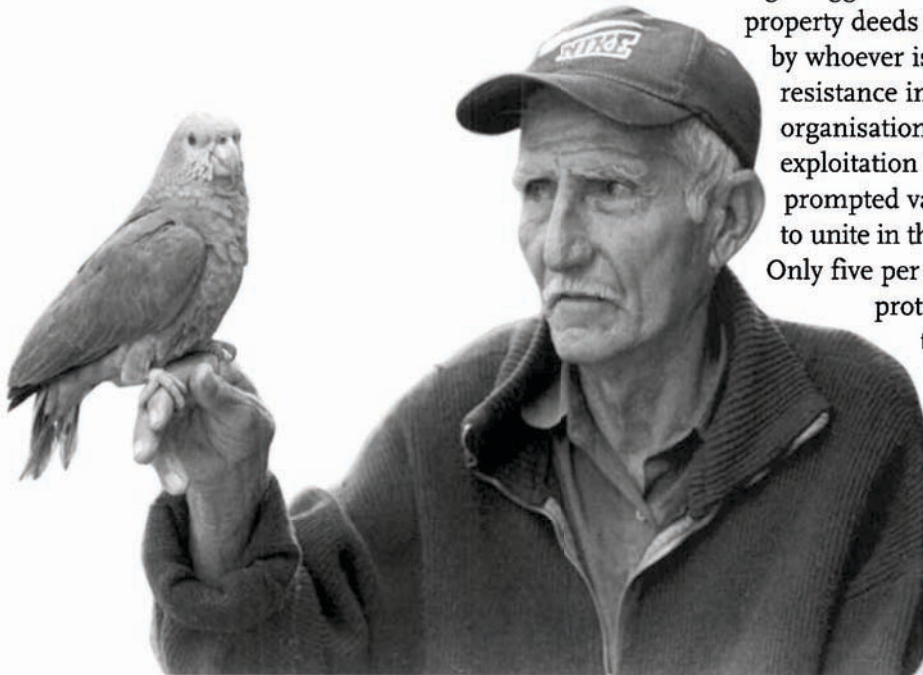

Exploiting the environment

'The environment' is more than the physical context defined by natural phenomena and resources: the concept means very little without an understanding of essential social, cultural, and economic factors. To think about the state of 'the environment' in Bolivia means recognising the tensions which exist between those who see natural resources as a common good to be conserved and those who view them as exploitable economic assets.

Bolivia contains large tracts of untouched Amazonian rainforest; indeed, 48 per cent of the country is covered by forest, most of it sub-tropical or fully tropical. But immediate action will be needed to preserve Bolivia's natural wealth from the onslaught that is taking place on the eastern plains of the department of Santa Cruz, where countless trees are being sacrificed for extensive soya cultivation and cattle ranching. Here the levels of tropical deforestation are some of the worst in the world.

The illegal loggers who come bearing property deeds granted (for a price) by whoever is in power have met resistance in the shape of indigenous organisations. Unchecked exploitation of the forests has prompted various indigenous groups to unite in their demands for land. Only five per cent of forested land is protected, and that more in theory than in practice. Bienvenido Zacu, of the indigenous umbrella organisation CIDOB, explains what they are trying to do: 'Indigenous communities are now islands in a sea of illegal loggers and oil companies.'



'Indigenous communities are now islands in a sea of illegal loggers and oil companies. We want our territories to be recognised, so we can ensure that the forests are not destroyed.'

We want our territories to be recognised, so we can ensure that the forests are not destroyed.' But indigenous people themselves also contribute to deforestation, when they take jobs in the logging industry – one of the few sources of paid employment in the region.

Along with the rapid deforestation of the east of the country, the lack of tree cover in the *altiplano* means a high degree of soil erosion, which reduces the fertility of the land. When the land is too poor to support the population, young people migrate out of rural areas; those who stay behind, despite their intimate knowledge of specific localities and their close relationship with the land, inevitably contribute to environmental degradation, as they struggle to survive in arid conditions. They manage to maximise their yields without the heavy use of fertilisers which they cannot afford, but they face formidable obstacles, as plots of land are subdivided among sons, and fields become smaller and smaller. Intensive cultivation is still viable, thanks to the wide range of plant species available to farmers. There are more than one hundred varieties of the native potato, which *campesinos* plant according to the varied conditions of their plots.

