Your spirit, *alma*, can never be lost during your life. Only upon death will the *alma* depart your body and live on. During Todos Santos, which takes place on November first and second, *almas* return to earth and will take vengeance if they are not treated correctly. Therefore, it is crucial for Aymara to provide the deceased with food and clothes, showing their humbleness towards the dead and honoring the departed for who they were.

The Aymara hold the belief that each person is born with three souls that together form a person's identity: animu, ajayu, and alma. Throughout a person's life, these three souls alternate in their level of influence over an individual's identity, leading the person to change and develop

GUARANÍ

In the South West corner of Bolivia, known as the Chaco region, I find yet another ethnic group that claims to have answers to the questions surrounding identity. Making up just 2% of the population, the Guaraní are hugely outnumbered by the Aymara and Quechua.

According to the Guaraní, a human's identity is formed by two souls: *acyiguá* and *ayvucué*. *Acyiguá* is an animal soul that can be anything from a fly to an elephant. Temperament and instinct are formed by this soul – but it's not all good. In fact, mischievous behaviour is said to come from *acyiguá*. To control *acyiguá* the gods gave humans *ayvucué*, a special human soul, that also gave us reason and speech. It is this soul that will be judged for the individual's actions once it returns to the gods. *Acyiguá* will remain on earth, a wanderer plaguing the living.

NEUROSCIENCE

It is time to move away from religious beliefs and look at identity from another angle; for the problem with religion is that there is no way of verifying it. A field that is dedicated to verifying how phenomena work is science. Many neuroscientists are focused on finding the location of identity in the brain. It's a troubling subject, though, as scientists are experiencing serious difficulties with locating identity.

The problems start with defining identity. There is a widely acknowledged definition for personal identity in the field of psychology and psychiatry, namely 'the organized set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influences his or her cognitions, motivations, and behaviours in various situations'. This definition, however, leaves a lot of room for subjective interpretation.

Secondly, it is very improbable that there is one focused location of identity in the brain. The brain is a complex network of neurons –brain cells– working together, making the research challenging. Scientists are now looking at broad areas in the brain that may hold our identity. However, the problem with looking at broad segments of the brain is that these areas have many different functions.

It is thought that the right frontal hemisphere –our front right side of the brain– is responsible for our identity and sense of 'I'. Evidence for this comes mainly from people whose identities have radically changed after suffering a severe brain injury. It is in this way that someone can lose their identity, possibly forever.

Surely, no Yatiri can repair a damaged brain, a scientist would say. However, the Yatiri may say in his defence that an accident of that nature can scare the soul away, which means that the soul can return to its origin. So who is right? Who has the answers to the questions on the origin of our identity? The Scientist, the Quechua, the Aymara, or the Guaraní?

한국팝의 볼리비아 숭배

The Bolivian Cult of K-Pop

TEXT : ALEX WALKER
PHOTOS: VERONICA AVENDAÑO

Mention K-Pop to a non-obsessive and their knowledge of the genre will most likely extend to Park Jae-sang's *Gangnam Style* and, if you're lucky, its sequel *Gentlemen* — think *Alvin And The Chipmunks: The Squeakquel* levels of disappointment. Say the name PSY to a real K-Pop fan, though, and they will laugh you off. Samantha Alejandra, a die-hard supporter of the genre, says his only redeeming quality has been 'displacing Bieber for the most views on YouTube'. In Bolivia, however, for reasons that Alex Walker will curmudgeonly attempt to explain, K-Pop has become something of a religion.

In January this year, Kim Hyung-jun, former member of the appealingly named SS501 and Korea's answer to Justin Bieber, became the first K-Pop star to perform in Bolivia. Promoting his solo album *Sorry I'm Sorry* –presumably a pre-emptive apology for the tuneless vocals that await– a YouTube video shows Kim being met by pandemonium at the airport. One fan, Maria Henecia U, perhaps under the deluded impression that Kim reads comments on cult videos of him, professed that 'to touch your hand was the best thing that happened to me this year!!! I love you'.

The tour was a demonstration of just how popular K-Pop in Bolivia has become, causing traffic build-up on the roads and requiring a police presence to maintain order; some fans were even seen pitching their tents outside the concert venue several days prior to his performance. It is a genre that has yet to permeate Western culture, however, despite having strong Western flavours: notably, hip-hop verses, euro-pop choruses, rapping, and dubstep breaks; not to mention superficial heartbreak. The latter is no more obvious than in a video of a live performance of SS501's Because I'm Stupid where Kim Hyung-jun can be seen silently 'weeping' mid-song — presumably reminiscing on some past personal trauma or just peeved about his apparent stupidity. K-Pop is a genre, however, that far transcends the music. It is a cult.

K-Popping

I spent an afternoon compiling an all-too-extensive list of fan groups associated with Bolivian K-Pop and, by number 462, lost the will to live. Kim Hyung-jun's group calls itself Junus –dangerously close to Judas one feels– and there is a sense that he is steering Bolivians away from the righteous path of Christ towards the dark-side that is K-Pop. Given the chaos when Kim held a concert celebrating three years since his debut as a soloist, I can't even begin to imagine the festivities once we reach 2014 years after his birth.

Aside from musical trend-setting, K-Pop has engendered a cult-following of 'airport fashion'; essentially shaped by the pre-flight clothing worn by the constellation of K-Pop stars on tour. Worldwide, these items fly off the shelves before the stars themselves have landed at their destination.

In Bolivia, though, fandom has escalated further. So-called K-Snacks are imported and sold at extortionate prices to a willing market and Denise Fernandez –K-Pop connoisseur from the radio group Melómanos– can think of three cases known to her where Bolivians have changed their official names to Korean ones. Far more disturbing, though, is the news that many young Bolivians are seeking gruesome plastic surgery, opening up the skin around their eyes, to 'appear more Korean'.

K-Pop is a genre, however, that far transcends the music. It is a cult.

Hallyu is the term Asians use to describe the tsunami of South Korean culture that began flooding their countries from the beginning of the noughties. K-Pop has become the most lucrative wave in this tsunami, contributing around US$2billion a year to the nation's economy. It is an East-West mash-up that, unlike Western Chart-Toppers, doesn't make reference to sex, drinking or clubbing. Indeed, the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family endeavours to censor such topics: PSY's first album PSY from the PSYcho World! was widely denounced for promoting this 'inappropriate content'; his second album was banned from minors; he has been arrested for marijuana abuse and was condemned for 'neglecting' his mandatory military service duties. PSY, then, against all expectations, has come to symbolise a satirising 'bad-boy': Public Enemy No.1 of K-Pop's cult.

