

Decolonizing the State? Plurinationalism and Statehood in Bolivia

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Introduction

Political identification as citizens of a certain state does not inevitably produce a personified *other*. While the Western conceptualisation of the institution state is directly linked to a specific nation, efforts by the current Bolivian government to fundamentally reform the Bolivian state show that concepts of 'the nation' and 'the state' are not immanently linked, transforming the traditional role of the state in Bolivia.

Despite representing approximately 62% of Bolivia's population, indigenous people have historically been excluded from national policy-making.¹ This ethnic inequality is reflected in socioeconomic statistics, as 52.5% of Bolivia's non-indigenous population and 73.9% of Bolivia's indigenous population live in poverty.² After independence in 1825, the minority non-indigenous socio-political elite attempted to build a Bolivian nation by coercing the various indigenous communities to assimilate to the 'more advanced' western civilisation. This has led to the widely spread rejection of the institution 'state' in indigenous political activism.³ While Bolivia's history is marked by indigenous resistance movements against colonisation, and later against white domination, most of these movements demanded to be autonomous from the state rather than participate in it.⁴ The social movements which emerged between 2000 and 2005, in particular the protests against

¹ M. Cajías de la Vega, 'Rebelión y Negociación en el Mundo Aymara Boliviano', in Gonzalo Sánchez y Eric Lair (eds.), *Violencias y Estrategias Colectivas en la Región Andina: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú y Venezuela* (Institut Français des Etudes Andines, 2004), pp. 485-514.

² E. Jiménez et al., *Economic Growth, Poverty and Institutions: A Case Study of Bolivia* (Unidad Económica de Políticas Sociales y Económicas, 2005), p. 43.

³ S. Rivera Cusicanqui, *Oprimidos Pero no Vencidos: Luchas del Campesinado Aymara y Quechua de Bolivia 1900-1980* (HISBOL, 1984), p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 14.

water privatisation and the prohibition of coca leaves,⁵ were the firsts to make concrete demands on the institution state.⁶ Rather than being separate from the state, these movements demanded to participate and influence how power is exercised by the state. With the election of Evo Morales, former leader of a trade union of coca farmers, as South America's first indigenous president in 2005, some of these demands were implemented and the 'Republic of Bolivia' was transformed into the 'Plurinational State of Bolivia'.⁷

This paper will conceptualise the institution of the state within the framework of contemporary conceptualisations of Aymara philosophy. Lining out important aspects of Aymara philosophy as explored by contemporary Andeanist scholars, this paper will reveal the distinct philosophical concepts underlying the idea of the state suggested in Aymara philosophy. The importance given to social relations as well the lack of a personated *other* fundamentally contradict the Western nation state as a link between territory, birth rights and identity. The second part will look closer at the specific demands on the state made by social movements between 2000 and 2005 and like these to Aymara philosophy. This will reveal that Aymara political movements portray the state as an instrument to maintain balance among existing political and cultural communities, rather than as a political or cultural community itself. This represents a deconstruction of the assumed naturalness of the state as a source of identity and guarantor of rights in Western thought. The final section will show how these demands have been implemented by Morales' government and how they are represented in the new constitution. The conclusion will make it clear that the Plurinational State is the result of reformation of the state according to Aymara concepts.

Aymara conceptualisations of the state

Recent academic scholarship aims to comprehend indigenous philosophy to take different perspectives on social and political

⁵ The U.S. 'war on drugs' aimed to ban all coca leaf production in South America. In Andean indigenous culture, coca leaves have an important spiritual and symbolic meaning.

⁶ Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, *Rhythms of the Pachakuti: Indigenous Uprising and State Power in Bolivia* (Duke University Press, 2014), p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

