

# THE CULTURAL SIDE OF BOLIVIAN HISTORY

## A Survey<sup>1</sup>

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Bolivia is not a country that has renowned personalities nor is it a country of famous cultural achievements. But at the same time any phase of culture is a true ingredient of Bolivian life. It is not trained or supported with finances to achieve international recognition but it is rather spontaneous and more of a folklore nature. At the same time the upper class often considers this folklore as something associated with the lower classes and therefore disdainful to them, or at least they are unappreciative. These same people went for cheap imitations of prevalent European taste, especially of France and Spain. A true Bolivian culture, be it art, music or literature, does not really exist. The Bolivian culture is of the same nature as that of any other indigenist country and hardly different from that of Peru.

From the soil of Bolivia came one of the greatest archaeological finds which reflected refined art such as exquisite pottery, impressive architecture, a complex religion, and a knowledge of science and engineering in the pre-Inca period. Today some of the remains of the great and mysterious metropolis of faraway days called Tihuanacu not too far from La Paz, attests to the existence of this great culture. By the fifteenth century the Incas with their capital in Cuzco had conquered most of today's Bolivia and had imposed their language, Quechua, and their culture. Their great road system extended into Bolivia. The architecture of huge, well-cut rocks

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<sup>1</sup>) No bibliography has been provided as my two bibliographical articles dealing with Bolivia will serve adequately for those interested in pursuing my data in this essay. I have no intention of duplicating these bibliographies since they are easily available. See: „The Historiography of Colonial and Modern Bolivia“, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, August, 1962. „A Selected Bibliography of Bolivian Social Sciences“, *Inter-American Review of Bibliography*, VIII (1958), 3. The author is indebted to the Social Science Research Council for a generous grant in 1961 to work on survey studies of Bolivian history. This essay was written together with other works thanks to this grant.

showed admirable mathematical precision and advanced stone cutting. All kinds of ceramics, well polished and with a great display of bright colors, have been found that date back to the Inca times. The best art of those days was the marvelous weavings of beautiful colors and with the finest vicuña, alpaca and llama wools that often portrayed wonderful motifs with the brightest, and at other times conservative, colors. Although the Incas are known to have distinguished themselves more in their advanced social and political structures and behavior rather than in cultural pursuits, they did have a superior music, poetry and theater. Today's true Indian music played by some peculiar instruments such as the pututu and the caracola marina and various drums is the same played by the Incas. As is known, the Incas had no written language but kept records by various colored strings with various knots which were called quipus. Not only did this system serve for records, at which the Incas were experts, but it conveyed ideas and cultural expressions, such as poetry and the popular theater, which had historical subjects as its theme and was performed by the Inca nobility.

While with the Spanish occupation and colonization the Indian culture decayed, such knowledge as weaving and the Indian music continued to be passed on from generation to generation. Today's Indian culture of Bolivia remains with great vitality, and with the defeat of the rule of the criollo aristocracy and mining oligarchy these Indian values are being reemphasized. For example, a whole school of modern Bolivian painters and sculptors has emerged, whose themes are the Indian and the Indian way of life. None has yet achieved wide fame but the vitality and enthusiasm and the unpolished talent are there. It must be stated also that today's Bolivian music that is featured on the radio and in the cabarets, the popular music, is quite melodic and charming and is highly influenced by Indian strains such as the carnavalitos or the taquirari, to mention two. This music reflects the wonderful amalgamation of the old and traditional and pre-Columbian with the new and modern rhythms and with the Spanish style.

Culture in Upper Peru in the colonial period was spotty and sporadic and was of the same pattern and flavor as that in any

of the Spanish colonial regions of America. It was of less intensity than that of Mexico, Lower Peru or even Santa Fe de Bogotá or maybe Guatemala. But culture in Upper Peru was possibly more developed than in Caracas, Quito, Cuba, and certainly more than in Chile, Paraguay and the Plata region. First of all, the University of San Francisco de Xavier in Chuquisaca was not only important in the political events of the region but was the main seat of culture and learning of Upper Peru. At the same time not a single professor or student of the University achieved world recognition, but the sole presence of a center of learning was of importance. In the field of writing, fiction is rather weak but there was poetry and a few theatrical productions. Most of the writings were chronicles and history treatises but here again Lower Peruvian chroniclers are of more fame than their colleagues from the Upper Provinces.