Interestingly, K-Pop is a cult that has changed the semantics of fandom: you are not a fan but a K-Popper. Ironically, then, being a disciple of K-Pop –a movement with such rigid and antiquated attitudes towards sex and drugs– involves sharing a name with both snortable horse tranquiliser and sniffable sodomy facilitator.

'Cultural Technology'

As is the case with many an organised religion or cult, the reality beneath the surface of K-Pop is far more sinister than its cherubic self-projection. As John Seabrook exposes in his article 'Factory Girls', the pursuit for The K Factor begins disturbingly early, with children as young as seven recruited and raised in an idol-engineering system labelled by its first exponent –founder of S.M. Entertainment, Lee Soo-man– 'cultural technology'.

Along with singing and dancing lessons, these budding stars must study foreign languages, receive media coaching and be prepared for the scrutiny that will haunt their adult lives; the final of these is so intense that, when a female duo called Girls Generation once attempted to disguise themselves in the streets of Seoul, their limbs alone gave the game away. Like members of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, it seems, K-Pop idols are force fed their movement's propaganda until it becomes all that they know. Only one in ten trainees makes the leap up to début.

Inevitably, in such a ruthless industry, there has been backlash for these Machiavellian record labels. Numerous fallen stars have sued their idol-engineers over abusive treatment and alleged 'slave contracts'. Indeed, three members of KARA, a hugely popular girl group with D.S.P. –one of the smaller agencies– filed a lawsuit claiming that, despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars they brought in, the girls were only paid $140 per month. Restrictions imposed are not just financial, however, and another label –Alpha Entertainment– forbids its female trainees to have boyfriends while, even more disconcertingly, barring any food or water

after 7pm, according to the *Straits Times*.

Neil Jacobson, 35, an executive for Interscope Records ranks the qualities of an idol in order of importance: 'First, beauty. Second, graciousness and humility. Third, dancing. And fourth, vocal. Also, brevity. Nothing lasts more than three and a half minutes'.

This list presents a worrying reflection of today's fickle global music industry. K-Pop, though, is an extreme case. Indeed, Seabrook describes good looks as 'a K-Pop artist's stock-in-trade'. These 'good looks' –chiselled, sculpted faces tapering to a sharp point at the chin– differ concerningly from the flat, round faces of most Koreans. Granted, some will have been born with this unusual bone structure, but the majority can only look this way through cosmetic surgery.

Ironically, while in South Korea double-fold-eyelid surgery –a procedure making eyes appear more 'Western'– is a popular reward for academically flourishing children, Bolivian K-Poppers are seeking the reverse operation.

Why, God, Why?

The question that remains untouched must be tackled with trepidation. Mayán Sanchez, 19, explains, 'I got bored of watching videos from the same US pop singers like Selena Gomez and Miley Cyrus. It's always the same thing'. To migrate to what is arguably the most formulaic genre of all seems a queer decision — perhaps some Schoenberg would have served as a more effective musical cleanser, or a monastic silence.

It certainly isn't a credible protest against the Western charts; rather, an Eastern spin-off. Denise Fernandez, though, takes a more cynical view: 'it is simply an effectively-placed marketing strategy', she tells me. She does, however, accept the sentimental appeal of the genre, explaining that Bolivian girls crave a *grand amour*, that the language of K-Pop represents a 'revival of romanticism' and that, for Bolivian girls, 'sentimentality carries more weight than sex'.

Diamond Girls

It is a Thursday. 4pm. I am sitting in a photography studio along Calle Gua**challa**, *Waiting For Godot*. After several millennia in the bathroom, primming and pruning each other, with the unmistakable sizzle of hair-straighteners interrupted by the occasional fit of giggles, four out of five Diamond Girls –a Bolivian K-Pop dance tribute group– emerge from their makeover chamber sporting pseudo-Korean performance outfits. The other, however, has forgotten her shoes.

The gaggle of girls are the archetypal K-Pop ensemble: affectionate, girlish, giggly, dainty. We soon inflict a major cultural offense when we present them with a banner for them to pose next to. It reads: 'Te Amo! Kim Hyung-jun'. Unfortunately, after seeing the mortified expressions of the girls, we discover that the subject of our accompanying images is no other than his ex-bandmate and archrival Kim Hyun-joong. Uncertain that we will be able to overcome the shame of this cultural faux-pas and continue with the article –let alone the shoot–, stoicism prevails and we eventually decide to press on.

The girls tell me that K-Pop is the 'perfect combination of dance and song'; that their 'very depressing' Bolivian existence means they turn to the genre as a way out; that the arrival to Bolivia of the former Kim reduced them to 'tears of joy'; and, that they each got into K-Pop through the well-engineered channel of Ki-dramas. The girls embody the target market of K-Pop in Bolivia, speaking at length about the cult's generic Christ-figure — a 'good-looking boy, hardworking, organised, disciplined who doesn't need to flaunt his body or sexual prowess because he is pure and perfect as he is'.
Despite the shamelessness of Diamond Girls, K-Pop still seems to be a taboo interest in Bolivia — ask someone if they are a fan and they will profusely shake their head, only to rush home to catch their favourite Ki-drama as they do each day.

K-Future

K-Pop started off as a peripheral epidemic in Bolivia but is fast-becoming part of its mainstream musical furniture. It produces, in Denise Fernandez, a sense of déjà-vu, taking her back over a decade to Eurodance: 'it used to be a genre for the margins, now it is everywhere: Eurodance from 10 years ago is the K-Pop of today'.

Is this such a bad thing, though? K-Pop, for all its faults –and there are many, from musical to moral–, promotes a balanced and sensible lifestyle: K-Pop Fiestas in Bolivia begin as early as 8am and it is absolutely unheard of for alcohol to be consumed at one of these events — a staggering contrast to, say, the recent Glastonbury festival where, no doubt, stomach-pumping machines across Somerset will have been working overtime.

However, the emergence of K-Pop seems to be papering over the cracks in home-grown musical talent. While Denise Fernandez dismisses the claim that K-Pop's popularity in Bolivia represents a rejection of Western music as a 'common misconception', she expresses concern that people are eschewing Bolivian culture: 'musically K-Pop is not our roots, sociologically it is not our culture'.

Perhaps, though, subconsciously, as a result of Morales' persistent deconolisation efforts, young Bolivians are migrating away from the traditional American blonde bimbos to a more tangible idol. Indeed, it is uplifting to see Diamond Girls wax lyrical about the 'rounded lives' of their favourite stars. However, while the girls insist on wearing their K-Pop blinkers, the rest of us should not forget that this perfection is only surface-deep. The reality behind 'cultural technology' is both a sinister and cynical one. For Bolivians, though, this influx of Korean culture offers a more pressing concern: if Diamond Girls get their way, *Hallyu* may well prove to shape Bolivian national identity in the same way that American cultural exports have. ×

PIMP MY SIGHT

Valeria Wilde looks beyond the signs and stickers to understand the unintentional urban aesthetic shaping Bolivia's cities.