issues in non-Western contexts. This opens up the possibility to comprehend the normative base of political activism by contemporary Aymara movements in Bolivia. Josef Estermann claims that the main difference between Aymara and traditional Western philosophy is the perception of the individual within society.⁸ In his conceptualisation of Andean philosophy, individuals only exist in relation to cosmic elements, including other humans and animals as well as plants and non-living objects.⁹ Balance within these elements can only be maintained if all social actors respect the reciprocity which holds things together internally.¹⁰ Pachamama, a combination of the Aymara words time, space and energy, is regarded as the source for sustaining all forms of life as well as the guarantor for balanced social relations among these forms of life.¹¹ The relation to earth, the physical representation of Pachamama, is therefore the foundational element in Aymara philosophy.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig builds on these conceptualisations of Andean philosophy and relates it to concepts of identity and the Andean *self* and *other*. According to Taussig, evil had never been 'reified or fetishised, neither a thing opposed to good nor a thing spiritualised like the devil'.¹² Instead, both good and evil are represented in Andean concept of reciprocity, which, according to Estermann, reflects good and evil simultaneously within transitive social relationships.¹³ With the conquest, the Spanish literally brought the devil to the Andes. The fetishisation of the evil *other* in Andean philosophy first occurred in the place where the abuse of indigenous labour was the most brutal: in the Bolivian tin mines. Removing indigenous peasants from their land, forcing them to conduct labour in the lines and introducing them to the exchange-value system first led to an image of the devil in Aymara belief. However, the evil *other* was never personated, i.e. the white man never became the *other* in Aymara identity. The Aymara conceptualisation of the individual as only existing within a complex framework of social relations between all cosmic elements makes

⁸ Josef Estermann, *Filosofía Andina: Un Estudio Intercultural de la Sabiduría Autóctona Andina* (Editores Plural, 1998), pp. 3-14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

¹² Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 169.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 169-171.

othering between individuals impossible. Instead, the brutal breakdown of social relations among cosmic elements and the replacement of this equilibrium with purely economic relations, aiming to create profit, is what is seen as the devil in Aymara philosophy. The *other* in Aymara belief is therefore not a person, but the phenomenon of commodification of social relations, hence commodity fetishism.

From this philosophy follows a fundamentally different interpretation of the institution 'state', creating new meaning by 'linking new institutions with established traditional practices'.¹⁴ As already observed, neither identity nor specific rights are attached to the institution state in Aymara philosophy, as they are guaranteed by Pachamama. The relation between citizenship, birth rights and national identity, which is dominant in the European model of the state, does not exist in indigenous perceptions of the state, as both rights and identity are linked to Pachamama. However, as the result of a complex process of diffusion between colonialists and indigenous resistance which shall not be further explained here, the concept of national borders has been integrated into the Aymara interpretation of the state.¹⁵ Rather than seeking to re-establish the Inca empire or uniting Aymara people only, the contemporary interpretation of the Bolivian state in Aymara philosophy works within Bolivia's national borders.

Political activism in the Andes is often explained in terms of surviving elements of traditional *ayllu* governance.¹⁶ Anthropologist Tristan Platt claims that traditional Aymara territorial and social organisations known as *ayllus*¹⁷ are the main source of social and political Aymara identity. Furthermore, he observes that there is no *othering* between the different *ayllus* in the Andean region.¹⁸ Sian Lazar regards this 'inclusive indigenous and popular identity' as a

¹⁴ Nico Tassi, *The Native World-System: An Ethnography of Bolivian Aymara Traders in the Global Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 17.

¹⁵ Gutiérrez Aguilar, *Rhythms of the Pachakuti*, p. 23.

¹⁶ See Billie Jean Isbell, *To Defend Ourselves: Ecology & Ritual in an Andean Village* (Waveland Press, 2005); Xavier Albó, *La Paradoja Aymara: Solidaridad y Faccionalismo* (Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado, 1977); and Gary Urton, *At the Crossroads of the Earth and the Sky* (University of Texas Press, 2013).

¹⁷ *Ayllu* is the Aymara term for rural Andean communities.

¹⁸ Tristan Platt, *Estado Boliviano y Ayllu Andino: Tierra y Tributo en el Norte de Potosí* (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1982), p. 14.

