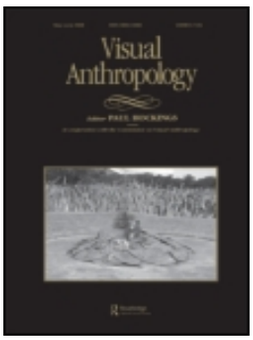

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Living on the Edge: A Photographic Essay on Urban Aymara Migrants in El Alto, Bolivia

Jerome Crowder

Like many other cities in Latin America, La Paz, Bolivia, has experienced rapid urbanization throughout the past two decades. Aymara-speaking migrants from the Lake Titicaca region and across the Altiplano head for this capital in search of economic prosperity, and end up living in the bedroom city of El Alto, perched on the valley rim above La Paz. Once in the city, some migrants maintain strong ties with their rural origins while others disassociate themselves completely from their Aymara heritage. This photo essay explores the process of urbanization and migration among Aymara migrants in El Alto, illustrating how they maintain their rural skills in the urban context in order to survive and adapt to a new life. These photographs address issues such as transportation, employment, family, and ritual, depicting urban life on the edge of the city. Each image illustrates a facet of how Aymara migrants adapt to the urban environment by implementing known practices that they brought with them, or replacing them with newer, urban ones. The accompanying text explains each scene as well as the relationship to the subjects and the anthropological interest inherent in the images.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my work I employ photography, not only to document events and to give as gifts for people who have done things for me, but also to explore the lives of migrants in El Alto. Baptisms, weddings, funerals, graduations, dances, and other festivals are all regular occurrences for an anthropologist, but I took the opportunity to make images of the more mundane life experiences that I observed in the city as well. The exercise evolved from being a means for me to understand the variety of lives in the city, into an actual discussion among the residents regarding the daily requirements of survival as an urban migrant. These images represent the dynamic process of urbanization and migration, reflecting my relationships with Alteños and their recognition of someone who knows them as friends, not as "others."

All images within this article are color, but appear in this publication as black and white reproductions.

JEROME CROWDER earned his Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh (1998) after completing fieldwork on the role of community in Aymara migrants' health decision-making strategies in El Alto, Bolivia. Over time, his research broadened to include a study of the effects of migration and urbanization on the lives of migrants. Photography is a key component of his work, as well as a pedagogical tool in the classroom and a lifelong passion. Crowder is a Lecturer at the University of Houston, where he recently taught Visual Anthropology as an undergraduate course.

My first encounter with El Alto began in La Paz in 1989 when I asked a store clerk named Eduardo about helping me locate indigenous healers in the city. Eduardo said he knew of some naturalists working near his home, and invited me to visit his family up in El Alto (barrio of 16 de julio) the following Sunday. Subsequent trips to Bolivia the next year and later in 1993 strengthened my relationship with Eduardo, his family, and a variety of people in the city, preparing me for my dissertation fieldwork in 1995. Upon returning, another serendipitous experience occurred when my contacts introduced me to Alvaro. Almost immediately, Alvaro encouraged me to stay with him and his family in the barrio Huayna Potosi, on the outskirts of El Alto, where other Aymara migrants live. My work concluded in 1997, and I returned again in 2000 to present my research findings to the community of people who had made it possible, and to continue photographing how the city and people change over time.

Early morning light illuminates this colorful crop of quinoa [Figure 1], one of the most nutritious foods in the Andes. Archaeological records reveal that the Tiwanaku valley, known as the heartland of the Aymara-speaking people, has been inhabited since 200 BCE. Local people continue to live in adobe houses and to subsist on the land that their ancestors cultivated for centuries before them. As in times past, rural people depend upon family members and neighbors (their community) to run the farms and provide for each other in times of need.

Within the past 50 years, rural ways of life have become increasingly dependent upon produce prices in the city markets. Today, there is not enough cultivable land to support everyone who lives in the countryside *(campo*). In order to find work and sustenance, people are drawn to the many opportunities provided by the city experience. The capital city of Bolivia, La Paz, is close to these rural valleys. In the past few decades, it has become the home to many Aymara-speaking people who have migrated there to find a new life.