Three or four individuals are of distinction in Upper Peru. Father Antonio de Calancha published in 1636 a history of Charcas. It is a storehouse of all kinds of information mixed with the supernatural. Luis Capoche (1547—1613), Orsua y Vela (1676—1736), and Pedro Vicente Cañete (1754—1816) are all figures of distinction. All of them cultivated history with the peculiarities of their age and all of them centered their work around the doings of the fabulous Potosí and all three were unable to publish their works during their days. Only recently did they see print and they have received the praise of the critics. Another colonial figure was Father Alonso Barba who was born in 1569 and who reached the age of one hundred, and who published in 1640 a treatise that has become a classic and is probably the only Upper Peruvian book that achieved world attention since it has had more than ten editions and is translated into many languages. It is a book of metals and mining and it is said that Father Barba, who lived in the village of Tarabuco near Sucre, was the first one in America or in the world to have talked about petroleum. By mid-nineteenth century the Barba editions had become rare and brought far over a thousand dollars a copy, since it was rumored that the Upper Peruvian Father had found the magic formula to make gold from all other minerals and therefore had fulfilled the old alchemists' dream.

There are also fine remains of an energetic architecture of colonial Upper Peru. Naturally this architecture was not peculiar to Upper Peru but was of the same types as in the other American colonies of Spain. But again Charcas was only a shade behind Mexico and Peru in the numbers of great masterpieces. Nearly all the great architectural creations were religious buildings, especially churches. The oldest churches such as San Lázaro in Sucre, Santa Bárbara in Potosí, La Merced in Cochabamba, San Francisco in Cochabamba, the village church of the small community of Laja, and some others all date back to the early or middle sixteenth century. Unfortunately some of these have deteriorated because of a lack of preservation and restoration interest. By 1600 a great number of beautiful churches of diverse styles had been built and Potosí alone had fourteen of them. In the seventeenth century more and more beautiful churches were built all over Bolivia, including some in villages. Sucre and Potosí today still are cities worth visiting because of their churches and chapels. But one can find in any Bolivian city of the highlands some impressive churches that date far back to the colonial period, and this also holds true for many villages such as Tarata in the Cochabamba Valley, the birthplace of Mariano Melgarejo. There too is a beautiful chapel at the Titicaca Lake home of the Virgin of Copacabana, the patron of Bolivia.

There were also built some beautiful — sometimes very simple, other times more impressive — public buildings. The largest one and still today one of the wonders of Bolivia is the colonial mint building in Potosí whose whole structure denotes mightiness. More gracious because of its beautiful simplicity is the University of San Francisco Xavier in Sucre. In all western towns of Bolivia, including some examples in small villages but especially in Sucre, Potosí and Tarija, there exist today well preserved and lived-in one family structures whose construction dates back to the colonial period. Here are the true Spanish colonial houses with their thick walls and heavy gates and fenced-in windows and their many patios and their red tiled roofs. Often there is beautiful carving on windows, doors, gates or walls.

There was much sculpture and carving. At first figures were brought from Spain, such as the Virgin of La Paz which is still in

the La Paz Cathedral and which is a splendid example of Spanish medieval sculpture. The Bolivian art historians, José de Mesa and his wife, say that much of the earlier sculpture and carvings had Flemish and German influence. By mid-sixteenth century local carvers with great ability had come into existence, such as the master craftsman, Diego Ortiz de Guzmán, who practiced in the first years of the existence of Cochabamba. At the same time in Chuquisaca lived a noble Indian of the old Inca aristocracy called Tito Yupanqui who was a great carver and who has left us with two religious statues which are the Virgins of Copacabana and of Pucarani. Soon afterward and during the whole colonial period other masters of sculpture and wood carving appeared and there are today innumerable examples in the innumerable churches of Bolivia such as, for example, those of La Merced in Sucre. There also developed the art of silvercraft which the Mesa couple say reached its greatest development in the seventeenth century, but which still prevails today in Bolivia. Some great silver craftsmen were the Upper Peruvian plateros Agustín de Chávez and Juan de Pineda. And some of the greatest pieces of silverwork are the tabernacles in the churches in Tihuanacu and Acora and in the church of San Francisco in Cochabamba, and the altars in the village churches of Ocabaya and Coroico. Besides these there are countless smaller pieces in various places and also much jewelry.

