

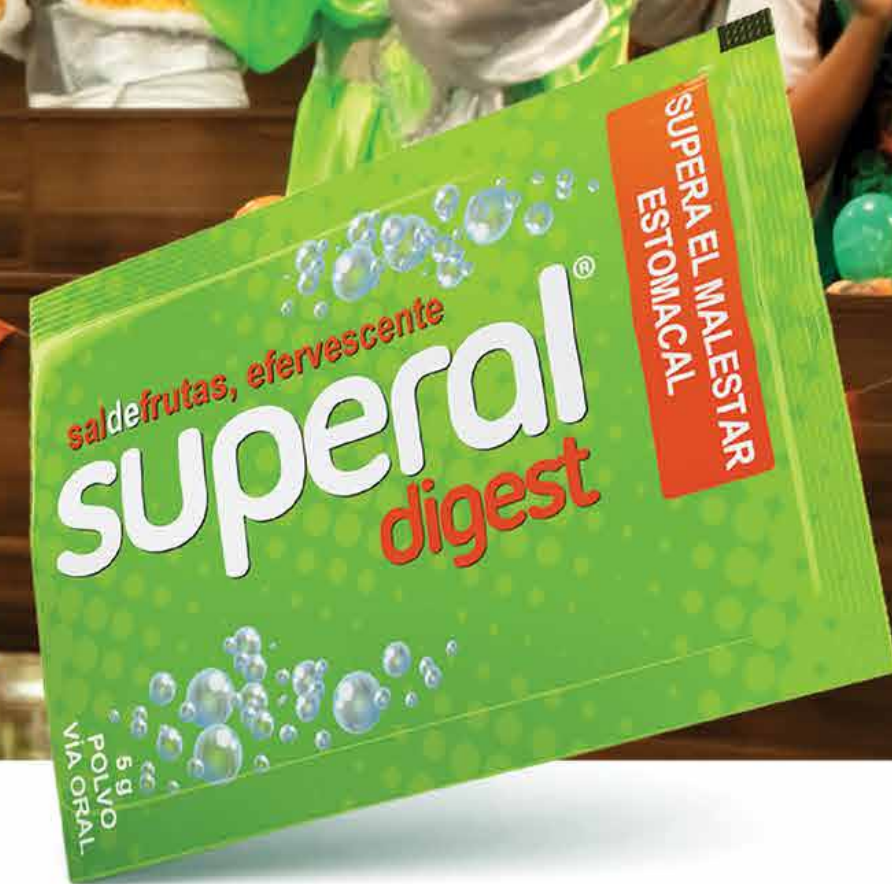
# BolivianExpress

Gratis Magazine





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## Editorial #102: Identities

By: Caroline Risacher

The 2012 census revealed that 41 percent of Bolivians self-identified as belonging to an indigenous group, a figure that caused controversy and confusion when compared with the 2001 census in which 58 percent of the population identified as such. The figure from the 2012 census was a surprise because the creation of the plurinational state in 2009 and the government's official recognition of 36 indigenous groups seemed to mark a new beginning where Bolivia embraced its diversity after centuries of colonial domination and assimilation. Reasons for the drop in indigenous self-identification could be attributed to the way the census was framed, the lack of a **mestizo** category, a resurgence of racism, social changes, or some combination of all of these factors. Indeed, identity is an incredibly complex concept, and a census wouldn't be able to reflect that accurately – especially in Bolivia, where identities are shifting and are constantly being reinvented and imposed by a dominant group.

The word itself, 'indigenous', may seem harmless enough and has been used by the United Nations since the 1970s to help identify and protect the rights

of Bolivia's indigenous peoples. But for Carlos Macusaya, an **indianista-katarista** thinker and member of the Jiccha collective, the use of the word 'indigenous' comes with a price. According to Macusaya, the word represents 'a colonial category used to name an undifferentiated population subject to colonisation.' Macusaya also points out that South American countries only started to recognise and adopt indigenous policies in the 1990s, when they started to come with international funding.

If you ask Macusaya, he will say that he is not indigenous; rather, he is Aymara. To him, the indigenous identity is imposed and represents the interests of other groups. Macusaya also considers the notion that in Bolivia everyone is *mestizo* to be a colonial concept. 'We must think of a country not of "indigenous" and not of "mestizos", because these are colonial identities with which the population is racialised to justify exclusions,' he says. 'It is useless and even dangerous to be trapped in ideas like "all Bolivians are *mestizos* because there are no pure races," because it is a mixture of something that does not exist: races.'

The current Bolivian Constitution

refers to and recognised the rights and autonomy of inhabitants of rural areas as '*indígenas originarios campesinos*' (native indigenous peasants). For Macusaya, the 'native indigenous peasants' evoke people who live in the countryside and are reluctant to change. Meanwhile, *mestizos* live in the city. The social changes that indigenous groups experience, moving to new economic spaces, are assumed as biological changes (miscegenation) and are read in racialised terms, Macusaya points out.

A census may need to categorise individuals for practical purposes, but one's identity is personal and even private. Identities shift over time, and they can't be reduced to one word and can't be imposed by anyone else. The next Bolivian census will take place in 2021, and its results will surely be analysed and discussed extensively. As the country goes through a period of political and social change while questioning and trying to assess the legacy of Morales's presidency, maybe it is time to start rethinking and reflecting on these words we take for granted – *mestizo*, indigenous, native – in order to avoid repeating the failures of history and create a true and durable 'plurinational' state.

**N.B.**

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



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# BOLIVIAN VERMOUTH

ONE FOR THE TASTE BUDS

TEXT: LAUREN MINION  
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MASTER BLENDS



**V**ermut Titicaca, produced by the renowned Master Blends company, claims to be Bolivia's first ever take on the traditional vermouth used in cocktails across the world, and it is certainly not one to be overlooked. Inspired by agricultural engineer and wine expert Joan Carbó, who originally hails from Barcelona, the vermouth 'blanco' and 'rosso' have only just appeared on Bolivian shelves. But already the product is showing signs of huge potential on the global stage with interest from the Cuban, Chilean and Argentinian markets.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 10 ▶

An aerial view of a vast, terraced vineyard in the Andes, showing rows of grapevines stretching across the landscape. The text is overlaid on the image.

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# THE ONLINE PRESENCE AND PRODUCTION OF JICCHA

HOW A SMALL GROUP OF AYMARA ACADEMICS MANAGED TO TAKE BOLIVIA'S SOCIAL-MEDIA OUTLETS BY STORM

TEXT & PHOTO: ANNELI ALIAGA

Anahí Cusicanqui, a business administrator with the Master Blends company, says with a laugh that thanks to Carbó's 'crazy ideas', the company was able to produce a product whose aim is to 'maximise all that is Bolivian.' Encompassed under this identity are the flavours that are so particular to Bolivia due to the plants and herbs that can be found exclusively on the **altiplano** and in the Amazonian rainforest.

Master Blends' vermouth 'blanco' – or Andino – is a drink inspired by the Bolivian *altiplano* and the flavours and culture that it represents for Bolivian people. The herbs *rica-rica* and *ajeno* (also known as wormwood) are the main contributors to the vermouth's flavour, and they are sourced in the renowned Salar de Uyuni and ancient Inca settlement of Isla del Sol in Lake Titicaca, respectively. A beautifully designed image on the label of the bottle shows a tableau of indigenous people on the aforementioned Isla del Sol. Cusicanqui says that altitudes of more than 3,000 metres does not affect vermouth production as it does the distillation process of other alcohols, and that this white vermouth is a much more fruitier alternative to a dry vermouth 'blanco.' She adds that Master Blends makes a special effort to locally source all 32 of the distinct and natural ingredients that contribute to this vermouth's rich and characteristically Bolivian flavour.

