population densities. Settlement dropped off to the south, but communities existed wherever there was adequate water along the Desaguadero River. East of Lake Poopó, settlements lay along the west-facing flank of the Cordillera Real on the alluvial fans of streams flowing from the mountains. There were also small settled valleys in the northern part of the Cordillera Occidental. In the south, the semiarid plateau supported only seminomadic shepherds.

The population of the valleys clustered in the crowded environs of Cochabamba, Sucre, and Tarija. In the Yungas to the north, the convoluted terrain limited exploitation of the fertile soils, and the population was concentrated in areas with relatively ready access to La Paz. Settlement increased in response to population pressure in the Altiplano and government support for colonization in the decades following land reform. Population growth followed access and feeder roads in the region and was concentrated at the middle elevations.

The lowlands’ small population was scattered, except for the concentration near Santa Cruz. Significant colonization developed along the Santa Cruz-Cochabamba highway. Large commercial farms producing cotton, rice, or sugarcane occupied the areas accessible to Santa Cruz. Elsewhere, large ranches, small towns, and settlements clustered along riverbanks where roads had not penetrated. Small subsistence farms were scattered along the perimeter of larger holdings and represented the spearhead of penetration into the forest. Indian tribes inhabited the sparsely settled northern half of the lowlands.

**Ethnic Groups**

The conquest of the Inca Empire brought the Spanish into contact with a stratified and ethnically diverse population in the region of present-day Peru and the Bolivian Altiplano, Yungas, and valleys. The scant eighty years of Inca rule over the Aymara tribes brought large-scale population movements within the empire. Inca policies included the forced migration of potentially hostile (usually recently conquered) groups and their replacement by Quechua-speaking colonists (*mitimaes*) of unquestioned loyalty. *Mitimaes* resettled in the valleys around Cochabamba and Sucre; many Aymara were expelled to the extreme boundaries of the empire (see Pre-Columbian Civilizations, ch. 1).

Spanish rule created a racially stratified society in which whites (*blancos*) and mestizos controlled Indians living in a form of indentured servitude (*pogaje*) on haciendas. The Spanish justified colonial policies as a means of converting the Indians to Christianity, a goal that was often subordinated to other needs.
Figure 5. Estimated Population by Age and Sex, 1989

However humane Spanish colonial policy was in theory, in practice the system was filled with abuses. The policies were frequently used to exact tribute from the Indians to underwrite the colonization effort. In the encomienda (see Glossary) system, for example, the Spanish overlords collected tribute from the Indian communities and, in return, were to see to their religious instruction (see The Economy of Upper Peru, ch. 1). Encomenderos, however, often exacted excessive tribute and appropriated Indian lands. The Spanish also employed the pre-Columbian mita (see Glossary) to require all able-bodied adult males to report for labor in the mines at prescribed intervals. This conscripted labor, coming at a time when European diseases caused unprecedented epidemics among the Indian population, ruptured many communities and Indian kin-groups. The resulting elevated mortality rates, coupled with arbitrary increases in the length of service, left some villages virtually devoid of adult males.

Indians fled to escape the intolerable conditions, many to the periphery of the mining communities themselves where they survived by a variety of illegal, if widely tolerated, means. Others sought refuge on haciendas, where they were exempt from the mita. Urban domestic servants and artisans, called yanacos, were exempt
as well. The general upheaval of the colonial period spawned a floating, rootless population unattached to any specific Indian community. Such individuals often abandoned their native language and way of life; they formed the basis of a class that was neither socially nor culturally Indian.

This group, added to the offspring of Spanish-Indian unions, rapidly gave rise to a population of mestizos of uncertain social position. Mestizo offspring of marriages recognized by the dominant Hispanic rulers were frequently assimilated by the ruling group. Illegitimate offspring of Spanish men and Indian women were usually taken in by their mother’s kin. Alternately, if they had received some education or training, they joined the ranks of urban artisans and petty merchants. They swelled the ranks of a distinct social group that was Spanish speaking and closer in culture to the rulers than to the mass of rural Indians, yet clearly separate from the Hispanic elite.

With the gradual decline of the mining enterprises and the end of the colonial period, most Indians found themselves tenants on large estates that depended on entailed labor to turn a profit. Free Indian communities remained on the less desirable lands. Pressures on these communities from further expansion of the haciendas depended on the level of agricultural profits in a given region. Independence brought little change; the small white elite remained firmly in control. Their wealth throughout most of the postindependence era rested on their agricultural estates, and they firmly resisted any effort to change the status or outlook of their resident labor force, the Indian peons. As a result, the economic and social culture of the hacienda, and with it that of the Indians, continued into the twentieth century.