Upper Peru or colonial Bolivia was a place of good painting — religious paintings as was the style — and the still numerous signed and unsigned colonial pictures that still exist are proof of this. The first painters who painted in Upper Peru were Jesuits or Franciscans who made canvases for their churches. The Mesa couple, who are intensively studying the Upper Peruvian paintings, state that pictures previous to 1570 were brought from Spain but that well preserved paintings done in colonial Bolivia of the 1580's are in existence, such as those in the church of San Miguel in Sucre, done by the Jesuit Bernardo Bitti. In the seventeenth century there was a blossoming in the artistry of painting and a distinct Upper Peruvian flavor came into existence, including the constant portraying of the Virgin Mary. It started with the Spanish Father Diego de Ocaña who came to Potosí in 1601 and then went to Chuquisaca where he left some of the most

valuable pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe. He also left a notebook of sketches of people and landscapes of Upper Peru. Other great painters, including the Indian Diego Quispe, were active during this early century. Painting became more and more the greatest cultural expression of Upper Peru as the seventeenth century progressed and into the new eighteenth century. Various local schools such as the ones of La Paz, Potosí and Chuquisaca came into being but all used religious figures as their motifs.

The greatest artist was the celebrated Melchor Holguín, born in Cochabamba in 1665, who has left innumerable paintings, especially in Potosí, which today are expensively valued. Many of Holguín's paintings and also some of the maestro Francisco Padilla are in existence in the convent of Santa Teresa of Potosí. Other Holguín pictures are carefully guarded in Bolivian museums. Holguín's disciple, Gaspar Miguel de Berrio, continued the master's style and skill in Potosí and area churches until 1763. His masterpiece rests in the village church of Belén. By the second part of the eighteenth century Potosí declined and able painters emerged in Chuquisaca, La Paz and Oruro. Especially famous was the Indian Luis Niño who was also a sculptor and whose religious works were sold as far away as Europe. The painter Diego del Carpio of the last days of the colony had a magnificent painting of the Virgin Mary and other masterworks, some of them in the church of San Juan de Dios in La Paz. In all, the colony had a sturdy culture that was channelled into religious pursuits but which produced such a genius as the master Holguín.

With the coming of the War and later with independence there were little changes in the nature of Bolivian culture but there was in the first decades indeed a noticeable decline in cultural pursuits. The long sixteen years of war produced hardly any noticeable literature or memoirs. Those written were mediocre and even of very low quality. Only two humble men with much Indian blood and little education produced a very few pieces of writing that because of their beauty, simplicity and honesty have a classical quality. They both are hardly known to the public and little or nothing is known about them. Juan Huallparimachi and the drummer Vargas (his first name was never found) served in patriotic guerrilla units and the former, a casualty of the War, wrote

charming poetry, mostly in Quechua. Drummer Vargas left us with a memoir of guerrilla life and fighting, only found recently among dusty papers. Its colloquialisms and its grammatical peculiarities record a rustic sincerity and true reflection of life among the guerrillas of independence. A more educated, quite sophisticated Aimara Indian who was also a world traveler, by the name of Vicente Pazos Kanki, wrote extensively, mostly history, and he even composed a history of the United States. He was conservative, ultramontane, and wished to recreate the old Inca monarchy with an Indian aristocracy. Chronologically he was Bolivia's first writer of some stature.

The War of Independence and its origins did serve as inspiration for two of the most famous Bolivian works by two of the best, if not the best, Bolivian writers of the middle and late nineteenth century. Nataniel Aguirre, a patrician of Cochabamba, wrote in 1885 a historical novel, *Juan de la Rosa*, whose simplicity and urbanity plus a decorous and delightful love story in a historically accurate setting have made it a book that has gone through many editions and has received continental praise. The other book, published in 1896, is a historical classic entitled *The Last Days of the Upper Peruvian Colony*, written by Bolivia's best scholar and historian, Gabriel René-Moreno. Using only primary sources René-Moreno was able to recreate masterfully the total setting and life of Chuquisaca in the first days of the nineteenth century and sketch the events that led to the beginning of the War.