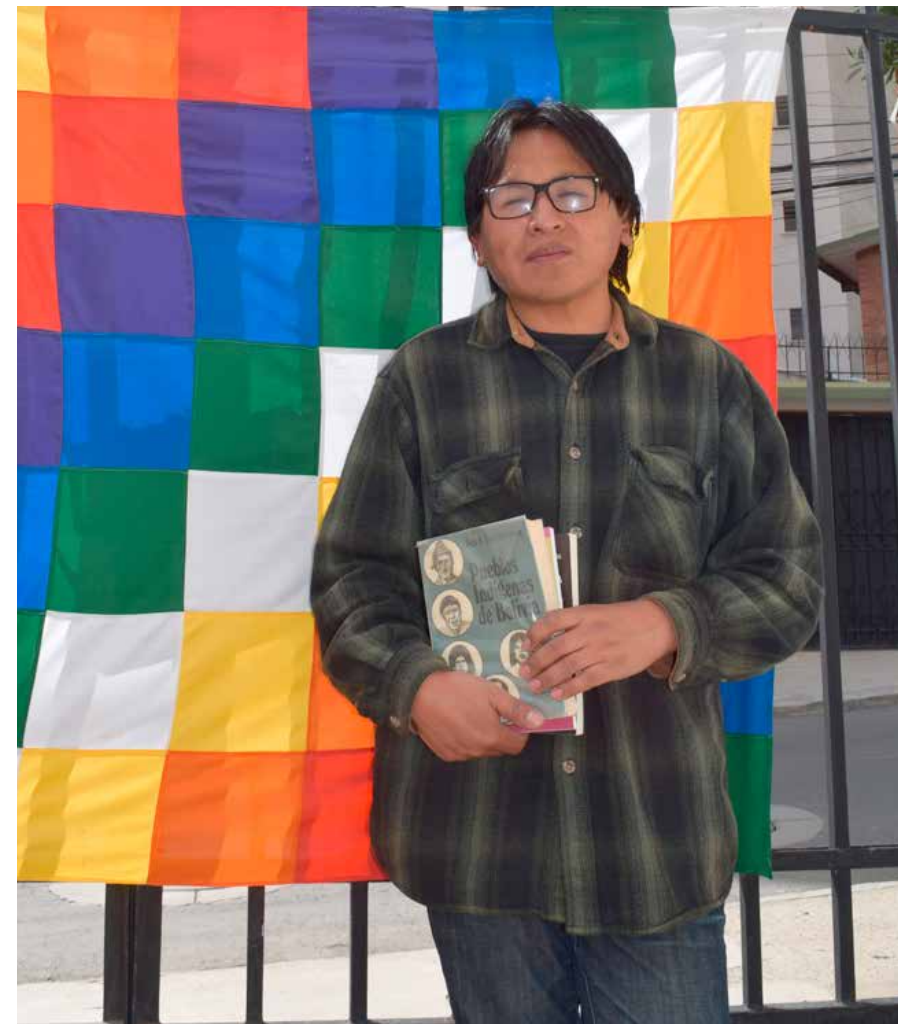
The vermouth Andino's counterpart, vermouth Amazónico, gains its flavour from the extensive Bolivian Amazon region. Its most noticeable ingredient is *canelón*, a plant found in the heart of the

tropical rainforest. This is an even fruitier vermouth, composed of approximately 24 locally sourced ingredients, among which are more berries and fruits than herbs, unlike the vermouth Andino. The history encompassed by the colourful and detailed label of this bottle tells the story of the arrival of Hispanic colonists and their search through the Amazon for El Dorado. *Canelón* was considered to be nearly as valuable as gold in this era, as it was a flavour that the Spanish had never before encountered.

In order to produce both the vermouth 'blanco' and 'rosso', Master Blends has teamed up with the Kuhlmann Distillery, located in Tarija. Vermouth is approximately 90 percent wine, and so the balancing and mixing that takes place in Tarija carries equal importance to the infusions of herbs and fruits that is carried out in La Paz. The infusion, which reaches an 80-90 percent alcohol content, is sent to the Kuhlmann Distillery to be mixed, balanced and bottled with high-quality white and red wine. Kuhlmann's Franz Molina says that a white muscatel wine is used for the white vermouth that is extremely aromatic, fine and clean. The red vermouth is produced from muscatel and tannat, which thrives at Tarija's 2,000-metre altitude.

Both vermouths are already showing great potential in the international market; however, at this early stage of production the Master Blends company is prioritising making it available in Bolivia nationwide in restaurants, bars and cafés.

## BOLIVIA'S FIRST EVER TAKE ON TRADITIONAL VERMOUTH.



For many years, Bolivia's academic content and political proposals were exclusively broadcast from and to an elite social sector. Wilmer Machaca, Carlos Macusaya, Iván Apaza Calle and Franco Limber, all academics from El Alto in their own right, decided it was time for things to change. They are managing to dispel the idea that Bolivian popular sectors have no academic agency and potential. Inspired by the word for 'now' or 'the present' in Aymara, Machaca created Jiccha in 2017 as a personal online blog. Two years later, the blog became a portal and Machaca teamed up with Macusaya, Apaza Calle and Limber to create a group with various social-media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. Now consisting of an official team of 12 members, Jiccha is a cultural and political platform that supports, produces and broadcasts academic content in the field of indigenous studies and the *indianista* and *katarista* political ideologies to an international and national following of over 15,000 people.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 12 ▶



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Both Macusaya and Machaca describe how there are no hierarchies in Jiccha. All of the founding members equally distribute the workload and are all active in terms of producing and broadcasting content. They manage this system easily due to the fact that they consider themselves experts in separate fields: Apaza Calle studies *indigenista* and *indianista* literature; Macusaya is interested in themes relating to indigenous identity; Machaca delves into technology and politics; and, finally, Limber writes about history. 'We all complement each other in many ways,' chuckles Machaca, but he admits that the theme of colonisation and political ideologies are common ground for them all.

Jiccha channels the majority of its activism through its online portal (jichha.blogspot.com) and its Facebook page. On these two platforms, Jiccha has been known to share downloadable content of complete works, such as academic articles and books, that would otherwise be inaccessible to aspiring young academics from the popular sectors who have neither the means nor the money to afford some of these texts. The team also has their own Youtube channel where they frequently upload radio shows on which they have been invited to speak thanks to their online visibility, interviews, documentaries and news clips relating to their objectives and interests. Additionally, they use their Twitter account to discuss current affairs despite Machaca's explanations that 'Twitter in Bolivia is seen as a social-media platform that is primarily associated with Bolivia's middle-class social strata, or verified politicians and figures.' Jiccha, on the other hand, is mainly focused on creating an academic environment for the popular sectors. While the group's Facebook page has attracted followers from all over the world, Machaca admits that its Youtube channel has more of a militant political following of kataristas, a stem of the indianismo ideology which is definitely more rooted in the Bolivian Aymara imaginary.

The group's philosophy revolves around producing and sharing con-

tent that allows them to give their political views more scope. Machaca explains that their principal objectives include 'generating reflection, thought and promoting new proposals for societal change.' Macusaya adds that, for him, Jiccha's most important and overarching group aim is 'to improve the image of the indigenous figure in the public eye: be it through the exploration of Bolivia's rural identity, denouncing the political marginalisation of the autochthonous populations or condemning the folklorisation of Quechua-Aymara culture.'

The political currents that are supported and promoted by Jiccha include indianismo and katarismo. These two ideologies are often clumped together, and they certainly share many characteristics. Yet Machaca takes his time in distinguishing one from the other.

While both of these movements were born from Quechua-Aymara Andean dissatisfaction, 'indianismo represents a more radical anticolonial stance on an international level,' Machaca says. 'The suffering, racism and discrimination that rural indigenous migrants had to face in the city pushed these sectors to create a political movement to defend their rights.' The realities that these migrants had to face on a daily basis, in terms of discrimination at work and being denied public services, were brand-new preoccupations; indianismo was a form of fighting against systemic, colonial and

hegemonic violence and oppression. 'Katarismo was followed years later,' Machaca comments. The katarista ideology emerged in the 1970s and was primarily formed by rural syndicates that proposed a new process of decolonisation that would have to come from within society. Decolonising Bolivian school's curriculum and Bolivia's dominant culture, and challenging political representation, were all principal objectives that spurred the movement. These battles for Aymara equality and emancipation are not over for the popular sectors of modern-day Bolivia. Jiccha forms an integral part of this struggle, using books, intellect and digital platforms as sources of political empowerment.