A native of Tiwanaku, Alvaro (the man in Figure 2) is familiar with the annual planting and harvesting cycles followed in the *campo*. Now a resident of El Alto (the outlying city sprawl around La Paz), Alvaro regularly returns to his family's farm to help his parents and siblings cultivate the food they will need for the following year. Here, he gathers dried sheep dung in a bag to use as fertilizer for their potato crop. Because of their dietary prevalence, potatoes are the only crops Aymara people fertilize organically. Dried dung from larger animals, such as cows, is used in the home for cooking fuel.

Inside the bus [Figure 3], the driver (*chofer*) maneuvers his vehicle around blind corners and through river washes. He dodges herds of animals as well as other vehicles that share the road. The driver must pay attention to his course, but he keeps small talismans and sacred objects close by to protect him from what he cannot avoid. Usually, his partner collects fares and secures baggage to the roof. If you look in the mirror above the driver, you will see a woman seated to his left. When traveling long distances, a *chofer* is sometimes accompanied by his spouse and family. Buses like this are most difficult to drive when loaded beyond capacity. On the right in this image, notice the silhouette of a man with a cap. His close proximity to both the camera and the driver reflects how crowded the bus was that day during the trip across the Altiplano to La Paz.

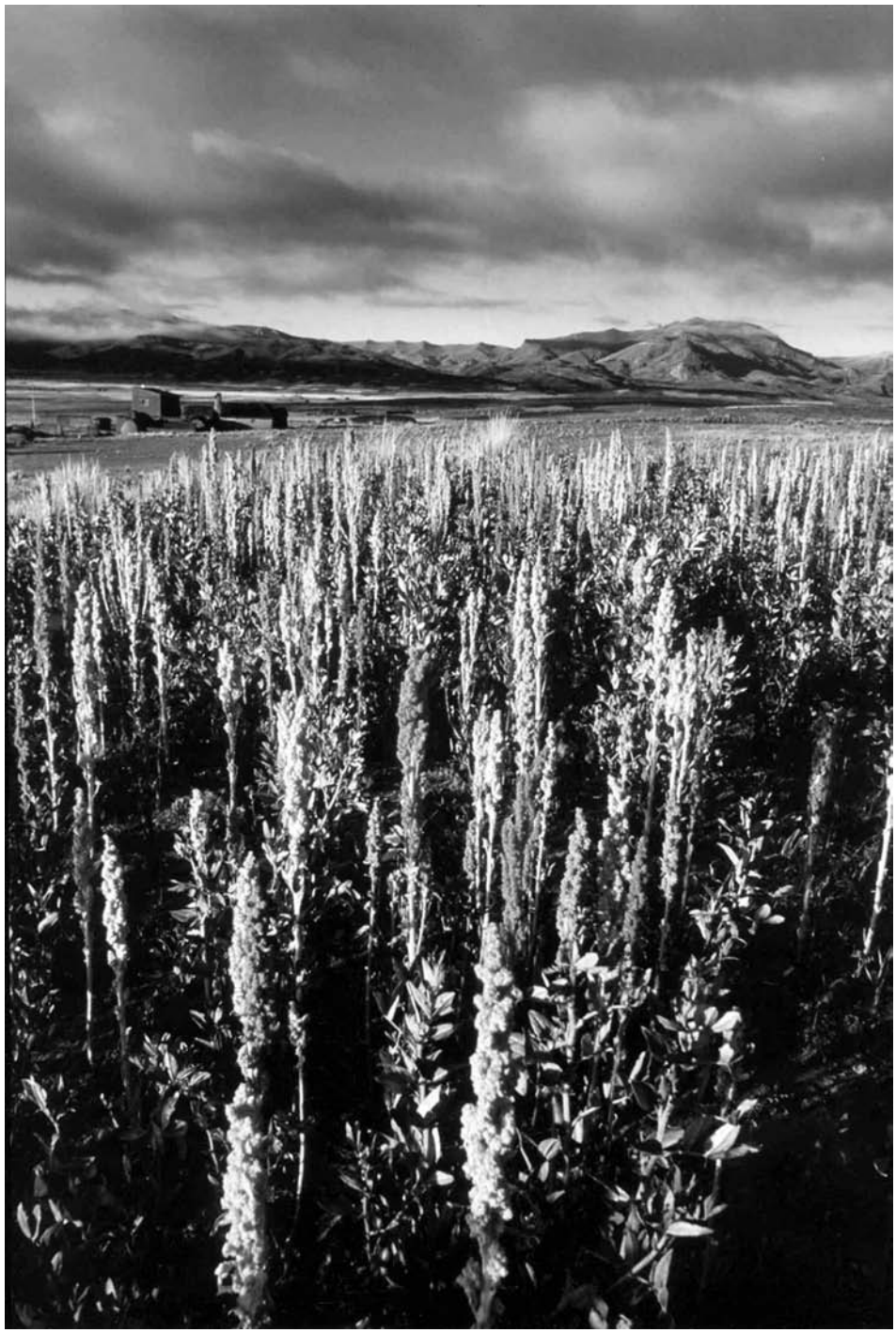

Figure 1 Quinoa in the Tiwanaku valley, 1996.

