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Ritual Conflict (*Tinku*) and Vindication of Indigenous Rights in Bolivia

Current conditions in Bolivia have been preceded by a long history of acts of violence of 2 types. One is a globalized type, which is material and politically motivated. The other is regional and social and is characterized by spiritual continuity. The first type is associated with radical social movements, barricades in the streets, "pro-life" marches, and repression. Its causes are rooted in the poor conditions of indigenous peoples in Bolivia, especially the severe and still unresolved problems related to land tenure and territory, water, coca, use of tractors, and the question of indigenous resistance.

Modern indigenous political protest

Given these conditions, a great number of powerful indigenous organizations have now taken the initiative, announcing that, despite the "advantages" of the law on popular participation, they intend to reform the political structure of Bolivia by demanding a constitutional assembly. By June 2002, they were no longer willing to believe government promises because 54 conventions signed since the year 2000 had been violated by the government, and government repression had led to 54 deaths.

The results of the presidential elections in June 2002 revealed discontent with the neoliberal regime. In light of the current parliamentary majority, the indigenous movement not only intends to block roads throughout the country but will also "block" government policy, in an attempt to achieve its aspirations. If this does not happen, the next government will have a much more serious situation to confront because it will have to deal with the isolation of the public sphere from civil society, while indigenous people renounce the existing "social truce."

Traditional ritualized conflict today

The second type of violence has deep roots, occurs on a seasonal basis, and is the manifestation of a particular form of traditional religiosity, which can be observed at the most 3 or 4 times annually (Platt 1996). It takes the ritualized form of a *tinku* or "encounter," which can be understood as a way of exorcising unnecessary violence between communities.

This native form of religiosity has dimensions different from those of Christianity. It is linked with the indigenous concept of *Pachamama* or "mother of Earth and life." In this view, Pachamama has "modernized" herself since the arrival of Catholicism in the region of the former Confederation of Charcas, located in modern-day Bolivia. Therefore, those who participate in *tinku* call themselves "warriors of Christ," as they see themselves engaging in combat on behalf of their own indigenous concept of the "holy cross" (Platt 1996). Today, because of the tension between national laws and customary law, *tinku* must be held under police surveillance (Figure 1).

National pressure to mitigate violence

Last year the highest-ranking regional authority admitted that he no longer knew how to deal with local conflicts. Public officials attempting to initiate reconciliation, in part by reconstructing *ayllus*—indigenous forms of socio-territorial organization—are realizing that this is a difficult task. Nevertheless, the communities have been obliged over the last few years by the national government to follow a more peaceful path; but they have not rejected this governmental imposition. The indigenous authorities in the Norte de Potosí region issued a public statement on 13 February 2001, declaring that they had united to form a peace council. Following the signing of the final agreement (25 May 2001), they proudly announced that they had obtained a concession from the government: "US$ 10 million has been set aside for the creation of a strategic plan for integrated development to consolidate an *ayllu*-based intercommunity organization."

Modern society confronts tradition

In the midst of festivities of reconciliation and participatory analyses, the peace council (UCDAP) stated: "We are no longer talking about conflicts and disputes over small pieces of land. Something major is now at stake: the flourishing of our culture and our economy, based on our own calling." This is where a connection with the first type of violence becomes apparent.

At the end of April 2002, violent encounters were reinitiated in the Norte de Potosí region during the "Fiesta de la Cruz" (3 May). It was reported in the press that a paving stone was thrown toward the plaza in the midst of the festivities, triggering a riot that left many people injured. The state authorities still have no explanation for why such acts continue to occur in the poorest region of the country and despite official pacification efforts. What is the fundamental motivation for these acts? The

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FIGURE 1 Men and women engage in ritual combat in a *tinku* in which participants confront each other with whips. In other forms of *tinku*, participants carry out ritual combat using their fists or slingshots. (Photo courtesy of AGRUCO)

answer lies in the concept of the *tinku*, or *encuentro*—an encounter that occurs at a ritual meeting place.

Origins of the *tinku*

These ritual meeting places are found in the high Andes, considered to be the very "heart" of South America, where 4 great watersheds originate, each of which has a major corresponding river. In the north, the Wanuni River makes its way to Lake Uru-Uru and finally to Lake Titicaca. In the south, the Pilcomayu River runs into the Río de la Plata, Argentina. In the east, the Río Grande flows to the Amazon Basin in Brazil. Finally, in the west, the Marques River flows to Coipasa, a salt lake close to the watershed of the Tarapacá River, which flows to the Pacific coast of Chile.