**MACHACA EXPLAINS THAT THEIR PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES INCLUDE 'GENERATING REFLECTION, THOUGHT AND PROMOTING NEW PROPOSALS FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE.'**

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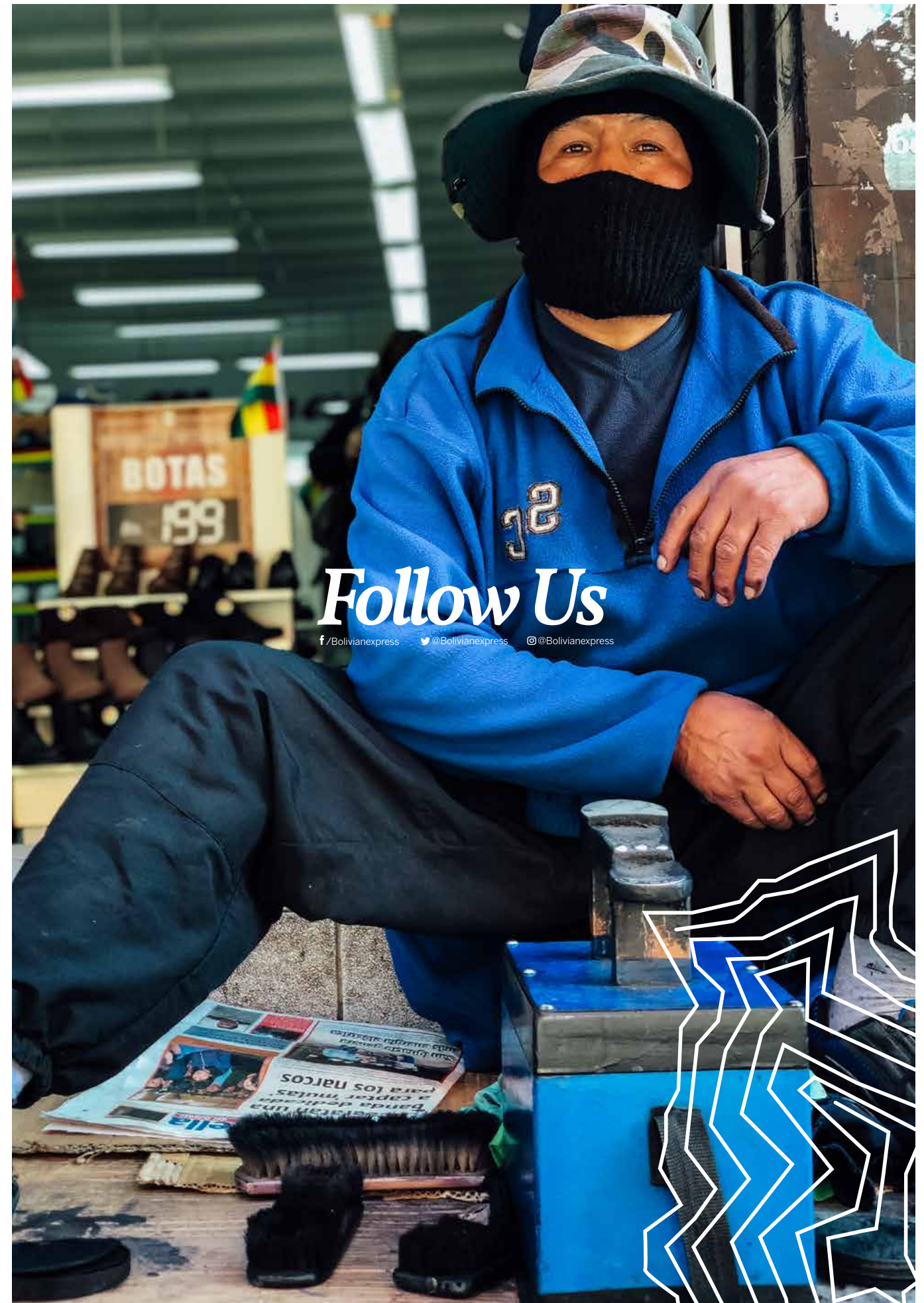
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# CHEVENING SCHOLARS RETURN TO BOLIVIA

UK GOVERNMENT'S GLOBAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME  
FOR FUTURE WORLD LEADERS

TEXT: BX TEAM  
PHOTOS: CHANGTSE QUINTANILLA



‘Bring your ideas to life, study in the UK’ is the Chevening scholarship’s motto. Last year, for over 1,500 professionals from approximately 160 different countries, this dream became a lived reality. Founded by the British government’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the year 1983, the Chevening scholarship programme continues to financially support postgraduate study in the United Kingdom of thousands of students from all corners of the Earth on a yearly basis.

After enduring a highly competitive application process, successful candidates for the programme are allowed to study a Master’s course at a British University, many of which are Russell Group universities, with all study and travel costs included before returning to their home countries to become valuable and skillful members of their respective societies.

This year, the *Bolivian Express* team had the pleasure of welcoming back some of Bolivia’s brightest young minds from their Chevening experiences in the UK at an event at the British ambassador’s residence. Following many conversations, and interviews with the past Chevening scholars, the team realised how inspiring, progressive and beneficial this scholarship programme is. All of the scholars had extremely positive experiences at different British universities, and were able to articulate their success stories with an impressively high and sophisticated level of English. Most importantly, the Chevening scholars did not see their return to Bolivia as the end of their scholarship experience. Instead, it is only the beginning. All of the interviewees expressed an eagerness and commitment to staying in Bolivia and channeling their influence, and newfound skills in their home environments.



## MARÍA FERNANDA ACHÁ SORIA

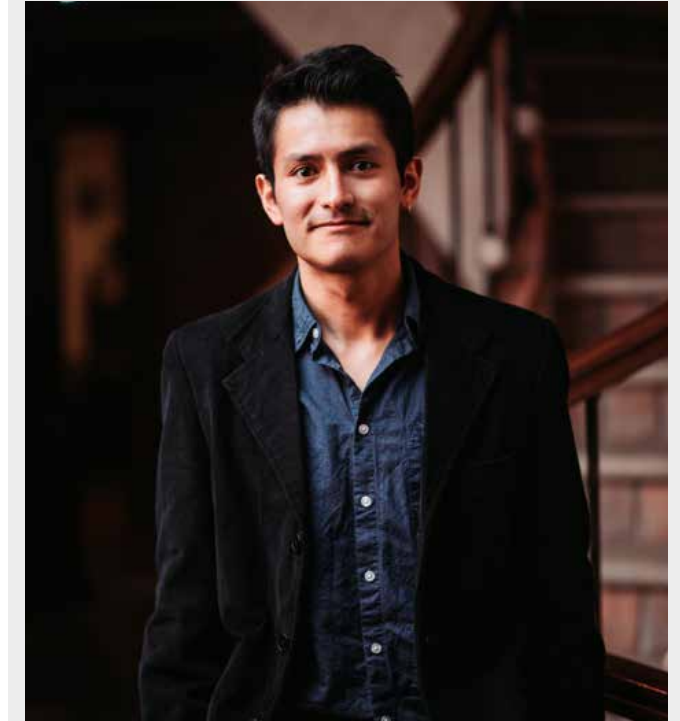
32  
ECONOMIST  
MSC SOCIAL INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE  
LONDON  
2018–2019

‘Chevening, as a fully funded scholarship, gave me the opportunity to actually go and study in one of the best universities in the world. I also like the networking opportunities that you have and the focus that they have in you studying and being the best that you can. They really push you to be the best in your field and then come back home and be able to implement it here.’

‘My experience was great. I was in London, a huge city completely different from the cities we have here in Bolivia. And particularly the Masters I was in was very interesting because we didn’t have British people, we were all international so we had people from Africa, Asia and a lot of Latin American people, so it was a very diverse group from different paths of lives. So you had people that had studied biodiversity, business, marketing...all these different experiences that will come into one. Being able to actually work together as a team with people that are so multicultural, sometimes it was taught but it was a very nice growing experience.’

‘I would like to be able to help to build a social entrepreneurship ecosystem here in Bolivia, because I really want to have the greater impact I can and I think supporting social entrepreneurs, getting that ecosystem built and finding partnerships would be the best.’