PHOTO: MARIELA SALAVERRY

Many people who pass through this city of contrasts, mysteries and peculiarities miss certain details that are registered yet seldom consciously noticed.

All it takes is stopping to analyse every sticker, sign and ornament in your path. Pay attention to the shape, aesthetic, origin and *raison dêtre* of each of these curios. You will discover a new city with secret messages about its people, culture and emerging trends that reveal its ever-evolving identity.

To make this exercise worthwhile, you must look with inquisitive eyes and suspend all judgements. When dealing with urban aesthetics, all manner of malapropisms, kitsch ornaments, pastiches of unknown origins and deliberate chaos intertwine. The line between the ugly and the beautiful is blurred to make room for the richness of the disharmony that defines La Paz's cityscape.

It is advisable to begin this exercise in a minibus. It shouldn't be too hard to find a sticker with that monstrously anthropomorphic cartoon bird, Condorito, stating that spitting is absolutely prohibited.

On the left of the bus driver you may well find the Oración del Chofer, set in a background of multicoloured gradients. You will see warning signs, from the prudential to the moralistic: 'if you get out late, it is not the driver's fault', 'it is better to lose a minute in life than life in a minute'.

If you're lucky enough to be sitting next to the driver at the front, you will be able to see a colourful fabric hanging in the windscreen; with ornaments and figures of saints or football teams — vestiges of the car's challa in Copacabana and testaments to the driver's devotion to the eponymous Virgin.

Keep your eyes open wide throughout this journey. Peer out of the window and read the messages on the backs of other minibuses or micros. The sayings captured on them come in varied colours, typographies and disastrously sublime spelling permutations. 'Why don't you tell me with a kiss', 'Your envy is my blessing', 'Don't follow me because I too am lost' are some common messages. These phrases and their colours distill the fleeting essences of society.

Should you be fortunate enough, you will encounter the historic Micro, 'El Inmortal', or the famous 'Superman'; which literally (sic) flew several metres without major incident. You may also learn of the improbable stories captured by the so-called 'logotipeados', which capture a range of beliefs ranging from political visions to the most banal of life's problems. One driver comments that the face of Osama Bin Laden, painted alongside the Twin Towers and the face of Che Guevara on the back of his Micro, reminds us 'how a hero went against imperialism'.

An extraordinary, personal phenomenon, almost inherent to human beings; which, as a form of expression identifies aspects of a culture

As Fernando Navia would say "This type of design -*Gráfica Popular*- is an extraordinary phenomenon that takes place from the individuality of each human being and, as such, is an inherent part of the human condition. It brings out various aspects of a culture by incorporating local elements and combining them with foreign –yet perfectly adopted– materials and references". In its own way, design distills the spirit and worldviews of groups from all social segments. The identity and sense of belonging of a people finds its expression with visual eloquence. ×

CHOLETS

The Neo-Andean Wave Sweeping El Alto

TEXT : ALEX WALKER
PHOTO: ALFREDO ZEBALLOS
ILLUSTRATION: MARCELO VILLEGAS

Gaudy and garish, the mini-mansions of El Alto stand as striking symbols of Bolivia's new Aymara bourgeoisie. It is a phenomenon that has exploded so quickly on the polluted streets of La Paz's sister city that there is still no accepted name for these architectural anomalies.

Labelled Kitsch, neo-Andean, cholo, cohetillo or any number of alternatives, there are roughly 120 such buildings across Bolivia. Most of them are in El Alto. Over 60 of them are the brainchildren of Freddy Mamani Silvestre — a mason who spent 18 years in construction work before a decade working in his current profession: architecture. These buildings, or 'cholets' –chalets **cholos**–, range from $250,000 to $600,000 and are invariably functional; with the lower floors housing the family business while the top floor provides a quasi-home for its owners.

> Every day they rise colourful and animated, the powerful building up of a city that emerges with creativity — this is the New Andean Architecture, colour and life' — Paola Flores

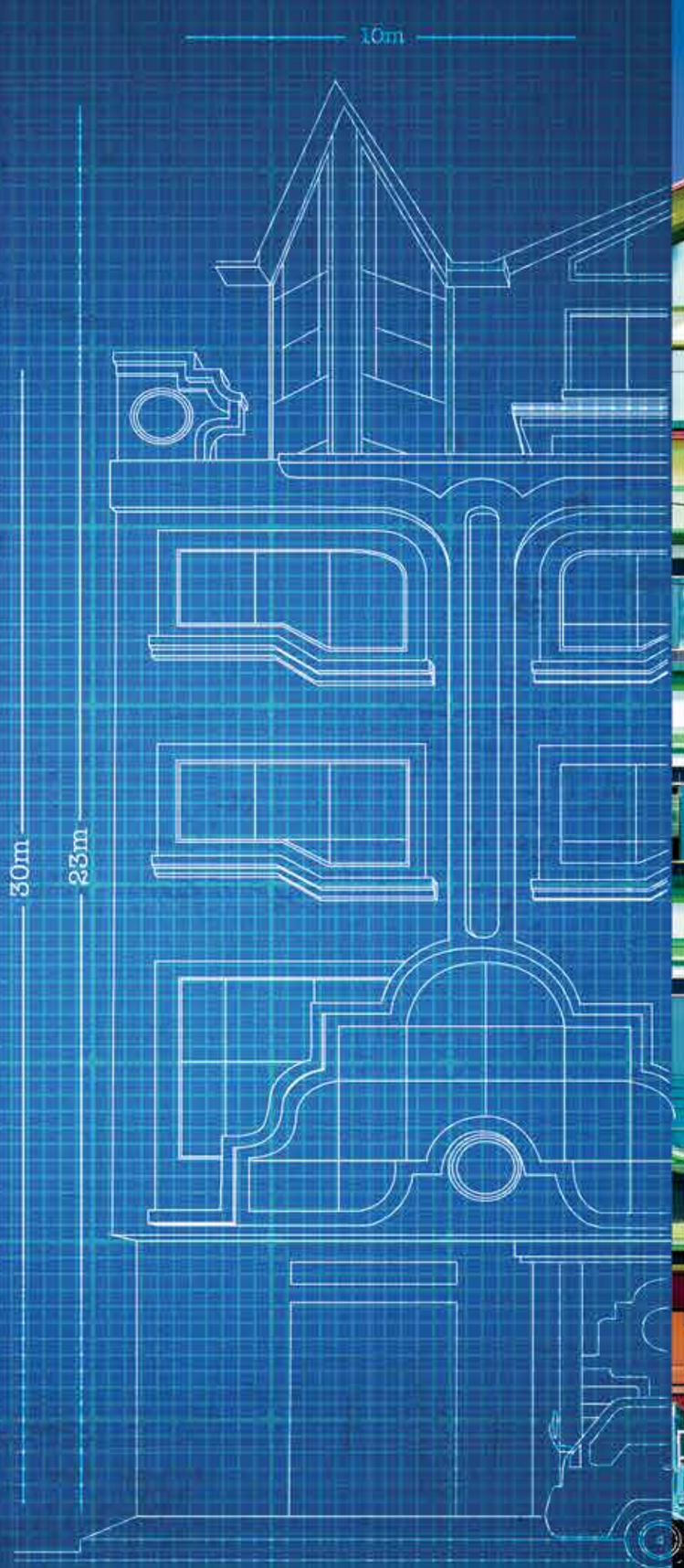
According to Mamani, each building has its own distinct identity. 'This is art,' he says, 'like music, and you get bored doing the same thing'. The buildings, though, are all stylistically similar. Mamani is the figurehead of this architectural movement that Gaston Gallardo, professor of architecture at the Universidad Mayor San Andreas of La Paz, describes as 'baroque, popular, contemporary'. Its style is defined by the use of Andean symbols in tribute to Aymaran history; images of condors, vipers, pumas and –most prominently– the Andean cross have all become design staples. Mamani explains that the inspiration for his work stemmed from a visit to Tiwanaku, 'I went [there] and began thinking that we should display our culture through buildings with Aymaran flavours'. Edgar Patana, the mayor of El Alto, believes that Mamani has achieved this and that 'his palette of colours is in harmony with the colourful weaving of the kallawaya culture, itself a descendent of Tiwanacotan culture'.