Ethnicity remained the focus of much of national life in the 1980s. It was a continuing force in the social relations of individuals and communities. Ethnic identity—always somewhat fluid—became considerably more so following the changes of the 1952 Revolution. The ethnic hierarchy with whites at the pinnacle and the mass of Indians at the bottom continued, although the possibilities for those at the lower level to rise improved.

Bolivia’s principal groups were a small number of whites, a larger, more fluid and diverse group of mestizos, and a majority of Quechua or Aymara Indians. Whites were sometimes lumped with mestizos and called mistis (the Aymara version of mestizo). One commonly used term, cholo, referred to an upwardly mobile Indian—one anxious to assume the norms and identity of a mestizo. Terminology varied by the region, class, and ethnic affiliation of the speaker.
A number of minority groups also existed. The Callahuaya, a linguistically distinct subgroup of the Aymara, lived in Mufecas and Franz Tamayo provinces in La Paz Department. The group was widely known for its folk medicine, and many, if not most, of the men earned their livelihoods traveling among the weekly markets held throughout the Andes. Those who marketed might speak Quechua, Aymara, and Spanish in addition to their native Callahuaya. There were also a small number of blacks, the descendants of the few slaves imported during the colonial era. The Spanish rejected African slaves as a source of labor for the mines, regarding them as being unable to stand the rigors of the cold or the altitude. Most blacks lived in the provinces of Nor Yungas and Sur Yungas in La Paz Department. Significant numbers of Europeans migrated before and during World War II. In the mid-1980s, large German-speaking communities existed in La Paz and Santa Cruz. Colonization in the Oriente in the 1960s and 1970s also brought small numbers of Asians to the region around Santa Cruz.

**Lowland Indians**

Before Spanish intrusion, the eastern lowlands were an area of extreme cultural and linguistic diversity. The region was the terminus of several major population movements. Tribes ran the gamut of technology and social organization from nomadic hunters and gatherers to sedentary agricultural chiefdoms. The largest and best known of these groups, the Chiriguano, successfully resisted a number of Inca military forays into their territory. Considerable trade also occurred between the chiefdoms in the Altiplano, Yungas, and valleys and these tribes in the lowlands.

The Spanish sent periodic expeditions through the area in search of the land of the Great Tiger Lord (El Gran Paititi), whose wealth was rumored to rival even that of the Inca. The indigenous population’s primary contact with Europeans, however, came through the Jesuit missions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The mission territory remained off-limits to other Spaniards until the Jesuits’ expulsion from the New World in 1767, thus sparing the Indians there the worst abuses of colonial rule. Settlers then entered the region, bringing new diseases and instituting a level of exploitation that ranged from forced labor to outright slavery. Conditions reached their nadir during the Rubber Boom in the early twentieth century. Some Indians survived by fleeing to less accessible areas of the tropical forest; others adopted the way of life of the Oriente lower class.

Both the numbers and the way of life of the lowland Indians continued to decline through the 1980s. Rough estimates put the
lowland Indian population at perhaps 100,000 in the early 1980s. The main ethnic groups or linguistic families were Pano, Mataco-Mac’a, Uru-Chipaya, Quechua, Tacana, Arawak (Mojo), Tupi-Guaraní, Chiquitano, and Aymara. These were divided into nearly thirty subgroups in size from 10 to 20,000 persons (see fig. 6).

Bolivia lacked a coherent national policy on Indian affairs. The criminal code made some provision for defendants deemed "without civilization" and therefore not criminally responsible for their transgressions. The national government made only sporadic attempts to protect the remaining Indians from abuses or displacement by the growing numbers of settlers. Missionaries, including the New Tribes Mission, the South American Mission, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, actively proselytized among the tribes. Fundamentalist groups were particularly interested in "untouched tribes." Critics charged that the missionaries undermined the indigenous way of life and left their converts vulnerable to exploitation by others. Others suggested that the missionaries at least protected their charges from the worst abuses of whites and mestizos.

Altiplano, Yungas, and Valley Indians

In 1989 about 25 percent of Bolivians spoke Aymara and 30 percent Quechua. La Paz Department had the heaviest concentrations of Aymara speakers, although small communities of Aymara were scattered throughout the Altiplano. Increased migration in the 1950s gave rise to a sizable urban contingent of Aymara in La Paz, as well as significant numbers in the Yungas and the lowlands.

Quechua were found throughout the Altiplano and the intermontane valleys of central and southern Bolivia. The largest populations resided in the departments of Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí, Chuquisaca, and Tarija. The diversity of habitats that they occupied contributed to significant regional variation. Some authors noted more dialectal diversity in Bolivian Quechua than in Aymara. In both languages, Bolivian dialects were mutually intelligible to all other speakers of the tongue.