'source of considerable political strength'.¹⁹ Hence, identity as *ayllu* members is not dependent on definitions of the *self* against other *ayllus*. This reflects Josef Estermann's conceptualisation of the Andean *self* as reciprocal social relations rather than contrasted with an *other*. The state represents an institution which establishes a dynamic relationship and mediates between the different *ayllus* or other communities.²⁰ Furthermore, the state guarantees that balance with Pachamama is not only maintained within the *ayllu*, but also within Bolivia's national borders. The state therefore takes a strongly redistributive role. From the Aymara perspective, the state represents an administrative body which holds together several *ayllus* or other local communities, and guarantees balance between them. The physical borders which define Bolivian territory today, however, have no deeper meaning in Aymara philosophy. Instead, the articulation of political demands within these borders is regarded as the way which causes the least friction and conflict with the established system and is therefore no more than a utility concept.²¹

Defending Pachamama: Aymara social movements and their demands on the state

The emergence of various Aymara social movements in Bolivia was triggered by several major environmental changes of which were the direct result of neoliberal policies implemented in 2001. As part of the War on Drugs, the consumption of coca leaves and products was banned in Bolivia and coca farms were eradicated. As a condition to receive further loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Bolivian government furthermore agreed to privatise the water supply, most importantly in Cochabamba and El Alto. Both of these events have triggered large social movements among indigenous peoples, leading to countless violent clashes between state authorities and protesters and road blocks between 2000 and 2005. Both protest movements eventually united, forming the *Alianza Antisistémica*, which would later represent the main voice for the

¹⁹ Sian Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City: Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia* (Duke University Press, 2008), p. 259.

²⁰ Sinclair Thomson, *We Alone will Rule: Native Andean Politics in the Age of Insurgency* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 12.

²¹ Gutierrez Aguilar, *Rhythms of the Pachakuti*, p. 123.

protesters.²² The overwhelming majority of protesters, in Cochabamba, Chapare and El Alto, based their political claims on indigenous philosophy.

Neoliberalism was initially promoted to the Bolivian people as a political ideology favouring indigenous rights. According to Carlos Quiroga, neoliberal Bolivian policy-makers in the 1980s and 1990s claimed that the diminished role of the state would make it possible for indigenous communities to practice their traditions, especially regarding education and healing, without major interference from the state.²³ Cuts in social spending would finally grant indigenous communities the autonomy they have been demanding.²⁴ This emphasis of the normative and cultural aspects of neoliberalism as well as the engagement with indigenous demands reveals the awareness of the conflict between indigenous communities and the state among government officials.

Specific criticisms of the Bolivian state emerged among protest leaders during the demonstrations which started in 2000. The *Alianza Antisistémica* expressed their discontent with the state on three levels: The political attempt to build a Bolivian nation, the cultural assimilation necessary for this attempt and the economic attempt to subordinate local production systems to a network of transnational corporations.²⁵ While these structures existed before neoliberalism, neoliberal policies lifted them up to an extreme level and deepened inequalities between Bolivia's indigenous and non-indigenous population. Most importantly, the commodification of land and natural resources disregarded the spiritual importance of indigenous territory symbolised by Pachamama, destroying cultural and economic aspects of indigenous community life. Politically, the assumed universal rationality of neoliberalism within the government labelled alternative visions on development as damaging to the economy. Building a nation based on ideological rather than ethnic homogeneity led to the same exclusion of the indigenous from the political sphere as before. Despite these criticisms, the social movements made it clear that they were

²² C. Rojas & L. Pablo, *Bolivia: Movimientos Sociales, Nacionalización y Asamblea Constituyente* (Observatorio Social de América Latina, 2006), p. 59.

²³ C.V. Quiroga, 'Rebelión Popular y los Derechos de Propiedad de los Hidrocarburos', in *Revista Observatorio Social de América Latina*, Vol. 12 (2003), p. 27.

²⁴ Nancy Grey Postero, *Now We Are Citizens: Indigenous Politics in Postmulticultural Bolivia* (Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 3.

²⁵ Thomson, *We Alone will Rule*, p. 17.