When Mamani first published a photo of one of his designs, it was labelled by one journalist as 'chola' architecture — perhaps with the initial view of dismissing it. The name stuck, however, and, rather than treating these buildings with the contempt that you might expect such loud architectural statements to provoke, people began to want their own, wearing it as a badge of Aymaran pride. Indeed, as Paola Flores explains, 'the mini-mansions mesh modern and baroque architecture and flaunt, above all, two things: their owner's wealth and their Aymaran heritage'. The harsh geography of the Altiplano has driven many Aymaran to the big cities to promote their individual businesses and this influx to El Alto has engendered a new social class — the nouveau-riche Aymara bourgeoisie. Rosario Leuca, a woman who began selling food in the streets and who has now built a second restaurant in her seven-storey Cholet, embodies this class and has a house to reflect it: 'I am an Aymaran woman, proud of my culture, happy and full of colour. So why should my home not show who I am?'

Leuca is not unique in expressing this pride. In fact, Rafael Choque, 25, an agronomy student and citizen of El Alto says, 'To me, it's like a shout that says, "Here we are! This is what we are!"'; while Rim Safar, president of the Architectural College in Santa Crúz echoes this notion, explaining, 'It is a way of saying: "I am a proud 'cholo'; before I had no money, now I do, look at me!"'. The buildings certainly make a strong statement that Mamani believes 'represents the modern **Alteño** because he is identified by his cutting-edge attitude: by his fight for economic, social, cultural, political, and now architectural identity'. However, while the buildings have taken on an Aymaran identity post-construction, they are not ostensibly proud statements of indigenous heritage. Rather, the movement seems to symbolise a reaction to traditional Western buildings: 'I haven't seen this style in any other place', Elisabetta Andreoli says, who is an Italian architect and worked with Mamani on his recently published book. 'I believe that many latin nations have tried to distance themselves from the modern and classical architecture of the northern countries.'

Outside the movement, though, the general consensus is that this architectural style stemmed from the arrival of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president. This, however, is a 'gross injustice' to its designers, Bolivian artist Santos –the brains behind the transformers-esque alteña architecture– tells me. 'Morales didn't design this house', he says, indicating the huge baroque chamber where we are standing, 'and he should not get the credit for it'. While Santos makes a valid point, it would be incorrect to say that Morales is not involved by association. From a purely financial standpoint, his government has presided over an economic rise and, by extension, an architectural revival –the industry grew by 8.6% last year– that has rendered building for excess, rather than necessity, a possibility. Perhaps even more significant to this movement is the fact that Morales's tenure has brought about a swell in so-called Aymaran pride.

Pride, that well-documented chestnut, comes before a fall and we may yet see a retraction of such gaudy architecture. When such buildings are exceptions, rather than the rule, they are revered as progressive and revolutionary; however, with 20 such buildings under Mamani's construction alone, 'arquitectura chola' is well on its way to becoming the norm. ×



NEW MULTICULTURALISM IN BOLIVIA?

TEXT : OLLIE VARGAS
PHOTO: AMARU VILLANUEVA

Since the social struggles of the early 2000s and the election of Evo Morales, Bolivian identity has taken on a new importance. For the first time, the State has sought to recognise and incorporate marginalised indigenous communities in the new Estado Plurinacional.

However, there's a continuity with the old order, characterised as a period of multicultural neoliberalism. It's comparable to the situation in post-apartheid South Africa; in both countries, an anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggle preceded the election of the new 'progressive' governments. Yet, these were ultimately contained and transformed into a struggle of 'stages'—a 'cultural' stage where a new bourgeoisie drawn from the oppressed racial groups emerges and existing power relations stay intact, and a separate stage of socialist transformation, promised sometime in the undefined future. An example of this, in the Bolivian context, is the notorious claim by Vice President Álvaro García Linera that socialism is not possible for 50 to 100 years and, instead, the task is to build 'Andean-Amazonian' capitalism.

What this arguably shows is that, while there is a discourse of indigenous liberation and rhetoric of constructing the 'plurinational' state on the basis of Bolivia's many indigenous communities, this project is not seen as running parallel to a wider transformation of material relations. The key task is seen as building a capitalism of the indigenous, rather than locating the roots of indigenous oppression in capitalism itself. In short, there is a separation of liberation struggles with anti-systemic struggles.

This kind of identity politics has a history in Bolivia, especially since the end of General Hugo Banzer's dictatorship in the 1980s. This spawned an important political tendency known as Katarismo — the brainchild of urban Aymara intellectuals who sought to grapple with a new neoliberal Bolivia of highly racialised capitalism, but in which the traditional agent of change –the organised working class– have suffered debilitating setbacks. These new intellectuals looked to ethnic nationalism over class-based struggle. But, like all forms of nationalism, it vacillates between playing a progressive role but also a potentially reactionary one.

For example, Victor Hugo Cardenas, Vicepresident from 1993 to 1997 and the first indigenous politician to reach such heights, came from the katarista movement. However, he lined up behind the neoliberal right in enforcing the sweeping privatisations of that decade — measures that hit the indigenous poor the hardest. Even today, in the upcoming national elections, figures in the indigenous movement have sided with right-wing business interests and architects of 1980s neoliberalism. When the struggle against indigenous oppression is falsely separated from exploitation rooted in capitalism, reactionary distortions such as these take place.