Language served a major role in shaping ethnic identification and relations. Traditionally, the inability to speak Spanish had contributed to the vulnerability of the Indians. Mestizos and whites controlled access to the larger society through their command of Spanish. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, only minute numbers of Quechua and Aymara were bilingual; for many of these, competence in Spanish was simply a step in severing their links to their Indian identity.
Figure 6. Major Ethnolinguistic Groups, 1988

Source: Based on information from Instituto Boliviano de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología, and Sede Nacional del Instituto Andino de Artes Populares, Mapa Etinolinguístico de Bolivia, La Paz, 1988.
Data from the 1976 census revealed that, for the first time in the country’s history, a majority of Bolivians spoke Spanish, one of three official national languages. Slightly more than one-third of the population were monolingual Spanish speakers; the same proportion were bilingual or trilingual in Spanish and one or more indigenous languages. Official figures showed an absolute and relative drop in the number of monolingual Indians. Between 1950 and 1976, the number of monolingual Quechua Indians dropped by nearly 40 percent. The number of monolingual Aymara speakers declined by more than half over the same period. In 1950 more than 60 percent of all Bolivians were monolingual speakers of an indigenous language; by 1976, however, only one-fifth fit this classification. This trend was even more pronounced in larger cities. By the mid-1980s, surveys found a scant 1 percent of the population of department capitals to be monolingual Quechua or Aymara speakers. Sociolinguist Xavier Albó cautioned, however, that these surveys underestimated the number of monolingual Indian speakers.

In practice, Spanish and indigenous languages were intermixed to a large extent in regional dialects. Indeed, Quechua and Spanish in Cochabamba were so intermingled that observers dubbed the local dialect Quechuañol. In other regions, too, Aymara or Quechua vocabulary relied on extensive borrowing from Spanish coupled with indigenous suffixes. A lexicon of Spanish borrowings included kinship terms, forms of address, place-names, and much of the vocabulary for food, clothing, and tools.

So-called social dialects also reflected this intermixture of Spanish and indigenous languages. For example, three Aymara dialects—known as patrón, radio, and missionary—differed from the version spoken by natives as a result of the influence of Spanish. Patrón Aymara, used by Spanish speakers in positions of authority over monolingual Indians, had a limited lexicon and relied on extensive Spanish borrowings. Radio Aymara was used by radio announcers who, although they were native speakers of the language, were translating directly from Spanish. It tended to appropriate Spanish linguistic categories and also borrowed many words. Missionary Aymara also superimposed Spanish on the indigenous languages to a large extent.

As the numbers of bilingual Indians grew, a shift in the pattern of bilingualism occurred. Early in the twentieth century, for example, virtually everyone in the city of La Paz spoke or understood Aymara. Spanish speakers learned it in childhood. Until the Chaco War (1932–35), Aymara was the only means of communicating with underlings. Among contemporary paceños (residents of La
Bolivia: A Country Study

Paz), however, the Aymara were bilingual, whereas native Spanish speakers were monolingual.

Changes beginning in the 1950s brought Indians into greater contact with national society. Increasingly, Indians themselves gained access to national political institutions at the same time that reforms gave them a greater measure of control over their lives. Whole communities gained access to consumer goods, governmental services, and educational opportunities unavailable a generation earlier. Those accustomed to dealing with Indians as a subservient underclass, however, found these improvements hard to accept.

Despite extensive changes in the relations among ethnic groups, the cultural categories and vocabulary that non-Indians customarily used in talking about ethnicity remained in general use. Indio (Indian) was still a term of disparagement, carrying with it a variety of negative connotations and implying intellectual inferiority and backwardness. In response to the pejorative meanings commonly attached to indio, the government substituted the term peasant (campesino) in official pronouncements following the 1952 Revolution. Nonetheless, improvement in social status usually meant becoming a mestizo.

Indians focused their loyalties on their local community rather than on some abstract sense of a common ethnic identity. These loyalties extended outward in concentric circles from family to neighborhood to village. Regardless of how much neighbors might fight and litigate with each other, they united in quarrels with rival villages. Factionalism and solidarity existed side by side in the local setting, implying simply a different arena of action.

By the late 1960s, small but growing numbers of educated Indians could be found in the professions, especially teaching. Although education was predicated on the goal of “Hispanicizing” the individual, some educated Indians—especially those teaching in more remote areas and those with fewer years of teaching experience—retained a strong positive orientation toward their ethnic background. These educated Aymara and Quechua speakers formed the nucleus of a genuinely Indian intelligentsia. The 1970s and 1980s saw a fluorescence of Indian intellectual groups and centers.