Figure 2 Preparing the soil, 1995.

Figure 3 Chofer *in the Altiplano, 1995.*

Above the rim of the La Paz valley, El Alto spreads out across the Altiplano [Figure 4]. Here the differentiation between urban and rural is blurred. Near the periphery of El Alto, people continue to graze herds and grow crops for subsistence. Although they are urbanites, they maintain traditional ways in order to survive in a capital-intense urban world. The vast city extends below, testament to tremendous growth over the past 50 years. It is now home to almost 600,000

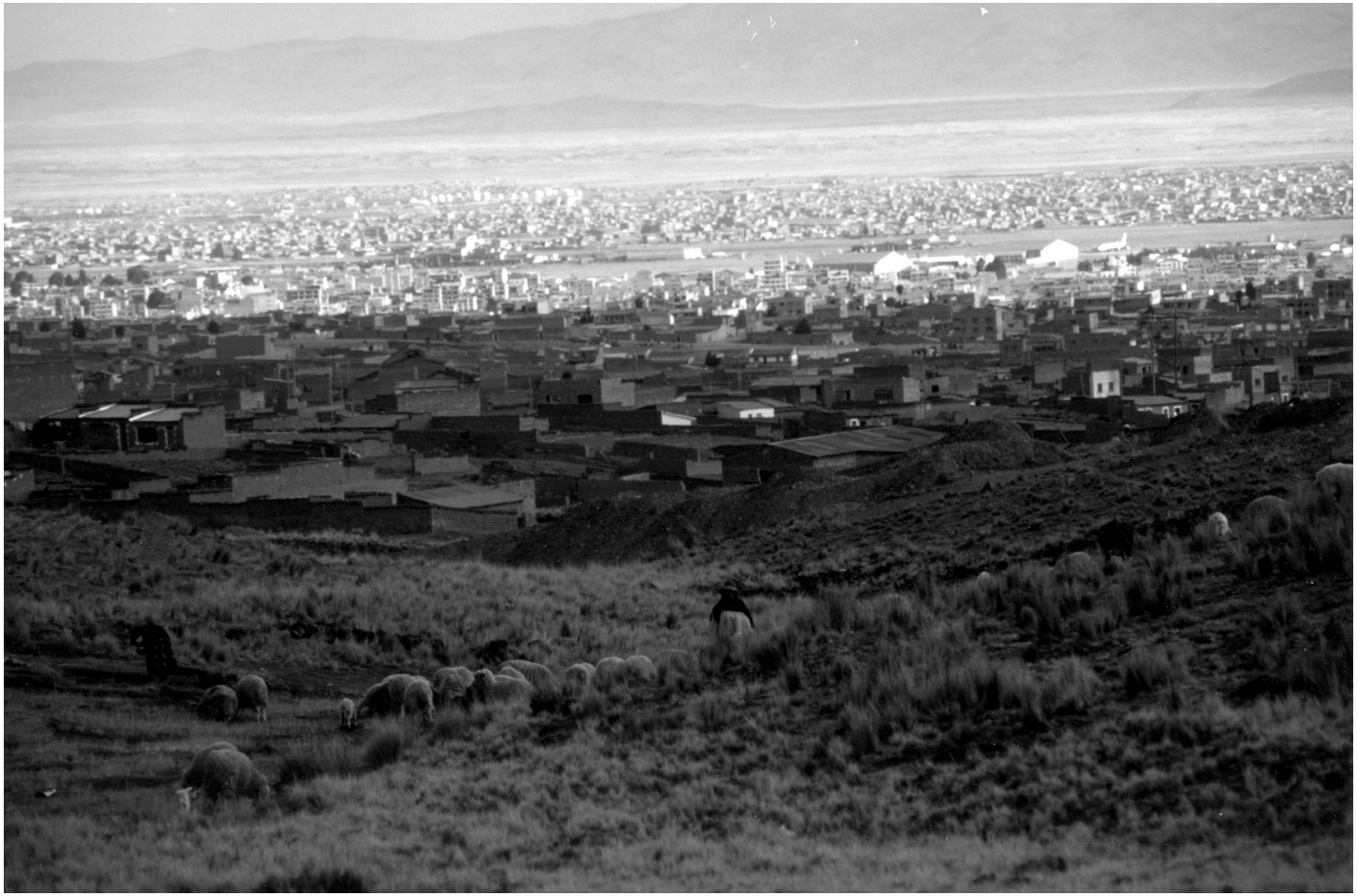

Figure 4 Urban herds, 1997.

people. From here one can see the shiny planes at the airport located in the center of El Alto. The modern convenience of a gateway to the world amidst the sprawling impoverished city is one of the many contrasts common in El Alto. Without El Alto, La Paz would not be connected to the exterior. And, without La Paz, El Alto could not exist, as it is the dormitory for workers in that city. The two are intrinsically connected, directly reflecting the relationship between rural and urban in Bolivia and other cities throughout Latin America.

Seated at the rim of the valley between El Alto and La Paz, this mother and her children exemplify the urban condition [Figure 5]. On her back, the girl wears a *manta*, a square piece of cloth commonly used to carry goods such as those sold in a market. Today, the woman has taken her two children with her to sell goods in La Paz. Resting above the city, the family waits for a bus to take them down.

Many families live in El Alto while they work in La Paz below. More than 70,000 people move between the two cities daily, leaving as early as 4:00 a.m. and sometimes not returning until after midnight. Because urban life demands that residents participate in the capital economy, living costs are high and people must maintain more than one job in order to survive and support a family. Alvaro and his wife, brother, and sisters live together in El Alto. Each day they leave to sell goods in local markets, or to work as laborers in homes, businesses, or on construction sites for people living in La Paz (*Paceños*).