Gabriel René-Moreno was born in 1836 in Santa Cruz de la Sierra where his father was the owner of the only adequate library. Later the family moved to Chuquisaca and the son was sent to Chile for his university training. He was introvert but persistent, and he remained a resident of Chile until his death in 1908. But his over a dozen books and his other writings all deal with Bolivia and they are models of good history. He earned a living as a teacher, then professor and librarian and he was also a collector of documents and rare books. Today the National Library of Bolivia located in Sucre contains as its largest collection the library of René-Moreno. This man remains Bolivia's greatest social scientist.

By the middle of the nineteenth century culture was still of a precarious status. Basically the newspaper — and there were many which came and died — was the focus of culture as it was of politics. The first real Bolivian newspaper was the *Condor* of Chuquisaca under the guidance of Marshal Sucre and edited by his trusted executive secretary, the Spaniard Facundo Infante. It was a journalistic jewel and good beginning for Bolivian journalism, which often includes a cultural page in its newspapers where writers and poets have a free forum. While Bolivia never has produced a world famous paper it has to its credit since independence a host of good newspapers such as *El Diario* of La Paz, the dean of the Bolivian papers, and the suspended *La Razón* of La Paz and the also suspended *Los Tiempos* of Cochabamba. There were others such as *El Restaurador* of the old capital, Sucre, published in the 1840's. Practically all Bolivian authors and poets of distinction were also classified as journalists. Such, for example, was the case of Pazos Kanki and Nataniel Aguirre and also of Nestor Galindo, Ricardo José Bustamante, Tomás O'Connor d'Arlach, Julio Lucas Jaimes and many others.

Nestor Galindo of Cochabamba was a fair poet but he became famous when he was killed by the tyrant Melgarejo and therefore passed into the annals of history as the first true Bolivian martyr of culture. This more than his poetry enhanced the reputation of belles-lettres in Bolivia. Ricardo José Bustamante, born in 1821 in La Paz and with a college degree from Argentina, developed into the best Bolivian poet of the early days of the Republic. Probably his best piece is his poem of the majestic Mamoré River of the eastern tropics of Bolivia. In it Bustamante, from the cold, high town of La Paz, shows an admirable talent — celebrated even by the stern critic Menéndez y Pelayo — for powerful descriptive poetry. The same sought after praise of Menéndez y Pelayo was also given to one who did not seek honors and did not engage in journalism because it was a woman and she was blind from childhood. María Josefa Mujía of Chuquisaca always remained in Chuquisaca and wrote moving poetry in which she expressed a deep pessimism and the suffering of blindness. Her most celebrated poem, called „The Blind Woman“, is one of the most touching poems of Latin American poetry.

Tomás O'Connor d'Arlach from Tarija is the prototype of an aristocratic criollo with a thin layer of erudition and a desire for versatility. Both his grandfathers had been distinguished generals of the Bolivarian army who remained in southern Bolivia, married the best local girls and acquired vast lands to become feudal lords with much leisure and a sense of noblesse oblige. He wrote much but at a relaxed pace and it was history, poetry, fiction, political essays and some archaeology, and then there was journalism. It was all fair to good but nothing outstanding. It was clean and breathed propriety and dignity. Tomás O'Connor d'Arlach is best known for a book which contains the anecdotes of Mariano Melgarejo, which has gone through many editions and still remains one of the most popular history books of Bolivia. It has made Melgarejo an everlasting figure of attention. The historical accuracy of the book is doubtful but the study has been responsible for creating the terrible image of a terrible tyrant. O'Connor d'Arlach's reminiscences of his many friends, published in 1893 is a wonderful book because at its best it mirrors the dominating aristocratic society. This author from Tarija typifies the shallow pseudo-scholarship of the nineteenth-century Bolivian intelligentsia.