However, this bounteous biodiversity is being threatened by international companies which have been experimenting with genetically modified (GM) potatoes. On paper, Bolivia has good environmental legislation, but it lacks the resources to implement the law, and the technical expertise to prove wrongdoing. The first public meeting to discuss the implication of the introduction of GM potatoes to Bolivia took place in Cochabamba in 2000, bringing together environmental NGOs and agricultural experts worried about the implications of the new technology. Multinational companies could make profits from selling to Bolivian farmers the seeds of the very same plants that they gave to the world in the first place.

Of the species in danger of extinction, most is known of the large mammals, birds, and reptiles, such as jaguars, armadillos, bears, condors, river dolphins, eagles, boas, and caymans (a form of crocodile). The large cats, in particular, are prized trophies even in humble homes, where pelts are proudly displayed on living-room walls. Nobody knows what numbers of insects, birds, and plants may be dying out, as the forests are progressively cut down.

Water of life

Bolivia has significant reserves of drinkable water, a resource which many predict will become crucial in the future. The tragedy is that those reserves are not made available in a safe form to the Bolivian people, many of whom suffer curable illnesses, 80 per cent of which can be traced to untreated drinking water.

The economic liberalisation policies which have shaped Bolivia in the past 15 years have dictated the privatisation of State-controlled water companies.

Strong resistance to the commercial control of water resources has come from the *campesino* sector, which relies on affordable irrigation. Regionally, in Cochabamba in 2000, anti-privatisation demonstrations took centre stage, bringing together rural and urban organisations in protest. Impoverished city dwellers could not afford price rises, and neither could *campesinos*. The foreign consortium which had begun to operate in the environs of Cochabamba and was about to impose a sharp increase in the price of water services was thrown out.

The protests were organised by the *Co-ordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida* (Co-ordination for the Defence of Water and Life), which united previously disparate social organisations. The protests were organised so quickly that some in Cochabamba thought that the Co-ordinadora was one woman; an old man came every morning to the barricades in the Plaza 24 de Septiembre, wanting to congratulate her. The protests changed the way in which society at large viewed privatisation and resource management. Although the battle in Cochabamba was organised by experienced activists drawn from unions and local NGOs, the street fighting was taken up by a new generation. The 'water war' radicalised young people who had never before been involved in politics, and it changed them for ever.

Marcelo Rojas, a young man of 22, went along with some friends to a rally against the privatisation of water in his city, Cochabamba. When the police began to attack demonstrators, his friends melted away and he was left in the midst of a street battle. Ahead a wounded protestor dropped the Bolivian flag which he had been carrying, and Marcelo ran to pick it up. He became the standard bearer of the 'water wars', acquiring the nickname *Banderas* (literally 'Flags'). Flag held high, he stood on the

The graffiti on the wall behind Marcelo Rojas says: 'The water belongs to Cochabamba, damn it!'



CONSTANT VIGILANCE

In the indigenous territory of Monteverde, a group of village men sit in the afternoon sunshine, relaxed and amused to be thought interesting by a foreigner. The only forbidden topic of conversation is the matter of having 'woolly legs': an Andean expression for having two wives. They talk of their communal land, their community obligations, the new road to be built, their tree nursery, and their round-the-clock vigilance against the depredations of illegal loggers. The only way to ensure that the forest is not cut down is to organise constant

armed roadblocks across the muddy paths. They defend their environment daily, with no fanfare and no let-up. They don't like to talk about it, because they are up against powerful interests which are protected, albeit illegally, by the authorities. They know from bitter experience that it is up to them to protect their territory. Politically they rely on regional indigenous organisations such as CIDOB to argue the case for protecting their land; but on the ground the only thing that stops loggers is concerted resistance.

barricades erected in the city centre until the moment when the water company left. He had never previously been involved in politics, but the popular uprising of which he was part became for him an accelerated education in defending the common good. There was a price to pay for his visibility: he was arrested and mistreated by the police on several occasions after the end of the protests. In spite of the hardships endured, he feels a changed man: 'Now I realise that we have to struggle to make our country better'.