Achá had some advice for people interested in the programme: ‘Go for it, trust in yourself, and don’t fear rejection because if you really don’t go for it you’ll never know. Prepare for the process, take time to understand what you want and what your future is, think about it and think about how you are going to implement it back home. Be honest with yourself.’



## SERGIO ROLANDO MENDOZA REYES

29  
JOURNALIST  
MS INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING  
BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
LONDON  
2018–2019

‘The UK gives a lot of importance to education and culture in general. Chevening is one of the most prestigious scholarships, one of the few fully funded that allows you to choose any course that you want. They also give you a lot of networking and connections to develop your career.’  
‘I discovered a lot about myself and my profession, it was an amazing experience in both aspects.’

‘Before the programme I had a basic idea about investigative journalism, after the program I have a more complex and complete idea about journalism and media, I earned a lot of tools that I can use for investigative journalism. The programme opens a lot of opportunities. And I have the dream to make a change with what I’m doing.’





**NATHALIE LIZETH FOREST YEPEZ**

34  
ECONOMIST  
MSC IN DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS AND EMERGING MARKETS  
UNIVERSITY OF YORK  
YORK  
2018-2019

'The programme was very supportive, one of the things I liked the most is that Chevening is focused on leadership and networking. Now I would like to continue working in economics and research, and end up in a leadership position to help my country. We have a lot of challenges for the future.'

Forest had some advice for future applicants 'Be honest with yourself. Sometimes you want to impress and show all the most interesting things that you have done. But everything works better when you have the honesty with since the beginning.'

*Learn more at [chevening.org](http://chevening.org)*



**MARCELO FERNANDO GANTIER MITA**

27  
ECONOMIST  
MSC IN ECONOMICS  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK  
COVENTRY  
2018-2019

'Now, I'm working as a consultant and also teaching macroeconomics at the Universidad Católica Boliviana. I want to continue teaching because I think it is a very good way to pay back to my country after all the experience that I had abroad. So I want to change the mentality of students, telling them to try harder and have big aspirations.'

'I've learned so much about many different things because I shared with people from all over the world, the experience with Chevening opens your mind. But I'm happy to be back in my country and work for my people to improve things here. We need a lot of human capital to build a new country.'

# THE ELEGANT ANDEAN CONDOR

THIS BIG BIRD IS THREATENED BY HABITAT LOSS AND HUMAN AGGRESSION

TEXT & PHOTOS: LAUREN MINION

**T**he Andean Condor, one of the world's largest birds that are able to fly, weighs up to 33 kilogrammes and has a wingspan that can exceed three metres. The Andes mountain range of South America is the condor's exclusive habitat. The bird not only wows people with its grace and size, but also with its historical significance. All of this has contributed to the Andean condor's status as a national symbol of Bolivia, and thus its appearance on the country's tricolor flag.

In Incan mythology, the condor signified the upper world, or the sky; furthermore, it also signified power and health. Julia Peña, a co-founder of the Valle de los Condores tour company and conservation project near Tarija, says that many Andean indigenous groups believed that the Andean Condor cleaned the air and the human soul. This mythological task makes sense, as the condor is a scavenging vulture that feeds on dead animals, cleaning its territory of carcasses that otherwise would rot and pollute the surroundings.

The Andean Condor soars up to altitudes of 5,000 metres to scout for food, relying on thermal air currents that it uses to propel itself with its fully expanded wings. Considering its weight, this is vital for the Andean condor's survival, as the warm air enables it to ascend without wasting much energy. However, this reliance on hot air currents within the mountain ranges can also inhibit the condor's flight during the rainy season from November through March. Once its feathers are wet, it is considerably weighed down, which can interfere with the bird's stamina, directional skills and flight control, leaving it unable to navigate the skies in search of food. Many condors do not survive the rainy season.

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CONTINUES ON PAGE 18



*A female Andean Condor sweeps over her territory in search of food, using warm air currents to save energy*

Condors are also threatened by rural farmers. Although the condor will prey on any deceased cattle or sheep, it will never attack a live animal. But some farmers still consider the bird to be a threat to their livestock, and they will use poison to kill the condors – not realising that the iconic birds are no threat to their farm animals at all. Peña says that due to this and other factors, such as loss of habitat, the breathtaking species is under threat of extinction.

Because the condor was a relatively hardy species in the past, before widespread human encroachment and persecution against it, it had a low mortality rate and a concomitant low reproductive rate. It is more difficult than ever for condor mates to find each other, and because the female condor lays only one egg every two years, the species cannot replace its depleted population. During infancy, both the mother and the father condor mind their young, feeding it by regurgitating food that they have consumed in a liquid form so that the chick can consume it. The young bird stays

**THIS BIG BIRD IS  
THREATENED BY  
HABITAT LOSS AND  
HUMAN AGGRESSION**

in a nest that its parents have made out of rocks, which provides protection against the elements. These rock nests are located at extremely high altitudes, sometimes on cliff edges.

According to Peña, although there are very effective conservation and reproduction projects for the Andean Condor in Colombia and Argentina, Bolivia lacks such efforts. There is a condor conservation site in Andean foothills of the western region of the Santa Cruz department, but it is not aimed towards increasing numbers in the wild. Its staff rescues condors that have been poisoned by farmers, but the birds are kept in captivity after their treatment. Though this conservation has the condors' welfare in mind, any chicks born here do not have the chance to fly as they should, and the birds are susceptible to many diseases that are carried by humans. It is for this reason that Peña expresses the need for more educational projects about the species so that people can learn about its habits and especially about its harmlessness to livestock in the area.



*Steep cliff and rock faces make the perfect place for a Condor to build its nest, using rocks to protect themselves from the elements, the sheer drops and high altitude ensures that predators cannot get near*



# CLUBES DE CIENCIA

A CATALYST FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION IN BOLIVIA

TEXT: GEORGE FEARNLEY  
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CLUBES DE CIENCIA BOLIVIA



In January 2020, Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia hosted its fifth-annual event. Participants took part in one of 15 different workshops, or clubs, consisting of five-day intensive courses. Three hundred and twenty-two students ages 16 to 22 took part in the event and, for the first time in Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia's history, came from all nine departments in Bolivia. Impressively, it was entirely free of cost for those who attended. Each club was headed by researchers from universities like Harvard and John Hopkins, as well as the tech giant Google. Each workshop conducted various experiments, from creating genetic modifications using CRISPR technology to creating cyborg cockroaches that could be controlled by cell phones.

Clubes de Ciencia was conceived of in Harvard's Departments of Molecular and Cellular Biology and Chemistry and Chemical Biology. Postgraduates and doctoral students from these departments were concerned that they had few peers from Latin America. They concluded that sources of inspiration were scarce for young people from some countries in this region, and that opportunities to engage with professional scientists who were active in their respective fields were in short supply. The grad students decided to provide such an opportunity. After some hard work and planning, the first iteration of Clubes de Ciencia unfolded in Guanajuato, Mexico, in 2014.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 22 ▶










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After attending the programme in Mexico, Mohammed Mostajo-Radji was inspired to bring a Clubes de Ciencia event to his home country. According to him, Bolivia was in desperate need of such an initiative. 'Despite being one of the countries with the largest GDP investment in education, Bolivia consistently places last in the region in every measurement of education and innovation,' says Mostajo-Radji. He set his sights on inspiring Bolivian youth to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers, creating a support network in both Bolivia and abroad, and influencing the future of science education in Bolivia.

The clubs are designed and led by PhD students from top universities in the United States and Europe and co-led by PhD students working in universities in Bolivia. In the lead-up to the event, the two instructors spend many hours together preparing their workshop. The goal of this is to motivate collaboration between researchers working outside of Bolivia and within it, to encourage the sharing of knowledge and expertise and to ensure the students have an inspiring experience when it comes to their week of science.

