

From horseback to motorbike: Inside the motorcycle boom in Indigenous South America

April 25 2023, by Diego Villar



A Chacobo man works on his motorbike. Credit: Diego Villar

With their tropical climate, flowing rivers and dense forests, the vast plains and basins that make up [South America's lowlands](#) cover a significant portion of the continent's surface. Indeed, the Amazon rainforest covers approximately seven million square kilometers or around 40% of the total land area of South America.

These lowlands are primarily located in the eastern part of South America, stretching from the Andes mountains to the Atlantic Ocean. Two of the main lowland regions are the [Amazon basin](#) and the [Gran Chaco](#)—both diverse landscapes that are home to a wide variety of Indigenous cultures and communities.

As varied as the region is, much of its exuberant landscape has been drastically changed over the past 150 years by the arrival of mechanical machinery. And this is especially the case in territories inhabited by Indigenous people, who have been forced to adapt to new ways of living, with their traditional life transformed or disrupted.

Steamships, railways and trucks used for transportation arrived over the last century—followed by guns, used for both hunting and warfare. The arrival of bulldozers and chainsaws, used by the logging industry, has changed the rainforest forever. Meanwhile, electric generators hum constantly in the background.

[Motorbikes](#) are one of the latest machines to hit the lowlands. Over the last two decades, there has been a huge [motorbike](#) boom in Indigenous South America, with more and more people buying bikes from the money they make trading rubber, [palm hearts](#) (the pale white inner core from the palm tree), and Brazil nuts. And I have seen firsthand how motorbikes have drastically changed Indigenous people's lives.

I have spent the last 20 years working with the Chacobo—an Indigenous group from Bolivia—and have seen how for them, having a motorcycle is more than just a way to get around. It represents a sense of belonging and citizenship.

Owning a motorcycle is a symbol of how Indigenous people have adapted successfully to the changing world around them. The motorbike is considered such an icon of development and progress that in the

Bolivian city of Riberalta, you can even find a monument of a motorbike.

For many people, motorbikes are more than just a way to travel. In South America, especially in regions like the Bolivian Amazon, motorcycles have become a way of life.

Bikes and beliefs

In the past, the Indigenous people of these regions spent hours decorating body ornaments, bows and arrows. Now they spend most of their free time polishing, dismantling or reassembling their motorcycles.

Most of these bikes are cheap Chinese brands (Dayun, Wanxin, TianMa, Haojue), while their Japanese equivalents (Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki) remain a lusted-after status symbol.

At the same time, the arrival of the motorbike has led to these local landscapes being littered with mechanical "ruins" or "fossils". Wheels, handlebars, fuel tanks and exhaust pipes all line the villages, gathering dust.

With proper spare parts not easily available, the inevitable repairs and upgrades must rely on "cannibalization"—using parts of old vehicles or whatever items are at hand to sort the issue. This obviously changes the way the lowland motorbikes look.

Bikes are named and considered to have a gender. Indigenous people also believe their motorbikes can be influenced by spiritual or supernatural forces that can cause them to behave in unusual or unexpected ways.

For instance, according to these beliefs, a motorbike may suddenly

accelerate or stop working altogether without any physical or mechanical explanation. It's thought that such episodes happen sometimes with the intent of causing harm or misfortune to the owner of the bike.

Passion vs. safety

The motorcycle boom has also led to a rise in [traffic accidents](#). Road accidents involving motorbikes are now a leading cause of death among the Chacobo—even more so since Chinese companies began paving the road that runs across their territory.

Things that many of us take for granted, such as insurance, speed limits, regular MOTs or services alongside helmets and protective clothing, do not figure here. So, a lot of the [road accidents](#) that happen in this region end up being fatal.

This has led to a number of communities forming road blockades and burning commercial trucks that have run over motorcyclists. Local authorities are starting to demand legal compensation for the families of the dead or injured. Dealing with [road accidents](#) has become an increasingly important topic for Indigenous leaders and communities.

At the same time, motorbikes have significantly transformed the relationship Indigenous people have with nature and society. They have made hunting, fishing and horticultural work much easier and more productive. And it's not just the men: many Indigenous women have become motorbike riders and are using their bikes to challenge traditional gender roles.

While the increasing amount of motorbike accidents is concerning, it's clear that this passion for motorcycles has become an integral part of Indigenous people's lives that will likely be passed down through generations. Indeed, it's quite common to see whole Indigenous families

on bikes—including pets and tiny children.

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