To understand the multiculturalism of today, one has to look back both at the dynamics of the leftist indigenous movements before the electoral success of President Evo Morales' MAS party, and at how the MAS then responded to the aspirations of those movements that swept them to power. Despite rhetorical commitment to both racial and economic liberation, separating the two into distinct 'stages' made the realisation of either impossible and led to the continuation of the neoliberal multiculturalism that the leftist indigenous movements fought against.

Politically speaking, the early 2000s a period of indigenous insurrection. The period can firstly characterised as a bid to break with the old neoliberal multiculturalism. The period was, secondly, a bid for political power that would transform the indigenous communities from being merely recognised by the elite, to being real historical actors forging their own future. There were two main demands that came from these groups.

The first of these demands was for a Constituent Assembly, which was brought to centrestage after the 'indigenous march for territory and dignity' in 1990, led by movements in the department of Beni. The idea was to break from the liberal notion of representative democracy, in which power is kept in the hands of the elite political parties, and to create assemblies comprising social movements, indigenous organisations, trade unions, and the like. That way, power is not held by unaccountable political parties, but wielded directly by people.

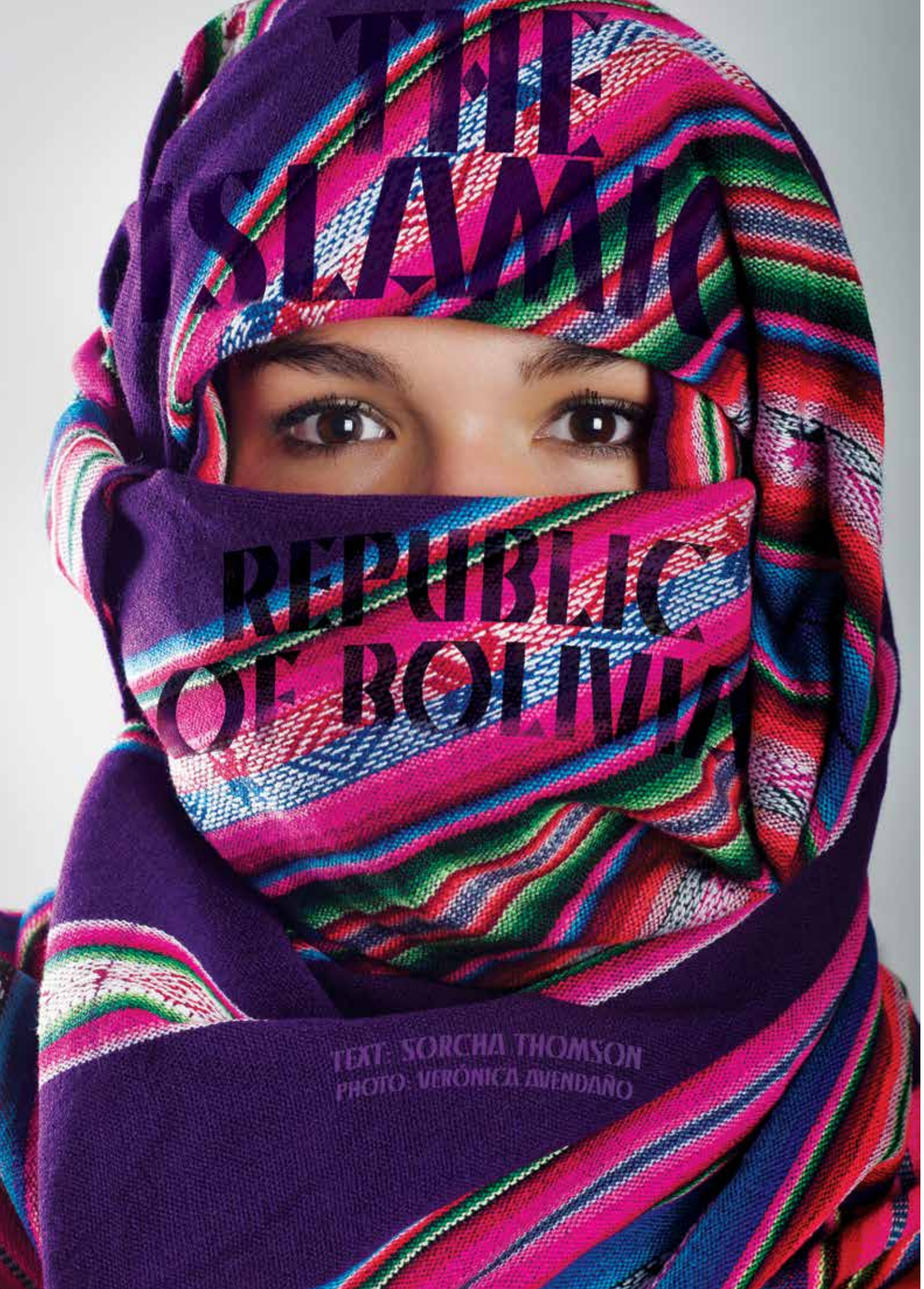
The second was the demand for the nationalisation of the country's hydrocarbon resources. This demand is characterised by recognising that empowerment and democracy require natural resources to be in the hands of the people rather than transnational companies and foreign imperialist states.

The synthesis of these two demands recognises two things: the need for those at the bottom to take political power rather than handing it to elites claiming to act in their name; and the inseparability of political/racial liberation and economic emancipation.

Despite supporting these demands while it was in opposition to previous governments, on coming to power the MAS failed to usher in this transformation. A Constituent Assembly was in fact created, but it was gutted of the revolutionary content the indigenous movements advocated. Instead of being an aggregation of the social movements, elections to the assembly had to be either through established parties or citizen groups. More worryingly, a clause about minority protection meant that any organisation achieving over 5 percent of the vote was entitled to a third of the seats in its district. This gave the far right, which in many areas would not have won representation, a disproportionate amount of seats. Furthermore, the 'nationalisation' of the hydrocarbon resources was anything but that, with virtually nothing expropriated and the issuing of new contracts to 12 foreign companies. All that changed was the level of tax revenue and tightened regulations. On both these counts, the government didn't meet the movement's demands for political and economic power as a means of emancipation; the indigenous remain onlookers to the state and foreign capital.

The MAS strategy of building 'Andean-Amazonian' capitalism is incompatible with the aspirations for a mass transformation of power relations. In reality, it has meant the emergence of a privileged layer within the indigenous communities, or as some say the new 'chola' bourgeoisie of El Alto and elsewhere that have grown rich through commerce. This doesn't represent a new era for the indigenous or a new multiculturalism. The success of a few comerciantes cannot elevate the whole people to political and economic power. In El Alto (where over 80 percent self-identify as indigenous), where the new Aymara bourgeoisie is emerging, 90 percent of workers are in jobs described as 'precarious', a figure virtually unchanged since the 1990s.