Although privatisation was halted in its tracks, it is still not clear how water services will be managed in Cochabamba in future.

Black gold

Although silver and tin produced the bulk of Bolivia's wealth for 500 years, other exported raw materials have taken their place. The gas pipelines now under construction ensure that Bolivian wealth continues to benefit the world. Not only do the profits leave the country, but the social impacts of extraction have often been detrimental. It is nothing new, according to an indigenous activist interviewed in Santa Cruz: 'We still remember our grandfathers being captured and enslaved to work in the rubber plantations a hundred years ago.' Today the same lowland indigenous people are attempting to curb the damage caused by the careless work of gas and oil companies.

Mines are still productive, but the real money is now in gas. In the decade of the 1990s, the extraction of gas received the lion's share of foreign investment, as part of the capitalisation process. These developments, which show no respect for conservation areas and indigenous territories, have severe environmental impacts. The history of oil extraction in Bolivia has been tortuous, including two nationalisations, one war, and current conflicts, as companies ride roughshod over the environment and the rights of indigenous people.

Megaprojects

The extraction of hydrocarbons in Bolivia has followed a see-saw pattern between nationalisation and foreign exploitation. At the same time as the revolutionary government was nationalising the mines in 1952, it was also giving exploration concessions to North American oil companies. In 1969 the main company involved, Gulf Oil, was nationalised by a military ruler; in the 1970s another *de facto* President, General Hugo Banzer, allowed some dozen companies to operate in the country on 30-year leases. It was only in the 1990s that foreign investment was openly sought, and new laws were passed to encourage exploration and development. The State oil company, YPFB (*Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos*), was divided up and privatised, with controlling shares sold off in portions to three of the largest transnational companies in the world.

The context is familiar: lacking the capital to exploit its own wealth, Bolivia brings in foreign interests to exploit its natural resources; they do so to their own advantage. The difficult terrain, the small population, and the lack of industry mean that Bolivia itself is not an attractive market, so companies seek to export to Brazil and Argentina. To supply them, large pipelines stretch for thousands of kilometres east and south. The disadvantages are no less serious for the fact that they are obvious: the pipes have already proved to be a continual source of leaks and contamination, while neither the exploration concessions nor the physical pipelines show any regard for protected land, be it environmental reserves or indigenous territories. The indigenous and environmental activists have not taken the abuse lying down: they have challenged oil companies legally and politically, wresting concessions from them in the shape of consultation and compensation. The struggle is constant, because the companies have friends in high places. A recent book, *Las Manchas del Petróleo Boliviano (The Stain of Oil in Bolivia)*, for the first time exposes systematically who is exploring and where. The aim is to raise the level of public awareness necessary to demand permanent accountability from companies and government.



➤ A shepherd and his flock on scrubland on the outskirts of El Alto

The spice of life

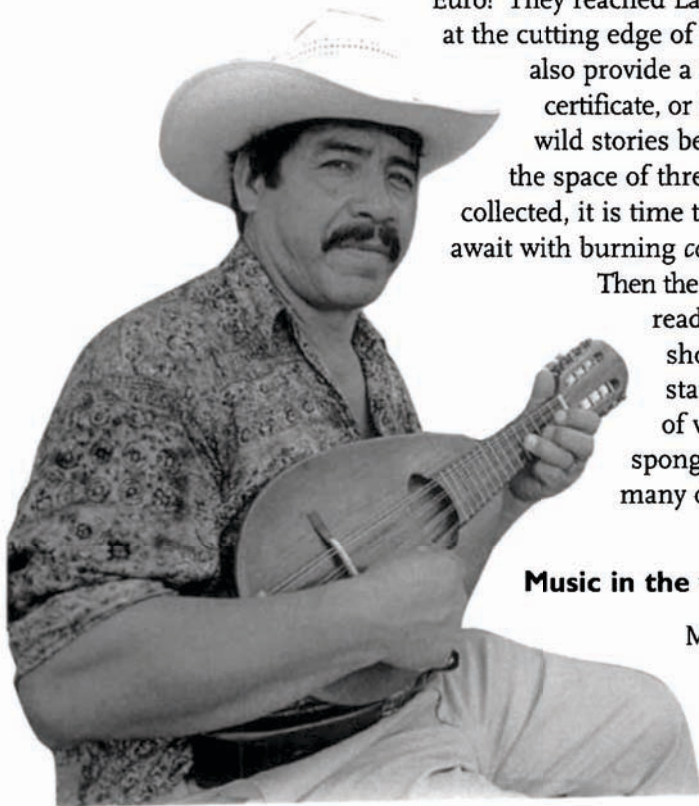
At the end of January, as the wet and grey summer ends in La Paz, the year begins in style. *Ekeko*, the short and plump god of Aymara good fortune, has a festival in his honour, and a hillside park is taken over by a fair for the Alasitas festival. All inhabitants of La Paz, *Paceños*, and beyond go along and buy miniature symbols of what they wish may come true for them during the coming year. From a house to a bag of cement, from a factory to a bag of rice, everything can be bought, wonderfully crafted, on the scale of a dolls' house. Wishes would not be complete without money, so Monopoly bills can be bought in many currencies. Dollars are always popular, but in 2000 there was an innovation: the stalls selling 'money'