Mestizos and Cholos

Mestizos and cholos, technically those of Spanish and Indian descent, constituted 25 to 30 percent of the population. Geographically, this was the most widely distributed of ethnic groups; economically and socially, the position of mestizos was equivocal. Because all of the so-called racial terms connoted social status rather than racial background, they were applied indiscriminately and
An Aymara woman knitting an alpaca sweater
Courtesy Inter-American Foundation (Jane Regan)
often interchangeably. A wealthy, upper-class person of mixed blood, for example, might be considered white, whereas a poorer one might be termed a mestizo. An Indian might be called a cholo in one situation or a campesino in another.

During the colonial era, *cholo* was a generic term used to describe any person who had at least one Spanish grandparent. Over the years, a more specifically value-laden meaning evolved. Although it still carried a purely racial denotation, it also connoted an upwardly mobile Indian, in the somewhat negative sense of an aggressive social climber. Some writers have viewed *cholos* as an intermediate, transitional group between mestizos and Indians.

Regardless of the status differences between *cholos* and mestizos, the cultural criteria of language, urban orientation, livelihood, manners, and dress defined both. Traditionally, mestizos and *cholos* filled the intermediate positions, such as clerk, small-scale merchant, hacienda overseer, and lower-level government official. Often those who had recently begun the transition to *cholo* were unskilled laborers or self-employed vendors and artisans.

The transition from Indian to *cholo* or mestizo required at least a change in residence. By migrating to an urban area, an Indian might assimilate and become thoroughly mestizo in aspirations and identity. Assuming mestizo identity required not only a change in style of clothing and livelihood but also sufficient facility in Spanish to speak with a locally acceptable accent. Complete assimilation was difficult to accomplish in one generation, however. More typically, the migrant’s children came to consider themselves mestizos or *cholos* as they were educated and became adapted to urban ways (see Urbanization, this ch.). Within individual families, such social mobility often engendered tension. The ambiguity surrounding ethnic categories and classification extended to the nuclear family. Full siblings could be viewed as members of different ethnic groups. Children who were relatively successful and adopted the dress and manners of *cholos* or mestizos deprecated their Indian parents and those siblings who were less educated or spoke Spanish poorly.

The 1952 Revolution changed the pattern of mestizo-Indian interaction. Traditionally, an elaborate etiquette ensured that mestizos, who considered themselves to be of higher status, received proper respect. Mestizos whose socioeconomic status declined after land reform, however, still wished to be treated with deference by Indians. Some, such as former landowners who had become impoverished, responded by refusing to interact with Indians. Others, who had entered commerce and marketing, interacted socially with peasants who were their trading partners but avoided dealings with
their own former peons. Interethnic drinking patterns also changed in the years following the revolution, ceasing entirely in some regions, and becoming a new ethnic interaction in other regions.

**Whites**

Whites, or blancos, also known as the gente decente or gente buena (decent or good people), sat atop the ethnic pyramid of the late 1980s. They represented roughly 5 to 15 percent of the population. Socioeconomic and cultural boundaries rather than narrow racial criteria marked blanco status, although the vocabulary describing whites (as well as other ethnic groups) was rife with racial terminology. Although whites were well aware of the admixture of Indian genes in their ranks, their sense of superiority rested largely upon the notion of "purity of the blood" based on a strong sense of aristocracy and good lineage.

The standards for membership in the white elite varied by region, as did the degree of traditionalism and adherence to the Spanish heritage. In general, the white elite was culturally homogeneous and true to its Spanish heritage. Its members preserved the Hispanic traditions that dominated national society, even though these were not shared to a great degree by the mestizo and Indian majority.

Whites were not as widely distributed geographically as mestizos, but they resided in both urban and rural areas. In the large cities and smaller towns, they traditionally held high-status positions as professionals, wealthy merchants, or high-ranking government officials. In rural Bolivia, whites were the wealthy and influential patrones. Patrón status implied not only financial independence but also a European life-style, a particular code of moral behavior, a lineage traceable to colonial roots, local origin, and a leisurely attitude toward work.

Whites saw their own sense of honor and morality as much stronger than that of mestizos or Indians. Theft, drunkenness, premarital pregnancy, and physical violence were censured among whites but expected among those of lesser status and, presumably, breeding. Whites viewed upwardly mobile Indians or mestizos, even those mestizos who had amassed great wealth, as inveterate social climbers and pretentious upstarts. Deficiencies of lineage notwithstanding, mestizos or cholas of financial means could gain a measure of social acceptance through marriage to a daughter of an impoverished white family. The children of such a match, depending on their education and good fortune, were usually accepted as whites.