There have undoubtedly been gains; an indigenous president has emboldened many and contributed to a cultural shift against racism. However, the power structures that replicate racial oppression remain intact and 'multiculturalism' is limited to its neoliberal form in which 'diversity' is celebrated but said communities remain powerless. ×



In his 2010 visit to Iran, Evo Morales asserted that Bolivia and the Islamic Republic share an 'identical revolutionary conscience', aimed at fighting imperialism and injustice in the world. Bolivia's expulsion of all USAID operations in May 2013 signalled a new era of international relations, in which Iran has become the primary patron of Morales' Estado Plurinacional, with the promise of $1.1 billion in aid and infrastructure. Media reports of hospitals in which the nurses are forced to wear the hijab and mushrooming fundamentalist Islamic cells prompted Sorcha Thomson to investigate the reality of the 'Islamic menace' in La Paz.

'Our job is to help the people and that is all.'— Hassani, head of the Iranian Red Crescent Hospital

The focus of the international media melée has been the Iranian Red Crescent Hospital in El Alto, the satellite city to La Paz, where poverty is endemic and, according to Olivier Javanpour of the Jerusalem Post, conditions exist that make it one of the 'prime targets for fundamentalists and fanatics of all kinds'. On entering the hospital, I am greeted at reception by the gaze of Hassan Rouhani, current president of Iran, framed in gold above the desk. It appears that politics were not left in the waiting room.

However, in speaking with the head of the hospital, Mr Hassani, it becomes clear that for the staff and patients alike, the macro-politics of international relations are of no concern: 'Here we don't care about politics, we don't care about religion, we don't care about any issue which is going to jeopardise our principles. Our job is to help the people and that is all.' And, in doing this, the $2.5 million hospital has been highly successful. In its four years of operation, it has provided advanced healthcare to thousands of Bolivians, including dental care, maternity care, and the use of a potentially life-saving haemodialysis machine. The nurses dress in traditional scrubs, and the only hijab to be seen is worn by one of the Iranian nurses offering her specialist services to the hospital. It seems the relationship between Iran and Bolivia is bringing genuine aid to Bolivian people; it is difficult to reconcile the media's hyperbolic concerns with the tangible evidence of benefit.

Perhaps reports of the growth of fundamentalist Islamic cells, funded by the Iranian government, are more accurate. Bolivia, a country of approximately 10.5 million people, has a Muslim population of just 2,000. Nora Zimmett, of Fox News USA, writes that 'the connection between some of the community's religious leaders and Iran . . . has U.S. officials and terror experts keeping a watchful eye on them'.

Visiting the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia, this watchful eye appears to look in vain. Members aged 17 to 70 gather every Friday to pray together in this small mosque in the centre of La Paz. In operation for almost 20 years, the association has seen numerous changes in government and witnessed the shift in Bolivian relations from the United States to Iran. The majority of attendees here are Bolivian converts to Islam; they see no difficulty in mixing their Bolivian and Muslim identities. For the General Secretary of the association, Ibrahim Barbery, macro-politics are of little significance to his faith: 'We don't involve ourselves in politics. Whoever the president, we have to practice our religion. We respect the laws. What we ask is that they respect our religion'.

The spectre of ominous Iranian cultural imposition on the people of Bolivia appears unfounded.

However, native Bolivian Lucio Perez, aged 24, has witnessed the collapse of this mutual respect. On the streets of La Paz, he sees Bolivian-Muslim women told to 'go back to their country' and denounced as 'terrorists'. It is these instances that inspire the mission of the association, voiced by Ibrahim: 'To clean the image that other people have about Islam: most people think we are terrorists or something like that, but the reality is another thing. We are trying to give people the correct image of Islam'. Having been welcomed into this diverse and astute Islamic community, I see that the spectre of ominous Iranian cultural imposition on the people of Bolivia appears unfounded.

Morales' relations with Iran have sparked international concern about the implications of Iranian aid and the growth of Islamic culture in Bolivia. Yet, from the ground, it appears that politics fail to intrude upon the humanitarian goals of the Iranian hospital and the spirituality of the Bolivian-Muslim community.

However, as the history of international aid attests, there is no such thing as a free hospital. The pattern of exploitation and cultural imposition is too entrenched to ignore. While the media frenzy can be dismissed as hyperbole, it would be foolish to ignore the potential benefits that lie underground for this Iranian aid: beneath the Bolivian salt flats are 70 percent of the world's lithium reserves. With Bolivia's troubled history of natural resource extraction, the indigenous president has vowed that this time the riches stay in the country. But, in 2010, the Iranian Minister of Industry, Ali-Akbar Mehrabian, announced a deal to help the Andean nation conduct research on the exploitation of this high-profit mineral. With lithium's spectrum of potential, from the production of car batteries to nuclear weaponry, the courtship between Bolivia and Iran is certain to remain one of international interest.

For the staff at the Red Crescent Hospital and the members of the Islamic community, politics is a topic they choose to ignore. But it will be politics, and its ubiquitous relationship with aid and religion, that will continue to knock on their door.

The National Revolution of 1952

A PLEA FOR REMEMBRANCE

TEXT : SORCHA THOMSON
ILLUSTRATION: PABLO RUIZ

'To remember the past is to give the young people an understanding of our history, one they can use to change things in the present, and the future.'
—Greta Maria, 32

When investigating the role of the National Revolution of 1952 in contemporary Bolivian identity, the memory of Bolivia's mid-century history appears to suffer a generational rift. Asked what she knows about the revolutionary events of 1952, Viola, 19 years old, turns to her mother with a blank face and pleading eyes. Her innocent ignorance exposes the failure of the revolution to maintain prominence in the consciousness of Bolivia's youth. Sorcha Thomson explores the significance of 1952, and the importance of remembering what Carlos Mesa describes as both its 'lights and shadows'.

The events of 1952 cannot be viewed in isolation from the long history of Bolivian oppression, struggle, and defeat. In the countryside, the semi-feudal structure ensured 8 percent of the landowners held more than 95 percent of arable land. In the mines, three families controlled 80 percent of the industry, accounting for 80 percent of Bolivia's exports. The indigenous population had no rights; they were dispensable assets to the ruling elites.