Below Nevado Illimani (21,003 feet/6,402m), Choqueyapu (''River of Gold''in Aymara) is the traditional name for the La Paz valley [Figure 6]. The city of La Paz was founded in 1584 by a Spaniard, Captain Alonso de Mendoza, along popular trade routes and below the rim of the valley to protect it from the harsh Altiplano weather. Today, growth in the valley has exceeded the limits of its walls and extended onto the plain above. Until the late 1980s, these overflow neighborhoods (*barrios*) making up El Alto were part of La Paz proper. They became a sovereign municipality on July 16, 1988, after much demand for their political voice to be respected. Due to the rapid urbanization of the valley, native trees and shrubs have had a difficult time growing over the past 20 years. In the foreground, dark green patches of eucalyptus trees have been planted to prevent erosion on the unstable dirt flanks of the valley. One also can see the two-lane highway wind its way down from the rim of El Alto into the city of La Paz. There is a drop in elevation of more than 1,200 feet between the airport in El Alto (13,287 feet) and downtown La Paz (11,900 feet).

This famous marketplace is the driving force of El Alto, providing residents with a means of selling and acquiring the goods they need to live. The largest public market on the Altiplano, nearly anything can be found in 16 de julio—whether locally produced or illegally imported. Potatoes, grains, wool, and other indigenous items are available, as well as furniture, bicycles, autos, animals, clothes, prepared food, TVs, radios, musical instruments, and hardware. This photo [Figure 7] represents only a fraction of the streets and venues filled with people and traffic in the barrio of 16 de julio each Sunday.

Although few individuals in El Alto own a vehicle, hubcaps and other auto parts are easily available in the 16 de Julio market. Purchasing parts in El Alto is far cheaper than going to a distributor, as parts are frequently more expensive than the labor costs to install them. Contraband—merchandise that has entered the

Figure 5 Family at the edge of the city, 1993.

Figure 6 The La Paz valley, 1997.