Clubes de Ciencia adopts a participatory, hands-on approach to learning. This tactic has proven to be rather effective, says Mostajo-Radji, and 'students learn a lot more in five days of Clubes de Ciencia than in an equivalent university-level semester-long course.' What's more, as discussed in a paper written by the group, it is 'the methodology, and not necessarily the students' background, that is responsible for this knowledge gain.' This strategy therefore shows immense promise, especially in countries with limited resources and funds to put towards science education. 'These results demonstrate efficacy of participatory learning in a developing nation, and suggest that similar techniques could drive scientific engagement in other developing economies.'



Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia has evolved tremendously since its more humble beginnings. Initially, it only had the capacity to accept around 100 students. This year, it accepted 322. While Clubes de Ciencia operates in seven countries, 'in Bolivia we saw an emerging innovation ecosystem that was pretty unique, so we decided to provide as much support to this reality as we could,' says Mostajo-Radji. Forty percent of the workshops now focus on topics outside of the 'hard sciences', such as startup development, science communication and gender in science and technology. Additionally, Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia now incorporates two large events to cater to increased demand: HackBo, the largest technology hackathon in the country, and SymBo, a science, technology and innovation symposium targeted towards young professionals and entrepreneurs.

Although the event only lasts for one week of a year, the impression it leaves on participants lasts much longer. 'Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia students have created about five science-outreach organisations that currently work in seven departments in Bolivia,' says Mostajo-Radji. There are students like Leonardo Viscarra, who is creating 3D prosthetics and donating them to children born without limbs. All 20 of the Bolivian students that participated in the NASA Rover Challenge passed through Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia. As for fellowships and scholarships, 'over half of the Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia students obtain some type of aid either in Bolivia or abroad,' says Mostajo-Radji. As a result, there are Bolivian students studying STEM subjects all over the world.

Given the success of Clubes de Ciencia and its teaching methods, Mostajo-Radji wants to work more closely with the government to incorporate some aspects of the methodology Clubes de Ciencia employs into the current education system. 'I have had some meetings with the current minister of education which show promise, and I am hoping the next government will be as excited about collaborating as the current government is,' he says. 'It is no secret that the Morales administration had a very protectionist philosophy, which made collaborations with foreign institutions and scientists a difficult task.' This was a challenge for Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia since its closest collaborator and major sponsor was the US State Department. 'We are firm believers in people-to-people connections as the best way to break diplomatic tensions and create common goals,' adds Mostajo-Radji. A major landmark for Clubes de Ciencia Bolivia was when the Bolivian Embassy in Washington, DC, asked the organisation to devise a programme for the Bolivian community in the United States. In 2018, three workshops for students of Bolivian descent were held at the Embassy. In January 2020, the cultural attaché of the US Embassy in Bolivia and President Añez visited Clubes de Ciencia workshops in Santa Cruz. 'While these may seem to be baby steps, for countries which have lacked formal diplomatic relationships for over a decade, these are important steps towards mutual understanding and long-term collaboration,' says Mostajo-Radji.

Learn more at [clubesdecienciabolivia.com](http://clubesdecienciabolivia.com)

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# LA SAYA NO ES TODO

AFRO-BOLIVIANS STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION OF THEIR PLACE IN BOLIVIAN HISTORY

TEXT & PHOTOS: RHANNON MATTHIAS



**T**his year marks the 10th anniversary of the passing of Law 200 of the Bolivian Constitution, which officially declared September the month of **afrobolivianidad** and 23 September as the day of *afrobolivianidad*. As Bolivia's black population lived in obscurity and exclusion for centuries – its existence not recognised officially until 2009 – what is meant by *afrobolivianidad*, or being Afro-Bolivian, is still taking shape. If the televised celebrations on September 23 of last year are anything to go by, it is defined by **saya** – Afro-Bolivian dance and music – and an eternal struggle and need to reiterate that people of African descent have contributed to Bolivian culture and society, and not just in the realms of entertainment or sports. *Saya* forms a large part of the celebrations of *afrobolivianidad*; in Bolivia, it is an important way of passing on oral history as well as

embracing African roots. On the surface seeing people of all races and ages moving in and out of sync with the dancers gives the impression of joy in diversity. But as Irene Torrez, the president of the Movimiento Cultural *Saya Afroboliviano* (MOCUSABOL), points out, '*Saya* is not everything.' The drums of *saya* seem to drown out other African contributions to Bolivian society, culture and history, as well as a centuries-long struggle of Bolivians of African descent for basic rights and recognition.

Until 1980, *saya* was confined to small communities in the Yungas region of the eastern foothills of the Andes, most famously in the village of Tocaña, just north of Coroico. The spread of *saya* to Bolivia's metropolitan centres has given much-needed visibility to Bolivia's African-descended population, and it often provides Afro-Bolivians

opportunities to earn their living as performers. But as *saya* has become more commercial, as is often the case with art forms which have roots in minority communities, its significance and function have largely been lost on the audience, and it's thereby been compromised. At its root, *saya* is not just about the movements involved or its rhythm; it also evokes important historical events and notable figures. For example, '*Si yo fuera presidente*' (If I were president) is a well-known *saya* that honours Manuel Isidoro Belzu, the Bolivian president who abolished slavery in 1851.

Torrez, of MOCUSABOL, has built her life on the rhythms of the Yungas and has deep love and appreciation for her craft, proudly showing off the trophies and plaques that adorn her small office near the Miraflores neighbourhood of La Paz. But she allows that the Bolivian people's admiration for the art form can be at best superficial. '*Saya* is important – it connects us to our African ancestors and gives us a sense of pride,' she says. 'But a lot of people think all we can do is dance, and they don't have respect for what we do. Sometimes people pass comments like, "Look how sexy black women are when they dance." They don't pay attention to the lyrics of the songs or understand their true weight. We are just objects for their entertainment.'

Whilst people might be open to their music and dance, Afro-Bolivians have had to struggle to be accepted as a people by the rest of Bolivian society for centuries. In spite of legislative and historical changes, they are still victims of discrimination on various levels. They live in relative poverty, face social exclusion and are subject to frequent racist behaviour. Part of the problem with Afro-Bolivian representation stems from the fact that they make up less than 1 percent of the Bolivian population. Their cries are easily muffled, particularly in a country where over half of the population identifies as indigenous and were victims themselves of similar abuses for centuries. Afro-Bolivians' role in Bolivian history is too easily erased, and their historical experience is very often summarised into a sentence or two – if mentioned at all. Paola Inofuentes, an activist and the executive director of the Afro-Bolivian Centre for Integral and Community Development, puts it succinctly: 'To the average person, our history goes like this: We arrived as slaves, moved to Los Yungas and then we were liberated. The end.' But the history of Afro-Bolivians is much more complicated and of much more consequence, for Bolivia and the Spanish empire itself.

The first Africans arrived in Bolivia in the 16th century, as slaves to strip out the rich mines of Cerro Rico, near Portosí, where countless perished due to the inhospitable conditions they were subjected to (the exact number of deaths is impossible to know, but there are estimates that five to six million forced laborers – indigenous and African alike – died in the mines of Cerro Rico). And, like elsewhere in the Americas, both North and South, Africans were forced to perform agricultural labor – oftentimes in appalling conditions. 'African slaves were transferred to the Yungas partly because the region was in need of manpower, says La Paz-based historian Roger Leonardo Mamani Siñani, 'and it is said that they arrived knowing how to grow sugar, cotton, and tobacco – all of which grow well in Los Yungas.' Even after the official abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century, Afro-Bolivians continued to be oppressed by the mestizo elite until the 1952 National Revolution, after which



extensive land-reform laws were passed. Even then, though, Afro-Bolivians have faced discrimination and systemic economic hardship up to and including the present day. Juan Angola Maconde is an Afro-Bolivian economist and one of the foremost experts and researchers in the realm of black history. Originally from Dorado Chico, Yungas his first book, *'Raíces de un pueblo: cultura afroboliviana'*, was published in 2000, and received attention elsewhere in Latin America and even the United States. He emphasises repeatedly that his works have received more attention outside of Bolivia, though he was presented with an award for his research in September of last year – one of the few Afro-Bolivians to be commemorated outside of the area of *saya*. 'There has not been much research into the role of Afro-Bolivians in the War of Independence,' he says. 'There were black battalions that participated. They were known as *Los Batallones de Terror*, and many of them perished in the conflict. Their names are unknown because they were slaves who participated in the promise of eventual freedom. We do know that people of African descent participated in the Chaco War, and this is well documented. The likes of Pablo Murga, Pedro Andavez Peralta and Demetrio Barra emerged as heroes. But once the black and indigenous soldiers returned from the war, they were still subjected to servitude under the hacienda system, and this did not change until the revolution of 1952.'