The events of 1952 emerged as a response to this ingrained and often violently enforced culture of exploitation. In 1946, the ideals of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR) were adopted by the Union Federation of Mine Workers of Bolivia, asserting their goal for the seizure of power by the workers. With the 1951 elections, won by the middle-class **Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario** (MNR) but immediately annulled by the ruling military regime, the popular party, led by Victor Paz Estenssoro, were forced into exile. Having been denied their constitutional revolution, the masses took up arms in a violent uprising. From Cochabamba, Oruro, and Potosí, workers marched to the capital. In just three days the illegitimate government was defeated, and the captured prisoners forced to march through the city in their underwear. By April 11, there was no longer a state army in Bolivia. The only armed force in the country was between 50,000 and 100,000 men organised into militias by the unions. Real power was in the hands of workers. It would appear that a popular revolution had occurred.

However, as the exiled leaders of the MNR returned to govern the newly mobilised Bolivian masses, the ideals of revolution were diluted in political pragmatism. Despite legislative success in the granting of universal suffrage and education, demands for the nationalisation of the mines and agrarian reform were delayed and modified to allow continued dominance of the ruling elites. As such, the struggle created a semblance of triumph, but the culture of exploitation and inequality persisted to dictate society.

Felix Muruchi, whose autobiography charts his movement 'from the mines to the streets' as a result of the revolution, describes the succeeding years as a process of 'self-colonisation'. Indigenous people were required to reject their roots and adopt Western clothing and language in order to enjoy social acceptance. The **criollo** minority maintained an exclusionary society, blocking the newly franchised majority from integrating socially, economically, and politically. To become a participating Bolivian required a mutation of identity; race continued to dictate status. It is this failure to transcend the culture of racial discrimination that has emasculated the revolution in both the official histories of Bolivia, and the popular consciousness of its citizens.

Mario Murillo, Bolivian historian and author of But The Bullet Does Not Kill The Target, has made a significant contribution to the historiography of the revolution. His work places emphasis on the human voices of those who experienced the revolutionary events. This oral history offers an alternative to the traditional presidential history that dominates understanding of the Bolivian past. As an astute historian, he dismisses a direct link between 1952 and contemporary life, 'as nothing is a direct consequence of anything in history'. However, he does judge that 'Bolivia was never the same after 1952'. The indigenous population had won the basic rights to gain a foothold, though a loose one, in Bolivian society.

Sixty-two years on from the uprising, as personal memory of the events slips from the living to the departed, it is necessary to assess the ways in which the revolution is represented in the Bolivian national consciousness. For the spirit of revolution and the ideals that accompany it to continue, it is necessary for the younger generation to remember both the 'lights and shadows' of 1952. In conducting interviews on the streets of La Paz, not one person under the age of 20 displays any awareness of the national revolution; '**No, no sé nada**' is the recurring and disappointing theme.

However, Jaime Ortiz, a teacher from La Paz aged 54, demonstrates a greater understanding: 'I don't think it was really like a revolution, because it was unfinished. It had the spirit of a revolution, but things didn't get done'. In his opinion, the significance of 1952 lies in this spirit: 'It gave us the idea to start something different. Now, we can use these basic ideas to bring real change'.

And it is real change that is being promised by the presidency of Evo Morales, the first indigenous man to hold the office. His rise to power was made possible by the revolutionary actions of the miners of 1952. However, his rhetoric negates the uprising to a period of Bolivian history he describes as 'colonial, not ever revolutionary', claiming his own as the first and only true Bolivian revolution. His leadership is bringing tangible benefits to the conditions of indigenous life and has 'refounded' Bolivia as a plurinational state, constitutionally recognising the languages and cultures of the indigenous peoples. Yet in this plurinational state, ethnicity continues to act as a social indicator and a political tool. In order to move beyond essentialised identities founded in racial difference, it is necessary to remember and maintain the revolutionary spirit that has been the driving force of Bolivia's progress to equality.

> 'Amnesia is the enemy of justice.'
> —James Cone

The lack of awareness amongst the Bolivian youth surrounding the events of 1952 is mirrored by the lack of official memorialisation in La Paz. The only permanent commemoration exists in the **Museo de la Revolución Nacional**, an imposing building at the head of the Plaza Villarroel. Despite the grandeur of the approach, the internal exhibition provides sparse information about the revolutionary events. Beautiful and obscure murals depict in rich colours a symbolic representation of the struggle. Yet the details, characters, and culmination of the revolution are undetectable; the only mention of Juan Lechín Oquendo, leader of the labour movement, exists as a small plaque at ground level. Here, it seems, empty grandeur and abstract art have taken the place of genuine remembrance.

Despite the notable limitations of the process in 1952, the rights it won for the majority of Bolivians should not be discarded to the dustbin of history. Historian James Cone offers a profound warning: 'Amnesia is the enemy of justice'. To forget the past is to deny the lessons it can offer. The events of 1952 remind us of the power of popular mobilisation behind a cause. And its aftermath highlights the limitations of a revolution when faced with a culture hostile to its aims.

While 1952 did not provide immediate relief to the long history of Bolivian inequality, it did provide the fundamental tools through which the oppressed could lay claim to a Bolivian identity. The revolutionary ideals served as a template for the future Bolivia, even if this process was interrupted by 50 years of capitalist exploitation and military rule. Remembering this revolution is as important as the march upon La Paz 62 years ago. To forget would be to degrade the human lives lost in pursuit of an egalitarian Bolivian nation, and to fail in our duty to learn from their struggle. The blissful ignorance of youth, while beautiful in its innocence, bodes precariously for the future.

RAZZLE DAZZLE 'EM

BOLIVIAN DRAG QUEENS DANCE TO THEIR OWN BEAT

TEXT : ALEXANDRA VILLARREAL
PHOTO: JUAN CARLOS USNAYO

Imagine: it's the 1980s in the U.S.A. Ronald Reagan is president, and homophobia is rampant across the country. There's no Honey Boo Boo to sass her way into LGBTQ activism, and queer individuals hide inside a deep, dark closet to avoid violence and prejudice.

This is the backdrop for Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, a play that revolutionized the public's perception of homosexuality in the United States. Over eight acts, a colorful spectrum of characters paints the portrait of a heterogeneous population with an even more eclectic appetite for carnal pleasure. The text's rock is Belize, New York's resident drag queen. Encircled by closed-minded, critical men who choose to mask their identities, Belize stands out for her unabashed self-confidence and her ability to somehow paste everyone together in an awkward but necessary relationship diagram.

Now, fast-forward to Bolivia in 2014. Instead of Reagan, Evo Morales heads the government of a country submerged in **machismo**, an unspoken social order that has driven indigenous civilization for centuries, only to be reinforced with the advent of Catholic colonizers from Europe. In the plazas and on cobblestone roads in La Paz, discussing sexuality is a taboo, and according to one local, short-lived underground gay bars operate as one of the only meeting spots for homosexuals in the city. Gay Bolivian vagabonds search for solace in more accepting corners of the world, and though Bolivia's youngest generation is more outspoken about sexual orientation, teenage boys are still thrown out of Internet cafés because of photographic mementos on their laptops from a night out with their boyfriends.