Far better — even more congenial than René-Moreno — were a pair, father and son, who are really part of Latin American literature since they, especially the son, spent much of their lives and work outside of Bolivia and wrote of topics not related to Bolivia. The father was Julio Lucas Jaimes, born in Potosí in 1845, who wrote under the name of Brocha Gorda. He married the able Peruvian writer Doña Carolina Freyre. Jaimes was an acute politician, a stimulating teacher and later professor, and a celebrated journalist, who at one time was editor of the great *La Nación* of Buenos Aires. His contributions appeared in many of the leading Latin American newspapers. As all these great figures of Latin American letters, Brocha Gorda was versatile as he also engaged in poetry, literary criticism, novels, dramatics, debate, biography and history. His most celebrated work is *The Imperial City of Potosí*, first published in Buenos Aires in 1905, which sketches anecdotes, traditions, fantasies and legends of the town. Often Julio Lucas Jaimes is compared to the great Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma.

It was in Peru, in the delightful little town of Tacna, that Ricardo Jaimes Freyre was born in 1868 when his father was Bolivian consul in that town. As his mother was a native of Tacna he spent his childhood there. He failed to graduate from college in Lima and married a lovely girl from Sucre where he became a high school teacher. Later he was appointed private secretary of President Baptista. Politics forced him into exile to Buenos Aires where his father got him the job as editor of *El País*. Here Jaimes Freyre began his climb to continental fame. He made a friendship with the great Rubén Darío and together in 1894 they founded the *Revista América*. When Jaimes Freyre died in 1933 in Buenos Aires he had become one of the great men of literature of America and since he always kept his Bolivian citizenship he had given Bolivia the only acclaimed great writer. He was essentially a poet and his works, such as the celebrated *Castalia Bárbara*, have much of a medieval twist but with a style as resounding as the music of Wagner. There is little that is nativistic and therefore it is somewhat unrelated to the Bolivian milieu.

With the beginning of the twentieth century a new breed of scholars began to appear, who slowly pushed the fiction writer and poets from their monopoly. It was those men who, while writing here and there some fiction, mostly engaged in a study of social problems. Bolivia was approaching her one-hundredth birthday and little had her way of life changed, yet modern capitalism was forcing new ideals and new problems. And far away new social and political philosophies were proclaimed and made themselves heard in the ears (and maybe minds) of some of the more learned Bolivian men. Naturally this kind of literature had profound influence on political activities and eventually led to a total change of the social and economic structure of the nation. These writers advertently or inadvertently became the Muckrakers of Bolivia.

The one man that achieved universal fame as a social scientist—all others did not, nor even continental — was Alcides Arguedas, born in La Paz in 1879 of a hardworking middle-class merchant family. In his student days he wrote two novels dealing with Indian customs but both works fell flat and a third work had a similar fate. All three works had a destiny and so had Arguedas.

One of them years later was republished under the title *The Bronze Race*, which was classified as "an apostolic novel in favor of the Indian". As conservative as he, Arguedas, was, he did sketch the suffering of the Indians and was the first one to openly criticize the existing order. He was playing with fire. Arguedas knew that the Indian was the key to Bolivia and he also knew that the Indian was hypnotized into subversion — acted often more as an animal — because of centuries of white rule. The Indian was sick because the weight of history had made him sick. Arguedas realized that to understand Bolivia two things were necessary: knowledge of history and a knowledge of medical psychology. As a long resident of Paris he had fallen under the spell of the rising science of psychology. Arguedas undertook the writing of an elaborate history of Bolivia which was a controversial work. He also published in 1909 in Spain his most famous book which brought him continental praise and the everlasting scorn and hatred of most educated Bolivians. It was entitled *A Sick People (or Nation)* — in Spanish, *Pueblo Enfermo*. With a daring frankness Arguedas sketched the defects of Bolivia. The Nobel Prize winning Chilean poetess, Gabriela Mistral, called the book "temeriously just". To Arguedas those leading an Indian way of life — that was a big majority of all Bolivians — were sick and he blamed history for it.

The hatred for Arguedas in Bolivia has not abated. Of those who condemned Arguedas was the Bolivian writer Franz Tamayo of La Paz, who too achieved continental praise for his poetry. He was the son of a well-to-do family with a bit of Indian blood and much land. The father was Isaac Tamayo, who exercised great influence on the education and writings of his son. Franz Tamayo became an Indian racist who loathed everything that was Spanish. He even disregarded the mestizo because he was corrupted by the Spanish blood. At the same time Tamayo was a lover of the classics — he was always a bundle of contradictions and no pleasant man to deal with. Franz Tamayo, poet, journalist, orator, social scientist, educationalist, politician — he was elected President of Bolivia but did not assume the job — is considered one of the most potent poets of Latin American literature and a master of the Spanish language. Yet he is little read

since most of his poems and lyric tragedies are inspired by complicated mythology from the classic days. One reviewer calls the Tamayo works "Gongoric and Hermetic".