displayed signs saying, 'Buy the currency of the new millennium – the Euro!' They reached La Paz before London: who says Bolivia is not at the cutting edge of the global economy? The same stalls can also provide a tiny facsimile of a university degree certificate, or fantastical 'reduced' newspapers, running wild stories below the banners of the main dailies, all in the space of three inches. Once all desired things are collected, it is time to head to the Cathedral square, where *yatiris* await with burning *copal* incense, ready to bless the requests.

Then the faithful join the throng entering the Cathedral, ready to have holy water sprinkled (more often showered) on both heads and objects. Priests stand under the main pillars with large buckets of water, in which they dip broomsticks with sponges attached to the end, used to drench as many of the faithful as possible in one go.

Music in the wind

Musical traditions in Bolivia are rich and diverse, from the traditional to the imported. Andean panpipes are to be found in elevators all over the world, playing a travesty of Andean music,





Winner Candia playing a charango on a rooftop in La Paz

quiet and soothing. The real thing is a sound which echoes in human form the ever-present wind of the *altiplano* and conveys the soaring sensation of standing on a snowy peak in the altered light of the highest inhabited plateau. Wind instruments, accompanied by drums, were present in their multitude of shapes and sizes when the Spanish arrived. The incessant swish and whistle of the wind is inseparable from the *altiplano*, where the shelter of trees is rare, and only natural graded depressions provide an occasional escape from the sweep of the elements. The *quena* flutes, *pinquillo* flutes, *siku* panpipes, *zampoña* pipes, the *tinya* and *bombos* (drums), together with stringed instruments brought by the Spanish, produced modern Andean folk music. Inspired by the guitars and lutes which came from Europe, Bolivians fashioned a new instrument: the *charango*, a Bolivian contribution to world music. Traditionally made from armadillo shells, owing to the lack of wood on the *altiplano*, it is a small stringed instrument. Seventeen distinct types of *charango* originate in Bolivia, and the number grows as the national luthiers form part of a living tradition.

Music plays a central role in community life, and the *charango* has earned an important place for itself as the instrument of young men going courting. In many cases, making or receiving a *charango* as a gift is part of the rite of passage which makes a boy into a marriageable adult. Yet the older musical traditions, based on wind instruments in the main, are not cast aside: a new *charango* has to be 'tuned' by the wind before it can be played socially. The new instrument is taken by a group of young men to a high, exposed place near their home, and left there while they take refuge from the freezing winds and prepare for a long night. The wailing and force of the winds will infuse the *charango* with the sounds that it will produce, and thus ensure that they are a fitting tribute to the gods who live in the wilderness and protect people.