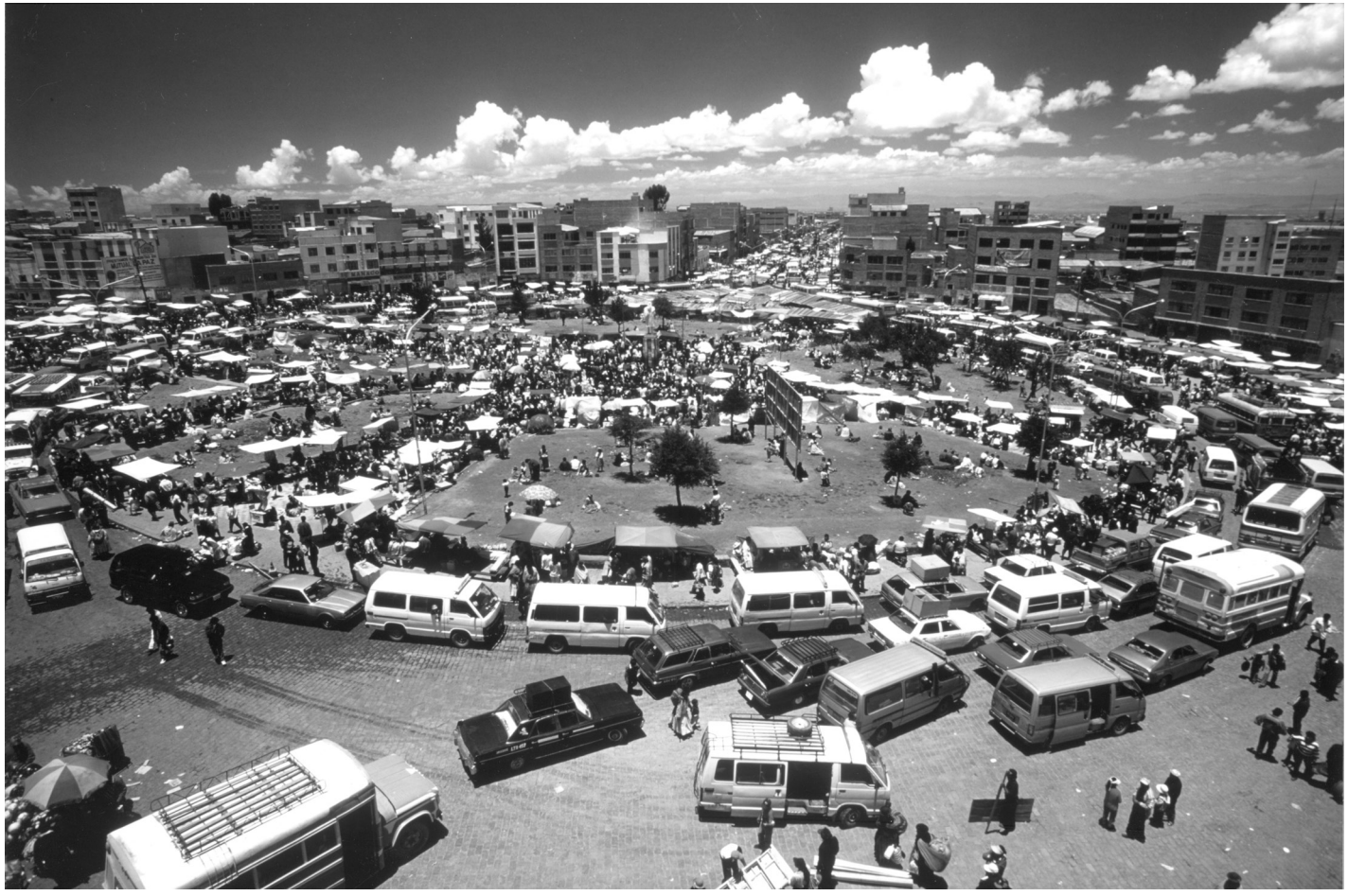

Figure 7 Market 16 de Julio, 1995.

Figure 8 *Hub caps, 1995.*

country without the paying of import duties—is widespread in El Alto, allowing access to affordable goods that would otherwise be unobtainable.

The jacket worn by one of these customers [Figure 8] was very popular among residents. It illustrates an entrepreneurial urge to capitalize on items that have a connection to the world beyond El Alto and Bolivia. This jacket was made locally in El Alto, but for the people who wear them such "foreign" goods represent prestige and the desire to become more integrated with an urban economy. Also popular are T-shirts and caps emblazoned with popular North American brands and logos such as Marlboro, Coca-Cola, Adidas, The Chicago Bulls, and Michael Jordan.

In the city, migrants use their rural skills to earn a living. Men like the one pictured here [Figure 9] engage in hard physical labor to make ends meet. Neither size nor weight discourages these human "horses," who charge a fee for carrying items from the point of sale in the 16 de julio market to a home, office, or vehicle. This man carries a wooden door on his back with the help of a plastic cloth (*manta*), such as peasants use to carry heavy loads in the *campo*.