Pedro Peralta is the most prominent Afro-Bolivian to emerge from the Chaco War, even being recognised by the Bolivian

Parliament in 2018 as 'an exemplary son of the Afro-Bolivian community and culture'. Recognition of heroes like Peralta is a victory and shows some signs of progress for Afro-Bolivians after centuries of being ignored, but there is still a long way to go. 'The legacy of colonialism and slavery and how it affected us and continues to affect us are not considered,' Inofuentes explains. 'I think that some people feel like the fact that we are being acknowledged is enough, and we should feel grateful. But we are not acknowledged for the role we played in liberating this country, and the current issues we face are ignored by everyone.'

Perhaps as a new generation with better access to opportunities, with the added advantage of being better connected and with new notions of *afrobolivianidad* will begin to emerge. 'Now with the Internet, it's easier to find out about people like Malcolm X, and find role models,' says Inofuentes. Acknowledging the role of Bolivians of African descent in the independence struggle would involve a lot more research, but it could go a long way in shaping blackness in Bolivia, and it would reinforce the idea that they have played roles other than entertaining or serving. In the past 10 years, black Bolivians have gone on to occupy positions of power – people like Jorge Medina, former chief of police Abel de la Barra and the deputy minister of culture Juan Carlos Ballivián. Hopefully, the coming generations will produce more examples of black Bolivian excellence, carrying the knowledge that their ancestors played a role in their freedom.

## CONNECTING TO THE ROOTS FROM THE ROOTS

AN AFRO-BOLIVIAN ENTREPRENEUR BRINGS BRAIDS TO THE FASHION FOREFRONT

TEXT & PHOTO: RHIANNON MATTHIAS



**A** **frobolivianidad** is often presented as being defined by **saya** and discrimination. The former is the music that Afro-Bolivians connect with their long-lost roots, and the latter is the inescapable result of centuries of slavery. Hair forms part of both of these realities – it is an inseparable part of Afro-Bolivians' identity and culture. *Saya* dancers wear their hair in braided hairstyles so that it sways to the bass of the drums, accentuating the dancers' movements. The hairstyles of people with African ancestry are historically and politically charged. Whether it is a gravity-defying Afro, a curly mane, dreadlocks or intricate braids, the way black people choose to wear their hair is important. Afro-textured hair is incredibly versatile and diverse. It's able to take on a variety of textures and shapes, but it is also very fragile and misunderstood – and therefore needs to be tended to with skilful hands. Siboney Angola is a young Afro-Bolivian radio presenter, dancer and model turned entrepreneur who is also the proud owner of *Áfrican-Queen*, a business specialising in hair extensions and braids – the first of its kind in La Paz.

Siboney is a member of one of the most prominent Afro-Bolivian families in the city of La Paz. Her uncle, Juan Angola Maconde, is an economist and historian who is most recognised for his investigations into centuries of lost Afro-Bolivian history. Her sister Carmen Angola Campos is a former gymnast and a prominent photographer, and her late brother Pedro Antonio Angola was the founder of the rock band Aeon. Siboney credits her Aymara mother for much of the success that she and her siblings have experienced, saying, 'She always enrolled us in lots of activities, and she really pushed us because she knew that in order to be recognised and respected we had to be outstanding.'

But coming from a family of trailblazers did not spare Siboney from racism. 'In school, I had it really bad,' she says. 'I would never wish for anybody to experience what I did. I was called all sorts of names. They would pick on me all the time. It was awful. The worst part was the teachers – they would just blow it off as kids being kids.' Siboney's hair was mocked constantly. Siboney credits her paternal grandmother, who was renowned for her braiding skills, for teaching her how to braid. But she says she also had help from her sister. 'When I was 8, my sister taught me how to braid my own hair,' Siboney says. 'It kept my hair out of sight, which helped with the bullying and allowed it to grow.'

'I HAVE ALWAYS FELT LIKE BEING BLACK MAKES YOU A GLOBAL CITIZEN. WE ARE ALL OVER THE WORLD AND WE ARE DEEPLY CONNECTED.'  
—SIBONEY ANGOLA

Braids are a protective style, adopted by men and women around the world as a practical and aesthetically pleasing way to wear their hair. But it was on the African continent where individual braids turned into an intricate art form, with individual tribes across different regions adopting a multitude of braiding and locking styles. The intricacy of patterns was a way to decipher the origins, background or relationship status of a person – this intricacy also means that certain hairstyles could take over 24 hours to complete, turning a braiding session into an intense bonding session.

Siboney started her business in 2014, the year she found out she was pregnant and left her journalism degree behind out of the need for a fixed income. She describes the business as her second child, though it is not without challenges – all of her materials and merchandise have to be imported at a steep cost and she has far fewer clients than a 'conventional' hairdresser. African braids are new here in Bolivia, she says: 'Braids really came into fashion in 2015, because of Instagram and other websites.' Instagram has birthed thousands of black influencers who challenge the conventional notions of beauty without the need for a high-fashion stamp of approval. 'I have always felt like being black makes you a global citizen,' Siboney says. 'We are all over the world and we are deeply connected.' Now with social media, this connection is even closer. And for Siboney, braids are far more than an internet trend. 'I feel connected to my African roots because of my hair,' she says. 'Everywhere I go, whether I am attending an event as a guest or modelling, I am representing my people, and my hairstyles are a huge part of that.' Braids are more than just a style to protect hair or a trend; they are a connection between the African diaspora, its descendants and the continent's tribespeople. A connection to the roots, from the roots – literally.

Siboney holds her head high – even under the weight of her extensions and in light of racist microaggressions. Apart from dealing with ignorant comments about her and her mixed-race daughter, she and many other black Bolivians have had unsettling experiences of being pinched and touched by strangers who believe in **la suerte negrita** – the belief that black people are lucky charms. 'I used to get really angry,' Siboney says. 'My sister still does. But I realise that being aggressive makes everything worse. I try to be calm and speak to people in a way that makes them rethink their words and their actions.' And she feels optimistic about the future of Afro-Bolivians. 'Now we are more visible,' she says. 'More of us are daring to dream, finishing school, getting involved in politics. I'd love it if more of us could stand up and demand what we deserve.' Siboney is a symbol of the potential future for Afro-Bolivians: educated, proud and independent.



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PHOTO: Michael Dunn [www.michaeldunco.com]

## RAINBOWS OF REVOLUTION

### THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WIPHALA IN THE BOLIVIAN IMAGINARY

TEXT: ANNELI ALJAGA

There is minimal, if any, concrete historical evidence of the origin of the **wiphala**, the multicoloured flag common to the Bolivian Andes. Aside from its links to Bolivia's pre-Columbian civilisations and present day Quechua-Aymara philosophy, the flag's story has been appropriated, twisted and turned to the point of obfuscation in order to foster the rise of popular movements, political discourses and fantastical tales. Many scholars and historians have managed to trace the patterns and colours of the flag to precolonial times, all the while debating its primary function: Did it serve as an astronomical calendar or merely as a vibrant decoration that would come to mean much more? Sure

enough, the flag's history may seem vague, yet the *wiphala* has become one of the most symbolic and controversial national symbols of Bolivia.