The indigenous music of the Andes recognises no boundaries: traditional performers in Bolivia incorporate tunes from Chile or Venezuela into their work, and conversely Bolivian music has been popularised by Chilean groups such as Inti Illimani. Within Bolivia, traditional music develops mostly through *peñas*, bars which serve as performance spaces. The popularity of Andean music is hardly new, as Simon and Garfunkel

found in the 1960s with their cover of *El Condor Pasa* (literally 'The Condor's Sweep'), recorded in collaboration with Bolivian performers. It captures the melancholic yearning sound which is so characteristic of Andean music. Although the music appeals to millions, often the public does not know its origin. The summer of 1991 was taken by storm by a tune which spawned a dance and countless copies, but few fans know that the *lambada* originated in a *saya*, a traditional Bolivian air. The original song was recorded (without credit) by the Kjarkas, a folkloric band noted for resurrecting forgotten songs. In 2000 Bolivia was robbed again. Clubbers in Ibiza couldn't get enough of *La bomba* – an exact copy, by opportunistic Spaniards, of a ubiquitous Bolivian pop song, written by Santa Cruz boy band Azul Azul.

Festivals

Festivals in Bolivia are part of life, both locally and nationally. Tourism has yet to debase the traditional carnivals, whose popularity shows the significance with which Bolivian themselves invest their own history and folklore. The merging of indigenous beliefs with Catholicism created some unique celebrations – although the whole of Latin America celebrates the Day of the Dead, known in Bolivia and other countries as *Todos Santos* ('All Saints'). The veneer of Christian belief cannot conceal much deeper customs, which originated in the ancient worship of the ancestors.

MESTIZO BAROQUE

The Spanish brought their own tradition of religious art which, in the hands of local indigenous and *mestizo* builders and artisans, developed into a rich and distinctive style of architecture, painting, and sculpture known as *mestizo baroque*. An example from Las Misiones is shown here. The colonial period produced



not only the paintings of Perez de Holguín and others, but also the works of skilled but unknown stonecutters, woodcarvers, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. An important body of native baroque religious music, performed at the Jesuit missions, was recovered in the Chiquitania (eastern Bolivia) in recent years and has been performed internationally, to wide acclaim.



Cochabamba: the traditional Dance of the Devils

The Carnival in Oruro is perhaps the best known, with thousands of dancers dressed in vivid masks and costumes. Oruro is a mining town, and the carnival is a celebration of the *Virgen del Socavón* (Virgin of the Mineshaft) and *Supay/Tío*, the indigenous devil of the ore-rich mountains. The carnival, with its music, dances, feasting, and *ch'allas* (offerings) to Pachamama, the Earth Mother, continues for a week. It is believed that the Oruro carnival began in 1789 with the worship of the *Virgen del Socavón*; figures dressed in devil costume were first recorded in 1790. The feast is a rich and complex expression of myths and beliefs, in which the past and the present have blended to produce one of the most important social and religious events in Bolivia.

In other cities, the Spanish customs brought over by the Church and the *conquistadores* were incorporated into indigenous rituals and festivities. In Cochabamba, reverence for the Virgin of Urkupiña provides one of the best examples of this syncretism. The devotion shown to her is manifested through an ancient awe of mountains and rocks as seats of spirits. The Virgin's festive day is celebrated in August, the coldest winter month, dedicated to fertility in the Andean calendar. The cult of the Virgin arises from her reputed appearance to a young shepherd girl, who took home a rock which became a lump of silver; worshippers now ask for a favour and take a piece of rock from the same place, bringing it back the following year if their wish has been granted.

THE SPICE OF LIFE

No restaurant table in Bolivia is without a small plastic bowl containing a red or green liquid paste called *llajua*. Recipes vary, but the main ingredient is the Bolivian chili, a local strain of the hot peppers enjoyed across the continent. Such is the importance of the condiment to Bolivian meals that when McDonald's burger-bars first appeared in the country, in 1998, they were obliged to provide it; this was the first time the global bland-food giant had had to defer to local taste in order to ensure custom. The Bolivians' pride in their own culture (symbolised here by an ancient monument from the ruins of Tiawanaku, re-erected in La Paz) could not have been more emphatically expressed.