The 4 migration routes used by primitive gatherers probably coincide with the courses of these 4 major rivers, which served as guideposts and "harvest routes." There is reason to believe that these gatherers penetrated as far as the so-called "heart" of South America but at different periods in time. Eventually, a need was felt to celebrate the encounter of people coming from different parts of the Andes. The celebration that developed corresponded with the *Wilakuruza*, the Southern Cross, a vital nocturnal constellation in the southern hemisphere that plays an important role in the genesis of Andean culture. The celebration takes place when the Southern Cross reaches its zenith above the Tunupa Volcano.

The mountain site of a *tinku* must be "marked" by the violence of the encounter, which is complemented by costumes of different style and color. Four different styles can be found in the region, each of which has an "ideological message" and "expresses an image of society that imposes its own logic and is not due to the actual chronological sequence of historical events" (Urbano 1981). The division of the territory into 4 parts, which is of basic importance to every *ayllu*, is manifested in deeply symbolic terms (Gisbert et al 1987). *Wiraqucha*—the *Ordenador* ("the one who brings order to all things") of textile art, a symbol of divinity—organized humanity into different nations by origin and lineage, with costumes made according to the pattern he painted for the *waka*, the material representation of the spiritual ancestors of each ethnic group (Cobo 1956). In the north red ponchos and in the south purple and black ponchos are dominant. In the east the ponchos are green, and in the west the dominant color is purple.

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In colonial times, efforts were made to eradicate "idolatry," features of which were transformed into customs that are not easily understood by the national authorities. For example, local inhabitants experience that the "sacred space" (Van den Berg 1990) which surrounds ancient villages is inhabited by forces that transcend them and on which their existence depends. These forces can be beneficial or destructive at high points along the roads and paths that traverse the Andes.

Similar high mountain experiences have been recorded and integrated in local knowledge systems in other regions of the world: a "different atmosphere" predominates at altitudes above 800 m in Switzerland, for example. Peaks higher than 4000 m act as "antennas" that radiate a high level of energy (Merz 2000) and create a sort of "line of force" flowing toward the lower valleys, which become "energy centers" that are beneficial to human spirituality. It is possible to measure their vibrations in units called "Bovis". This energy has a harmonizing effect on daily life and nature.

In the Andean "sacred spaces," violent rituals took place in the name of *Pachamama*, the origin of all space and time. These spaces may have taken the form of hills, towers, plazas, or strange rocks known as *waka*, or "protecting spirits."

Sacred spaces steeped with violence and reconciliation

Modern-day encounters take place in such "sacred spaces" in mountainous regions in the heart of South America. The location is neither accidental nor invented by humans. Rather, it is "imposed" by the specificities of a particular site that imbues spirituality to the Quechua region of *Qapaq Nan*, the route of *Wiraqucha*. The highlands of Karakara, Layme, and Jukumani are a spiritual region. Here it is possible to obtain forgiveness and achieve reconciliation. Balance is restored by the Aymaran battle rituals of *Pampachaña*, or forgiveness of sinners, and *Pampachasiña*, by which one obtains forgiveness for sins.

Restoration of balance takes place at 2 levels—between humans, and between human society, nature and suprahuman society. The idea is to balance the energies and not to polarize them. *Tinku* is thus a balancing encounter held in places called *taypi* ("center" or "intermediate place"). Ever since the existence of the ancestral *Taypi Qala*, the central stone at *Tiwanaku*, the *taypi* has had a regulating function among 4 territories. It concentrates forces to intensify them, and meliorates conflicting positions in the interest of unification. It is a place where differences coexist (Boysse-Cassagne et al 1987). *Tinku* takes the form of a short and violent ritual fight, characterized by warlike combat between 2 opposing forces. *Tinkus* occur in May, June, and August, a very hostile period when there is a heightened danger that the community will be divided.

This ancestral recreation of honor and homage to *Pachamama* (eg, in La Razón, on 7 May 2000, where 2 deaths, or "human sacrifices," were observed in Macha and Pocoata) may strike the visitor as a savage spectacle. It has been noticed that many contemporary young participants are well groomed and wear ear decorations. However, they never forget that every year on 3 May they must return to the "Señor de la Cruz" for the "encounter." Young males returning to their community without signs of having participated are not welcomed. Years ago they were even isolated.

What are the limits and the consequences of the *tinku* ritual at a time of economic globalization? Although the law does not allow for a single stone to be thrown during fighting, under penalty of a fine of US$ 300 (Platt and Gavira 1996), signs of the *encuentro* are still visible: bloody faces, bruises, and swollen eyes. These are inevitable consequences of this feast of "love, power and violence," which René Zavaleta Mercado has called one of the most profound expressions of Bolivian nationality.

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