Franco Limber, an advocate of the *indianista* ideology and author of *Breve historia real de la wiphala*, dedicates his book to deciphering historical truth when it comes to the flag's beginnings. He believes it is important to consider some hypotheses behind the *wiphala*'s historical roots. Despite Limber's disclaimers warning readers that his ideas may 'lack veracity', his findings have such an intimate relationship with their respective historical contexts that it would not be absurd to value their rationale and probability. For example, an uncanny resemblance of the *wiphala* pattern can be seen in textile artefacts from the Tiwanaku era: There is no mistaking the colourful, diagonally aligned squares that appear on some weavings from that time. Limber also attaches a photo of a precolonial **keru** (also spelt *qiru*) – an ancient Andean ceramic vase – to his study to provide visual evidence of one of the first recorded appearances of the *wiphala*. Although

this vase is considered to be Incan, it's worth noting that the creation and use of flags in general was thought to have been exclusively European. In fact, *wiphala* in Aymara is simply translated as 'a flexible, waving, square object', possibly suggesting that it was originally meant to be the linguistic translation for 'flag.' On the aforementioned vase (which can now be found on display in

**THE WIPHALA HAS BEEN HISTORICALLY VIEWED AS AN ANTICOLONIAL SYMBOL THAT WAS CARRIED BY INDIGENOUS REBELS.**

the Archaeological Museum of Cuzco), an indigenous figure carries seven-by-seven rainbow-coloured squares over his shoulder. This same pose and pattern would be reproduced in colonial baroque art by anonymous artists who illuminated the walls of the church of Calamarca with ethereal paintings of angels carrying representations of the *wiphala*. The artistic and historical record of what we now consider to be the

*wiphala* undoubtedly points to a certain significance and prevalence of this pattern in Bolivia's past, even if its true essence and precolonial meaning has disappeared over the years.

In 1979, Bolivian historian Germán Choquehuanca began the next chapter of the *wiphala*'s history. Based on the design and the seven colours that appear on the keru exhibited in Cuzco, the historian was inspired to redesign the flag that is presently sewn onto uniforms nationwide, and proudly flown over La Paz. Choquehuanca's contribution to the story extends far beyond redesigning the flag; he also played an important role in reinstating the flag's revolutionary political value in a modern context. The *wiphala* has been historically viewed as an anti-colonial symbol that was carried by indigenous rebels such as Tupac Katari and Pablo 'Willka' Zárate during their struggles against colonial forces. Many years later, in 1970, this revolutionary Aymara icon would serve rural Bolivian syndicate movements in their protest against hegemonic powers. Nowadays, you will be stretched to



find a popular social uprising across the Andes that is not accompanied by a multitude of colourful *wiphala*. Choquehuanca, much like Limber, believes the *wiphala* to be inherently Andean – something that was born into and will always be an emblem of Quechua-Aymara culture and the indigenous populations of the Andes.

The colours and the design of the *wiphala* are equally as meaningful as its history. Each of the diagonally aligned colours that appear on the *wiphala* stand for different concepts relating to the *cosmovisión andina*: the red represents man's relationship with **Pachamama** (Mother Earth), the orange represents social and cultural expression, yellow stands for **ch'ama-pacha** (power and energy), the white represents time and development, green is the richness of nature and agricultural production, the blue stands for cosmology and the purple represents Andean ideology and indigenous politics. Although these concepts stem from Quechua-Aymara culture and

thought, the overarching themes of unity, revolution and justice that are so frequently tied to the *wiphala* have engendered the flag's widespread appropriation across many native populations in Latin America that fight similar battles against discrimination and political oppression.

The *wiphala* is an omnipresent symbol to be reckoned with in Bolivia. Its visibility throughout the nation, as well as its inclusion in significant cultural works such as the artwork of Bolivian artist Walter Solón and Jorge Sanjinés's film *La nación clandestina*, highlight its emblematic nature and how deeply embedded it is as a national symbol. It is a flag that directly represents the ongoing struggles that the majority of this country face on a daily basis. It has withstood a turbulent history of modifications, and commodifications, and never lost its inherent revolutionary spirit in the postcolonial period. It is a flag that does not just belong to a select group, or represent a presidency or a person – it belongs to all Bolivians.



PHOTO: Casa Museo "Walter Solón Romero"

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**CONTACT:** +591 62570000  
**OPENING HOURS:** Monday to Friday from 9:00 to 21:00,  
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**ADDRESS:** La Paz. Sopocachi, Av. Sanchez Lima #2557  
**PHOTO:** Manq'a



## BAR

### CENTRO CULTURAL LA OBERTURA

**DESCRIPTION:** Located in the heart of the vibrant Sopocachi neighborhood, La Obertura is a renewed space that promotes bibliographic and artistic presentations. Within its menu, it has an offer of bolivian cocktails that you can't miss.

**CONTACT:** +591 76571859  
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**ADDRESS:** La Paz. Sopocachi, Pasaje Medinacelli esq. Calle Boyaca #2286  
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## CULTURE

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**DESCRIPTION:** MUTAB is an institution dedicated to rescue, preserve, study, research and promote the Bolivian Andean textile art. The space offers an immense learning, which transmits all the wisdom and history of Bolivian Andean communities. Here you can also find a fair trade store where you can buy handmade textiles and handicrafts from the same communities seen in the museum's permanent exhibition.

**OPENING HOURS:** Monday to Friday from 9:30 to 12:00 and 15:00 to 18:30  
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**PHOTO:** Bug repellent by Andrea Peralta



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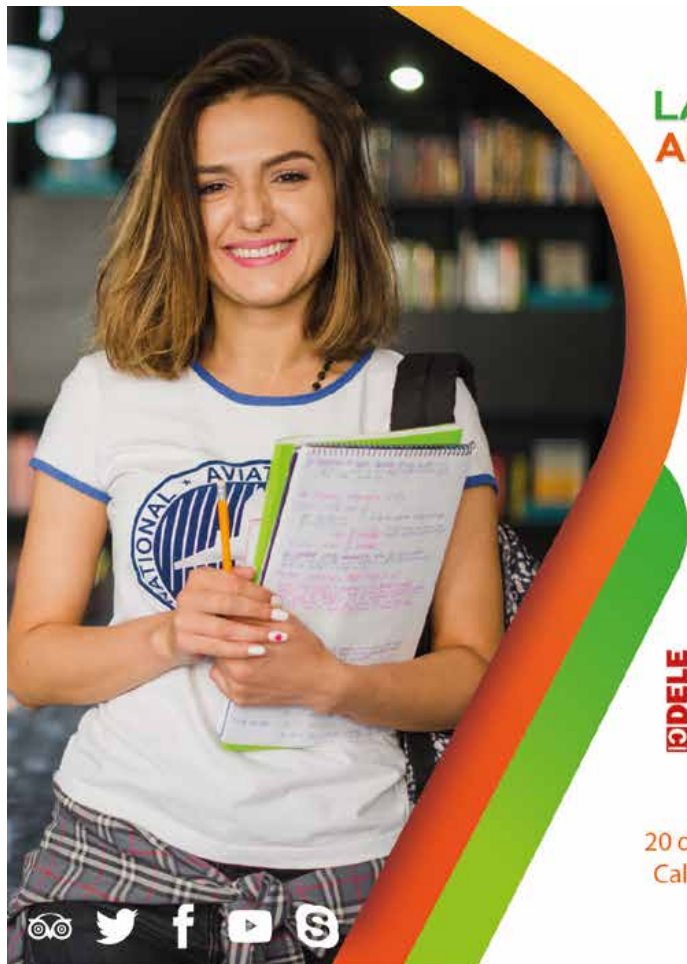
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# GLOSSARY **BX102**

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AFROBOLIVIANIDAD	Afro-Bolivian culture
ALTIPLANO	High plateau
CH'AMA-PACHA	Power and energy
COSMOVISIÓN ANDINA	'Andean cosmovision'
KERU	Andean ceramic vase
PACHAMAMA	Mother Earth
SAYA	A type of music played by descendents of African slaves in the Yungas region of Bolivia
INDIANISMO	Political movement in America that places the Indians as a central political subject
KATARISMO	Political movement in Bolivia, named after the 18th-century indigenous leader Túpac Katari
WIPHALA	Square emblem commonly used as a flag to represent some native peoples of the Andes