The media

In public polls, the communications media come second only to the Catholic Church in the degree to which they are trusted. The most widespread medium is radio, to which around 75 per cent of the population have access. In comparison, only 44 per cent have television sets, and only 16 per cent read a daily paper. As in Britain, the papers that sell best are tabloids, with their combination of gossip and outlandish stories which resemble the contents of the spoof newspapers of the Alasitas festival. Of all the TV stations, radio stations, and newspaper companies, the majority are owned by nine individuals or consortia. Critical voices are heard, but their reach is limited: even the broadsheet newspapers seem sometimes to be read only by the politically aware middle class, inside and outside government.

In the field of high-tech communications, Bolivia illustrates the possibilities of leapfrogging the competition. From relying until recently on telephones which had more crackle than capacity, it has taken up the Internet swiftly and effectively. In 1997 the only public access to the Net was in the *Casa de la Cultura* in La Paz. By 2000 there were Internet cafés on every other block. The same is true around the country. When an hour spent on-line can cost as little as four *bolivianos* (75 US cents), and at any one time up to one-quarter of the population of the country lives abroad, there are good reasons to use it. Conversely, it is possible to read Bolivian newspapers on the Internet from anywhere in the world, and the web presence of Bolivian 'gateways', full of local compilations of information about the country, is impressive.



> An Internet café in the ancient city of Sucre

Conclusion

The largest roundabout in La Paz, next to the football stadium in Miraflores, boasts seven exits and a significant amount of the city's total traffic. The ubiquitous Japanese-made minibuses speed off in all directions, lorries supply the city, taxis predominate as elsewhere, and the middle class drive themselves to work and back via the Plaza del Estadio. There are few traffic lights, not all of which work, and no markings on the road. The Bolivian highway code for taking a roundabout is to pile in and try to convince everyone else that you have the right of way, which often involves encountering cars inches away from your own, at right angles as well as at any other degree. Bolivians describe it as a *ch'enko*, the Aymara word for a tangle, a mess, something too complicated to sort out. Nobody pays any attention to the rules. Bolivians use *ch'enko* in reference to many things in Bolivia, to explain why things don't work, why they are still poor and their lives never seem to improve, and to describe the underlying complexity which makes change, well, a complicated business.

There may be no road signs but, then again, everyone seems to know where they're going. There are no jams or accidents. Traffic flows, people get places. Unlike the rest of Latin America, one is not deafened by the sound of hundreds of horns hooting. Drivers nudge their cars around the roundabout slowly and carefully, looking all ways. Everyone gets across safely and goes about their business. It is a lesson in tolerance.

Bolivians have their own ways of running the complexity of modern life. These may not fit others' ideas of what should be done, and for a long time Bolivians have not believed that their unique solutions could be the path to follow. The democratic opening which was won in 1982 has given them the breathing space in which to assess their own resources and potential. Economic stability still eludes Bolivia, but culturally, in the civic sense, the nation has flourished. The traditions of tolerance and non-violence, which have always been present, have been strengthened; comparison with war-torn neighbours Peru and Colombia illustrates the constructive nature of Bolivian protest. There is an acknowledgement of the structural violence built into the economic marginalisation which affects a high proportion of the population: the response is to organise, march, debate, negotiate.

The change in social forces to include the country's indigenous heritage, together with the transformative constitutional reforms of 1994, recognising the country as 'pluri-ethnic and multicultural', have changed the framework within which Bolivian virtues can be practised. There is a growing consensus that the majority of the people suffer economic exclusion, an historic problem which must be overcome. The elements necessary to achieve integration, while being respectful of difference, already exist in Bolivian culture. Solidarity is valued by everyone, and practised by many. Laws have been changed to ensure that the powerful are accountable and the powerless have a voice.

Bolivians have consistently proved that they can formulate realistic demands and oversee social change. The way forward, however, requires more: the powerful must recognise that unless they relax their exclusive grip on resources, the ensuing marginalisation of the majority will endanger everybody's future. Popular participation has shown that citizenship can be extended. Inclusion can be promoted by the State, but it has to be backed up by real resources: political participation does not work on an empty stomach. Thus the transfer of real resources from central to local government has provided a great opportunity for change from the grassroots upwards. The reforms must be continued and deepened, with municipalities achieving better articulation with regional and national power structures to reach their full

potential. But it is the beginning of a process: the irreversible opening of a space where Bolivians can decide for themselves where they are going, in their own way.