At the same time Franz Tamayo's essays about Bolivian education published in 1910 constitute one of the most important books in Bolivia because it represents the opening shot in the fight for Indian rights. Therefore Tamayo is one of the leading — if not the main — personality in the emergence of Bolivian indianismo and he can be compared to the Peruvians José Carlos Mariátegui, José Uriel García and Gamaliel Churata. One moderate Bolivian literary reviewer said that Tamayo is "the messianic precursor of the autochthonous surge and the future spirit of the New Indian." Another Bolivian professor and philosopher calls Tamayo "a complete humanist". Guillermo Francovich in his philosophical critique of Bolivian letters says that "Tamayo proposed for the Indian race in Bolivia the same function that the Germans wanted to give in their country to the Aryan race". Whatever one wants to think about Tamayo, he still was a powerful writer with a vast influence on the social thought of his nation and he was an indianista and a nationalist of no gentleness.

Other men also emerged whose writings did not achieve continental recognition but whose works were influential in the disappearance of the old order. There was the patrician from Sucre, Jaime Mendoza, who although a successful doctor of medicine devoted much of his time to writing fiction and non-fiction, and especially to the study of geography and history. He developed a sound and gentle nationalism based on the rich resources of Bolivia. As he was one of the first to specialize in psychiatry, Mendoza — as Arguedas — became interested in the study of the Indian and his mentality. He believed that education was the key to the emancipation of the Indian. Mendoza's genial optimism and his moderate nationalism were shared by the mild but wonderful teacher, Carlos Medinaceli of Potosí. Poor because of his miserable salary, this teacher wrote some of the best essays of modern Bolivia. His novel *La Chaskañawi* compares with the urbanity and thoughtfulness of Franz Werfel. While Tamayo was disdainful of the mestizo, Medinaceli gave him due respect and *La Chaskañawi* is a beautiful chola boliviana (mestiza) of a small village.

There is little doubt that Bolivian letters reached a certain maturity yet its whole trend was maybe an undue emphasis on the Indian element and of exaggerated nationalism and a concentration on the beauty of words, such as we can see in the writings of Fernando Diez de Medina. A few men, not too well known or appreciated outside or even inside of Bolivia, have emerged and have produced solid works in their fields because of their beauty and moderation. There is Adolfo Costa du Rels of Sucre, mostly residing in France, whose few works in Spanish give Bolivia love and distinction. Armando Chirveches of La Paz has elements of a great novelist and a great poet. Humberto Vázquez-Machicado of Santa Cruz de la Sierra during his rather short life brought history to the same quality practiced by René-Moreno. Gunnar Mendoza of Sucre, son of Jaime Mendoza, has made the Bolivian National Library and Archive one of the best in this continent and his historical monographs are models of good research. Guillermo Francovich of Sucre whose work with UNESCO is much recognized has written books of criticism that are widely cited.

The Indianismo of the Bolivia letters has also embraced other disciplines and although Bolivian painting and sculpture do not yet compare with those of Mexico or Haiti there are a host of men and women who are doing a fine task with nativistic motifs. The native Indians continue — maybe in a less refined manner — to make artistic items which are displayed in the many Indian markets all over the nation but especially in the Cancha of Cochabamba. Some of these, such as weavings, silver wares and pottery, are exquisite and remind one of the master craftsmanship of the past generation. On the other side a few Bolivians of recent days have achieved international recognition. In 1959 a seventeen-year-old Bolivian violinist named Jaime Laredo won the Belgian International Music competition in which he played against the world's best. Laredo since then has become a great name in the world of music. Several Bolivians have accomplished commendable and difficult tasks for the United Nations in faraway places. Bolivia's cultural evolution, although nothing spectacular, must be acknowledged and has to some extent served as the basis for political maturity