Profile

Highland Aymara and Quechua make up the majority of Bolivia’s indigenous peoples (3.5 million, 2012 Census), they also make up the majority of the highland Bolivian population. Many studies of Bolivia reference them and no other groups. They speak one of the two indigenous languages (Aymara or Quechua) and many speak Spanish too. Aymara and Quechua people share many cultural attributes and practices, such as their belief in Pachamama, an Andean deity (often translated as ‘Earth Mother’). Those living in rural areas tend to make their living as small farmers. Over the years, large numbers of Aymara and Quechua people have migrated to Bolivia’s cities. La Paz is predominantly Aymara (El Alto has become known as the Aymara capital of the world), whereas Cochabamba’s indigenous residents are mostly Quechua-speakers. (Bolivia’s lowlands are also predominantly Quechua-rather than Aymara-speaking.)

Historical context

Aymara and Quechua peoples in Bolivia’s highlands were more greatly affected than lowland indigenous communities by the agrarian reform implemented by the MNR government which came to power in 1952. The MNR redistributed many of the large estates, it also sought to mobilize indigenous peasants, incorporating them into rural trade unions. As noted above, increasing numbers of Aymara and Quechua people have migrated from their rural communities to the cities, where they have become an important and influential part of culture and society. Many Aymara and Quechua workers have also migrated to the lowlands – due to the drop in the prices of tin and agricultural produce – and often sought employment in the burgeoning coca/cocaine trade. Since the 1980s, as part of the growing protests against US intervention in Bolivia, the coca leaf has become a key symbol of indigenous and Bolivian identity. Since the 1990s, and particularly since the Popular Participation Law of 1994, Aymara and Quechua people have (as outlined the general country information [LINK – Bolivia])
become far more active in local and national politics. They have also been involved in the mass protest marches that have become a regular occurrence in Bolivia.

Current issues

Advances made – for and by indigenous peoples – include constitutional recognition, popular participation, bilingual education and greater parliamentary representation. (Indeed, Bolivia now has a Constituent Assembly, rather than a traditional parliament, and this includes a large number of indigenous representatives.) The current president of the country, Evo Morales, was born in an Aymara-speaking home and frequently invokes his indigenous roots. Modified agrarian reform laws have helped to redistribute an increasing amount of land to indigenous communities, although communities still feel that a great deal more could be done. Protests against transnational corporations continue to be an important part of indigenous politics in the country, and Quechua and Aymara organizations continue to support the state’s efforts to nationalize the gas fields.

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