One of Bolivia's greatest resources is natural gas. The national government refines petroleum in El Alto and sells propane to residents for cooking fuel, a stark contrast to the dung regularly used across the Altiplano. Every day, trucks like this one [Figure 10] drive through the city streets, blasting their air-horns and notifying residents to come out and trade their empty tanks for full ones. This young man, Sergio, will sell 150 tanks of gas in less than four hours each day. He and the driver know residents across the city, with some of whom they do business three times each week.

These military policemen [Figure 11] provide security for the annual Independence Day celebration in the central square (Plaza Murillo) of La Paz. There, the President reviews the troops and addresses the crowd of citizens who are celebrating their liberation from Spain.

The military service required of all Bolivian males allows rural men to leave their villages and see parts of the country previously unfamiliar to them. For contemporary Aymara speakers and other peasant farmers throughout Bolivia, obligatory military service is a stage of manhood, a rite of passage before fully becoming an adult. After completing his service, an Aymara man might return to the *campo* and raise a family of his own, or he might remain in the city and pursue opportunities available there. Both Alvaro and his younger brother Wilfredo served in the Bolivian Air Force, frequently traveling between La Paz and bases throughout the country. This experience made them familiar with the vast heterogeneity of Bolivians, but it also reinforced their desire to live in La Paz.

From his second-floor perspective, Marcelo looks around the neighborhood [Figure 12] and watches his siblings play in the backyard. When his father, Santos, is not repairing electronic equipment (TVs, radios, tape players, or amplifiers) in the room below, he works with a cousin to add another floor to the home shared with the cousin's wife and three children.

This image provides an opportunity to understand how Santos and his family subsist in the city. They use their lot to grow potatoes and medicinal plants, manage a small herd of sheep, and store hundreds of adobe bricks. Although Santos has lived in El Alto for 15 years, he continues to grow crops and raise animals. Such practices protect his family from the precariousness of urban life.