Sounds familiar, so where is drag queen Belize within this Bolivian drama?

Enter la Familia Galán from stage left. Fierce and fearless, the cross-dressing Family will take on any biting comment or hurtful snipe thrown their way as they strut down La Paz's parade routes in 6-inch heels.

La Familia Galán is a nucleus for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) activism in Bolivia, challenging traditional values of sex and gender through drag performance. As Bolivia's central unit for trans politics, the Family is known as much for its courage and resilience as for its good humor and playful attitude.

In her dissertation, University of Manchester student Fliss Lloyd referenced a *Conexión Fondo de Empancipación* study from 2011, which, according to Lloyd, found that transgendered Bolivian citizens 'were the most vulnerable [to homophobia], with 75% reported… being threatened with violence, and one third having suffered physical abuse'. Whether straight, gay, or bi, when a member of the Family leaves the Galán safe space to make a public statement in drag, they risk their own necks in an attempt to foster a more egalitarian and open Bolivia. But never fear—when the group and its allies are united for one of Bolivia's great fiestas, they're practically untouchable as they inspire a political dialogue through makeup and dance.

'The fiesta has given us the option to make ourselves visible', Danna Galán, the star-power of the Family, said. 'All of the microphones are for us. And from there, one gets a read on popular culture'.

While the Familia has chosen to use streetside parties as a way to interact with Bolivia's mainstream, they also sit around coffee tables together and explore more nuanced viewpoints on what it means to be part of Bolivia's sexual diversity. Their theoretical discourse is confined to a smaller group of intellectuals who are interested in the social implications of LGBTQ activism, and major themes include identity and the body as 'a space of oppression'.

'We don't really believe in an identity', Danna Galán explained. 'To continue planting the lesbian, gay identity is to continue having conservative views because identity is oppressive when you believe it yourself'. According to the Galán Family's main queen, however, intellectualism serves little purpose when it is not linked to action. 'Reflection and theorization would not have any meaning if it didn't enter daily life', she added.

The Familia Galán may have altered Bolivia's gender landscape to introduce options beyond the standard binary, but the nation's pre-Hispanic origins continue to exercise an overarching influence on Bolivia's social structure. Indigenous groups such as the Aymara and Quechua still believe that each gender has a set role to play. An article from Santa Cruz's El Deber in 2012 cited an anonymous chiquitano correspondent, who claimed, 'I don't like homosexuals because it's a small town, and in this town, there has never been that class of people'. It is evident that in this kind of traditional, dichotomized culture, there is no room for same-sex partners.

Even though these gender expectations originated in rural terrains with agrarian economies, where they proved necessary for survival, they have gradually seeped into urban life in cities like La Paz as families have moved from the country to metropolitan areas. Men rejoice when their wives give birth to baby boys, and both parents raise their sons to continue the bloodline in a heteronormative way.

Given these ongoing traditions, gender relations in Bolivia's social and political capitals remain conservative and restrictive. Sexuality is viewed as a given based on sex, and though homosexuality exists as a concept in the country, the topic suffers from a hush-hush policy.

'It's a matter of culture, I guess', Bolivian citizen Andres Pereira said. 'And in this culture, silence is so important. Silence and tradition'. He noted that almost 80% of his friends in the LGBTQ community have left the country to be a part of a more progressive environment.

Perhaps even more disconcerting than the public's silence regarding homosexuality is Morales' choice of words when talking about the subject. In 2010, Morales was under serious heat from the Western press when he implied that eating chicken with hormones would make men gay, and since his initial election in 2006, the president has become notorious for expressing controversial opinions on social issues.

'This government is the most macho government you've ever seen in your life', Pereira claimed.

While some members of the LGBTQ community are disheartened by the persistence of homophobia in both the public sphere and in their private worlds, others are optimistic about Bolivia's social future. Despite Morales' condescending quips, while president, he has passed several laws, including Law 045, that protect minority rights. Even if, in practice, these pieces of legislation are rarely enforced, they function as a symbolic olive branch to the LGBTQ population in Bolivia. And on the streets, where politics become *passé*, bold homosexual couples hold hands and sometimes steal a kiss in public. Though they may be surrounded by surprised stares, the stares are not always glares, but glances affected by the unknown.

A few days ago, a Bolivian man told me the story of his high school reunion, where he introduced his Belgian boyfriend to his former classmates. The alumni greeted both men with open arms, or in his case, with a drink to start off the night. No one was wearing drag. There wasn't a parade with 6-inch heels. But, in his perspective, a beer with his buddies and boyfriend outshone the shimmer of sequins on a loud costume.

Perhaps the problem lies in that, for every high school reunion and kiss in the street, there is an outburst of prejudice that demonstrates why the Familia Galán is so important. Most recently, representative Roberto Rojas of MAS commented on a protest against homophobia that took place on June 27 in the Plaza Murillo in La Paz. His problem? Two women kissing on the steps of a cathedral. His conclusion? 'Our country is not prepared for this situation, for homosexuals. A sickness. They seem like mentally ill people, it's a lot of radicalism'.

'The thing with Roberto Rojas was the most recent instance of homophobia', Danna Galán said. 'I'd rather be up against a Roberto Rojas who says that [homosexuals] are mentally ill people than someone who shows you kindness and gives you hugs and then gossips behind your back'.

Thanks to the likes of Rojas, Bolivia needs its version of Belize. The closet door is opening little by little, and the Familia Galán is standing by to make sure no one slams it shut again.

PHOTO: ALEJANDRO ORELLANA

PHOTO: KATYUSSA VEÍGA

GLOSSARY

CONDORITO	A popular character from a cartoon
ORACION DEL CHOFER	The driver's prayer
MICRO	Bus
CHALLA	A blessing to the Earth to get protection. This ritual includes decorating one's property or car with coloured streamers and sprinkling alcohol, golden grains, daisy petals and candies all around it.
LOGOTIPEADO	Slang for the paintings on the buses
HUACA	A revered cultural site
MORENO	Someone with a dark complexion
DIABLADA	A traditional Bolivian dance in which dancers dress as devils
MOVIMIENTO NACIONALISTA REVOLUCIONARIO:	Revolutionary Nationalist Movement
CRIOLLO	Elite white minority of Spanish descent
NO, NO SÉ NADA	No, I know nothing.
MUSEO DE LA REVOLUCIÓN NACIONAL:	Museum of the National Revolution
CHOLOS	Those of Spanish and Indian descent
ALTEÑO	Person from the city of El Alto
MACHISMO	Male chauvinism

PHOTO: MARIELA SALAVERRY