# CULTURAL AGENDA

## FEBRUARY - MARCH 2020

### LA PAZ

#### ANATA CARNAVAL PACEÑO 2020

Traditional activities  
 • Monday, February 24: 'Jisk'a Anata'  
 Bolivian traditional dances. 14:00 Montes  
 Avenue  
 • Tuesday, February 25: 'Martes de Challa'.  
 11:00 Plaza Mayor de San Francisco  
 • Sunday, March 1: 'Entierro del pepino'  
 Pepino's burial. 11:00 Plaza Mayor de San  
 Francisco  
 • Sunday, March 1: 'Entrada de ch'utas  
 y pepinos' Traditional dances. 11:00 Zona  
 Garita de Lima  
 • Saturday, March 7: 'Feria del puchero' Food  
 festival. 10:00 Plaza Alonso de Mendoza  
 • Sunday, March 8: 'Corcova de Carnaval'  
 Anata's farewell party. 14:00 Zona de Villa  
 Victoria  
 • Sunday, March 12: 'Entrada de Patak  
 Pollera' 14:00 Zona Munaypata

#### CARNAVAL TRANSFORMISTA

The LGBT collective of La Paz presents this  
 Art and Culture Show, with the participation  
 of delegations from all over the country.  
 19:30  
 Saturday, February 29  
 Info: +591 65950074  
 Cine Teatro 6 de Agosto

#### V IBERO-AMERICAN PHOTO MARATHON 2020

Simultaneous events in Latin America  
 and Spain. The theme will be the 'Urban  
 Centers'.  
 15:00 - 19:00  
 Sunday, March 1  
 Free event  
 www.losfotonautas.com

#### 2ND INTERNATIONAL WATERCOLOR BIENNIAL

150 works on display, demonstrations and  
 master workshops.  
 9:30-12:00; 15:00-19:00  
 Until March 12  
 Casa de la Cultura Franz Tamayo

#### HOMENAJE A LOS BORDADORES

Tribute to the artists who create the carnival  
 costumes of 'morenada'.  
 9:30-12:00; 15:00-19:00  
 Until March 13  
 Museo Costumbrista Juan de Vargas - Jaen  
 Street

#### BOLIVIAN SYMPHONIC CHOIR - CONCERT 'LATIN AMERICA UNITED'

A concert honoring the struggle for  
 democracy in Latin America. A moment to  
 give a message of unity through the culture  
 and music of each country. A program full of  
 Latin American folklore and united voices to  
 honor our continent.  
 18:30  
 Sunday, March 22  
 Bs. 40 or 60  
 Info: +591 70593108  
 Teatro Nuna - Calle 21 de Calacoto #8509

#### COCHABAMBA

##### CORSO DE CORSOS 2020

Bolivian traditional dances  
 8:30 - 23:30  
 Saturday, February 29  
 Beijing Avenue

##### RUTA DE LA CHICHA Y EL CHICHARRÓN

Gastronomic tour designed between the  
 towns of Tarata, Cliza, Punata and San  
 Benito.  
 8:00 - 18:00  
 Sunday, March 1  
 Info: +591 63527853  
 Organized by Destinos y Sabores tour  
 agency

##### COMIC WORKSHOP WITH MINJHOSH

18:00 - 21:00  
 March 9 - 13  
 Bs. 250  
 Info: +591 73779899  
 mARTadero - Calle 27 de Agosto esquina  
 Ollanta

#### HIP HOP CITY

Breaking, MC's, DJ's and graffitti.  
 21:00  
 March 21 - 22  
 Info: +591 77703913  
 Calle Venezuela entre Lanza y Antezana  
 No.655

#### SANTA CRUZ

##### 'JÓVENES TRIUNFADORES'

1st season of concerts of the Santa Cruz  
 Youth Symphony Orchestra directed by  
 Maestro Weimar Arancibia, Musical Director  
 of the National Symphony Orchestra..  
 Featuring the winners of the National Young  
 Soloists Contest 2019.  
 20:30  
 February 28 - March 1  
 Bs. 110  
 Info: +591 3 330 4295  
 Casa de la Cultura Raúl Otero Reiche

##### BRITISH WEEK SANTA CRUZ

4 days of activities where you can meet and  
 participate in British culture: music, food,  
 dance, cinema and many more surprises.  
 9:00 - 16:00  
 March 11 - 14  
 Facebook: UKinBolivia

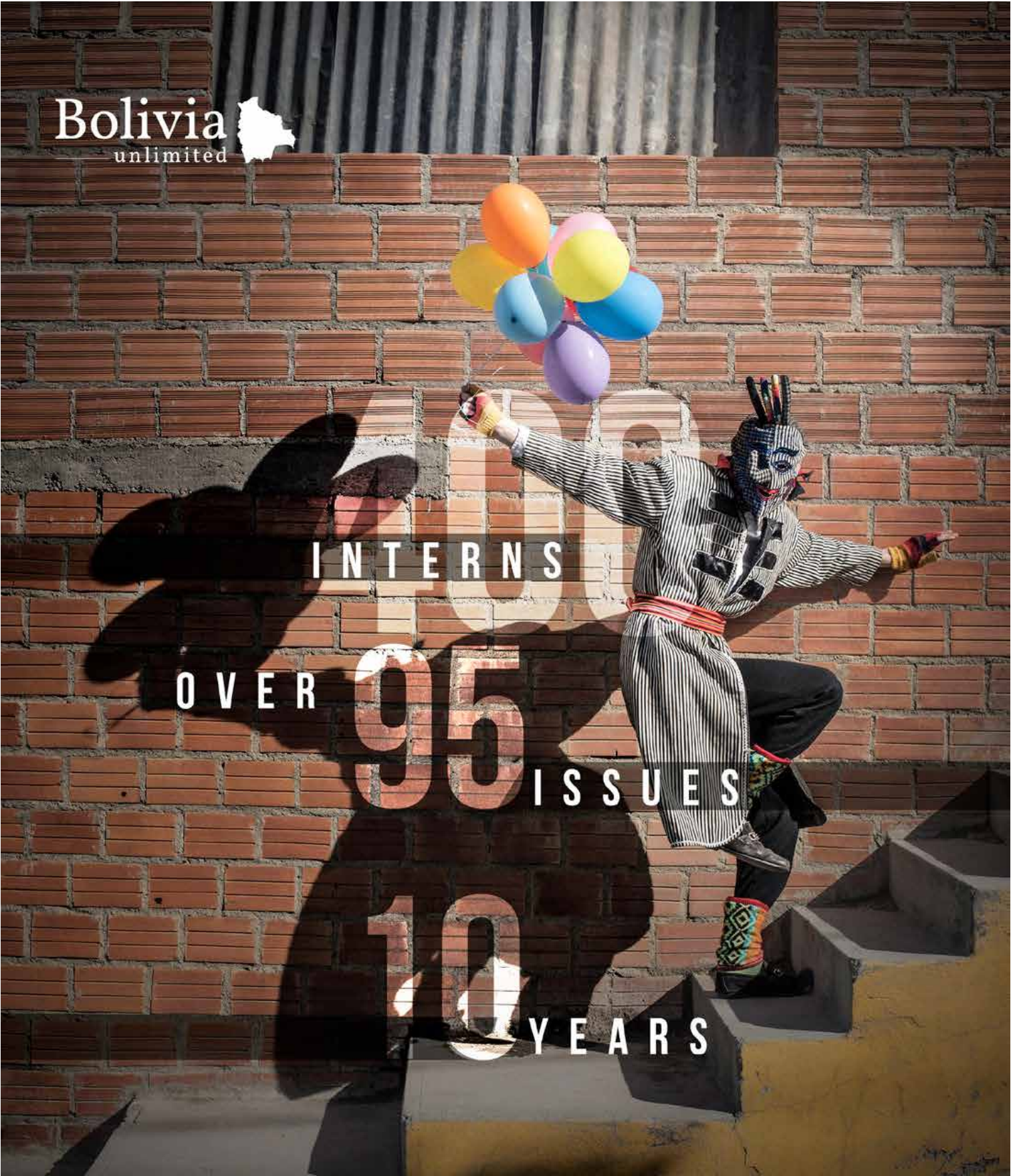
##### URBAN FESTIVAL

Dance, battles, shows, workshops and more.  
 10:00 - 21:30  
 March 14 - 15  
 Organized by Increibles Dance Company  
 Alianza Francesa Santa Cruz - Av. 24 de  
 septiembre #36

##### XXI INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL OF ART OF SANTA CRUZ DE LA SIERRA

Variety of artistic and cultural activities  
 Until March 15  
 Info: +591 3 3396626

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unlimited



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