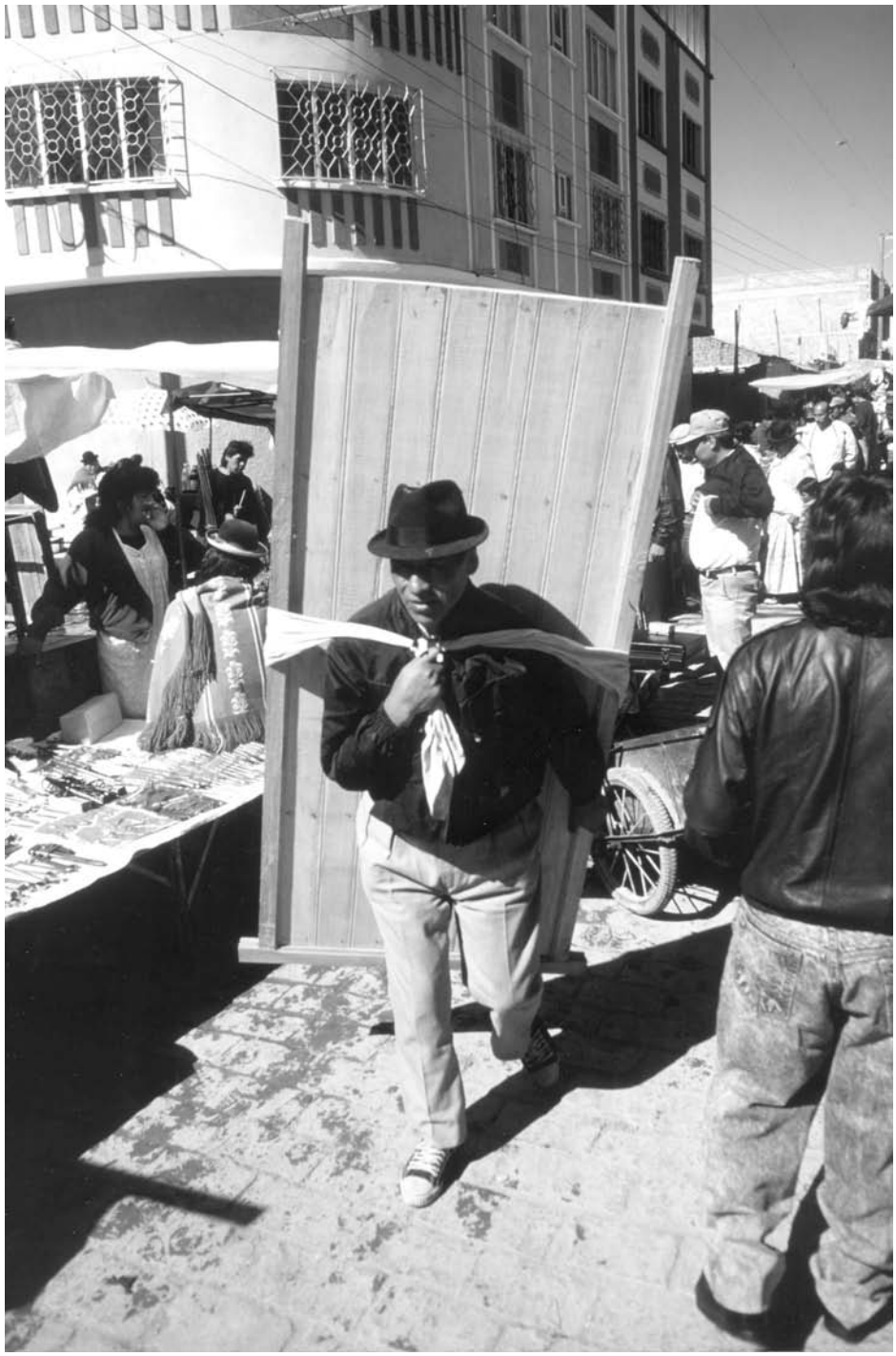

Figure 9 Hard labor, 1995.

Figure 10 Fuel run, 2000.

Figure 11 Military police stand guard, 1993.

Figure 12 *A backyard view, 1996.*

In 2000, I returned to El Alto and went to visit Santos and his family. Upon arrival, his parents disclosed to me that Marcelo had died in 1998 of a heart arrhythmia, at the age of eight. Two days after Marcelo's death, his mother gave birth to another son. She told me that this is the only photo she has of Marcelo, and is grateful to have it to remember him by. Each year on All Souls Day, they take the photo to the church and bless it, and then visit his grave at the cemetery with the image.

As her daughter watches, Maria (Santos's wife) prepares food to serve to her family and guests later in the afternoon [Figure 13]. Like other Aymara families in the northern sector of El Alto, Maria and Santos occasionally invite friends to eat: it is a way of maintaining social and familial ties throughout the city. Guests usually include extended family members (aunts, uncles, and cousins) and fictive kin relations (godparents) who regularly help Santos and his family. Trust (*confianza*) between neighbors is the basis for social interaction in El Alto, as residents feel they have few people they can turn to in times of need. Such intimate relationships are fostered by the infrequent invitations to eat together and socialize, reinforcing bonds to maintain the network of trusted friends. Although Alteños come from all corners of the Altiplano and share the Aymara language, one cannot assume that they are all alike or that all will get along with each other. Indeed, provincial beliefs and attitudes persist within this population, enhancing the tension between neighbors seeking employment in the city.

Discouraged about the health of his father in the campo, Alvaro and his brothers use their urban network to find suitable treatment for him. Older brother Xavier seeks insight through divination from a *yatiri* (shaman, literally "one who knows") who reads coca leaves [Figure 14]. Many Alteños still continue to practice indigenous forms of health care. Xavier feels that a *yatiri* will read the coca leaves, determine what is ailing his father, and then suggest therapies. Here, the local *yatiri* Don Miguel reads leaves in his El Alto bedroom as Xavier takes notes. The image illustrates the intimacy of indigenous health care.

Spread out on the bed, Miguel places on the cloth individual leaves (representing Xavier's father, his family, his soul, his enemies, and his friends) and then drops other leaves onto them. Depending upon the final position of the leaves (dark or light side up, their direction, etc.). Miguel interprets what they "say" and forecasts what will happen to Xavier's father. Miguel believes that the illness is not caused by a curse or sorcery (as the family fears), but is a medical condition that should be treated accordingly. In the end, the men took their father to a local physician in El Alto who diagnosed him with asthma.

Just outside El Alto, along the highway to Viacha, is a sacred hill (*calvario*). Here, *yatiris* celebrate traditional rituals for urban residents [Figure 15]. People travel to this location and hire a *yatiri* to perform a *ch'alla* (blessing) to the Pachamama (Mother Earth). They thereby ensure future good luck in business ventures, family matters, or personal issues. As with similar rituals in the *campo*, when asking the Pachamama for good fortune, one must reciprocate by "feeding" the Earth. Traditionally, this is done by constructing a "table" consisting of amulets, coca leaves, llama fat, sweets, and wool. The table is then blessed and set on fire. As this image depicts, while the fire burns Pachamama is given a libation through the sprinkling of beer and alcohol upon the ground. If this pleases Pachamama, the people's prayers will be answered.

Figure 13 Preparing a meal, 1996.

Figure 14 Coca reading, 1996.

Figure 15 *Altiplano Ch'alla, 1993.*

A combination of Catholic and indigenous religious practices, the first haircut usually occurs after a child's baptism ceremony. Alvaro and his immediate family invite extended family members and trusted friends to their home for food, celebration, and the *rutuch'a* (haircut). In this photo [Figure 16], Alvaro and his wife, Silvia, watch as their neighbor Pablo wields the scissors to give their daughter her first trim. The godfather, Don Ramiro, conducts the ceremony, inviting guests to take a turn at cutting the little girl's hair. This responsibility is accompanied by a monetary gift to the girl's family to help provide for her future education or other needs. Such participation and reciprocity between host and guest illustrate the strong relationship and mutual concern between the two parties. A *rutuch'a* celebration is an opportunity for Alvaro and his wife to reaffirm their ties with family and friends. They open their home and provide food, receiving financial assistance from those who most care for them. The attendants are not necessarily neighbors, but rather those the family most trusts. The placing of confetti in each other's hair identifies the celebrants and the importance of such bonds. With the blessing of friends and family and a libation to the Pachamama, the fiesta will continue well into the night.

Arms outstretched, Casimiro celebrates his faith with other members of the Sunday congregation at Iglesia Beth Shalom [Figure 17]. Evangelical churches such as this draw residents from across the city. They quickly are becoming centers for migrant families, who proclaim their new-found faith and acquire an instant family in the city. Since the church does not condone the consumption of alcohol, women may seek refuge from their alcoholic partners at the doorstep of its pastor and members. Preaching the diabolical nature of indigenous beliefs, evangelical ministers urge their followers to renounce traditional ways, speak Spanish exclusively, and abide by the teachings of the Bible. Migrants who find the church often comment that they feel more secure in their new urban situation, since they can trust other Christians whom they meet there. Since moving to the city, Alvaro's brother, Wilfredo, has converted and become an evangelical minister in the outskirts of El Alto, near their home. Throughout his father's illness, Wilfredo actively sought support from his congregation to pray for his father's well-being.

One day Alvaro went to visit Eusebio, a friend, business associate, and longtime resident of El Alto. Upon arriving at the house, Alvaro found the front door shrouded in black cloth. The traditional funeral dirge blared out across the neighborhood from a large speaker placed in the second-floor window. Inside, the home was filled with smoke and packed wall-to-wall with family and friends. Surrounding a casket on the other side of the room were candles, large sprays of flowers, and people quietly saying prayers and lamenting aloud. The men sat on one side of the room, smoking and chewing coca leaves, while the women congregated on the other, talking with each other and crying. To Alvaro's surprise, his friend had died the day before, and he had come upon the wake in progress. Eusebio's family and friends stayed with the body for the next two days, before taking it to a cemetery on the periphery of El Alto [Figure 18]. In the shadow of Nevado Illimani, the family recedes from the gravesite to receive condolences from friends and visitors who knew Eusebio.

Thus is the routine of life in the city and the *campo*: people striving to make their lives better through a variety of means. The city provides new opportunities for

Figure 16 Rutuch'a *in El Alto, 1995.*

Figure 17 Evangelical revival in El Alto, 1995.

Figure 18 Funeral in El Alto, 1996.

Aymara peasant farmers, offering commerce and employment as well as social, religious, and political alternatives. At the same time, it provides a cut-throat atmosphere in which survival requires that residents persevere, depending upon their family ties and other forms of social security for support. Death in the Andes, like anywhere else, is part of the cycle of life. Alvaro and his family strive to make the most of their lives in El Alto, knowing that one day their spirits will be with those living in the sacred mountains nearby.