'fighting against the government',²⁶ and not against the state, and demanded grassroots institutional reformation of the state.²⁷

Countering initial assumptions of neoliberal policy-makers, Bolivia's indigenous peoples demanded a stronger role of the state. Rather than being separate from the state, the movements demanded the 'doors to be opened for their inclusion in state affairs, collective economic rights, social benefits, and support for public well-being that can benefit rural areas.'²⁸ The role of the state should be to guarantee 'political-economic self-management'²⁹ as it is practiced in the traditional *ayllu*. Major protest leaders, Felipe Quispe, Alvaro García Linera and Evo Morales, repeatedly refer to the *ayllu* when talking about the role of the state reveals the dominance of Aymara philosophy as underpinning the social movements.³⁰ Political activist and scholar Raquel Gutierrez claims that the state is conceptualized as an instrument for the Aymara concept of *thaki* among protesters. *Thaki* refers to an authority creating a path of meaning and balance not only within, but also among the different *ayllus*.³¹ Practically, this overarching authority has the task to oversee infrastructure or water utilisation as well as cultural practices and rituals of reciprocity.³² By securing a dynamic interaction between communities, *thaki* ensures the maintenance of balance between *ayllus*. Consequently, social movement leaders demanded a strong redistributive role of the state, guaranteeing balance and equality with regards to distribution of resources, water, infrastructure and education, among the different communities which coexist within Bolivian territory.

Indigenous uprisings clearly articulated why and which neoliberal policies they rejected. The leader of the protests against water privatisation in Cochabamba in 2000, Felipe Quispe, stated that 'water is the blood of Pachamama, and the blood of the mother cannot be sold'.³³ One of the main slogans of the protests said, 'how can water be sold, if water is life?'³⁴ Then leader of the *cocalero* trade union movement Evo Morales became famous for the slogan 'The

²⁶ Álvaro Zapata, *Ciudadanía, Clase y Etnicidad—Un Estudio Sociológico Sobre la Acción Colectiva en Bolivia a Comienzos del Siglo XXI* (Yachaywasi, 2006), p. 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁸ Gutiérrez Aguilar, *Rhythms of the Pachakuti*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³³ A. Zapata, *Ciudadanía, Clase y Etnicidad*, p. 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth'.³⁵ Political agency in Aymara belief results from an intrinsic responsibility to maintain balance with Pachamama. Rather than individual material discontent, i.e. having to pay for water, most protesters acted out of obligation to the earth itself.³⁶ In the traditional *ayllu*, membership is dependent on everyone's participation in political and administrative matters in order to maintain internal balance. Traditionally, Aymara people are therefore highly politicised within their communities. As Raquel Gutierrez Aguilar observes, the discourse during the Aymara roadblocks in 2001 clearly reveals their actions as 'not based on the freedom to elect and to be elected',³⁷ but the result of an inherent collective obligation to contribute to maintaining the balance of community life and social coexistence.³⁸

Within the discourse of the social movements, links between identity, rights and the state are clearly being rejected. There is no discourse claiming territory or natural resources because of an Aymara birth rights or because the Aymara have always occupied this territory, even before the Spanish arrived. Instead, they specifically clarify that they do not make demands based on Aymara birth rights, but as defenders of Pachamama.³⁹ Moreover, they state that the representation of Aymara identity on the state level 'is not a priority',⁴⁰ because attempting to create a Bolivian identity by picking a preferred nation inevitably leads to more divisions.⁴¹ Another key slogan of the protests, 'The Aymara are Bolivians, too',⁴² reveals that being Bolivian is not related to any identity. While being Aymara refers to a cultural identity with specific traditions, rituals and language attached to it, being Bolivian refers to an administrative obligation to make peaceful coexistence between the different cultural entities possible. In Aymara belief, being Aymara and Bolivian is therefore just as compatible as being Bolivian and Quechua, Afro-Bolivian, Mestizo etc.. From the Aymara perspective,

³⁵ Evo Morales Ayma, *La Tierra no nos Pertenece, Nosotros Pertenece a la Tierra* (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2011), p. 2.

³⁶ Gutierrez Aguilar., *Rhythms of the Pachakuti*, p. 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴² Zapata, *Ciudadanía, Clase y Etnicidad*, p. 123.

legitimate Bolivian state therefore has to be one without any links to a specific identity.

Taking the nation out of the state: Plurinationalism in Bolivia

One of Morales' most important promises during the 2005 election campaign was the rewriting of Bolivia's National Constitution according to the demands of the social movements in order to end the 'internal colonialist structure'⁴³ underlying the previous constitution. The new *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS) government created a Constituent Assembly, including representatives from most social movements and geographical departments. After 14 months of drafting, the new constitution was put to a national referendum and came into power in January 2009.⁴⁴

The new constitution includes various articles which have been specifically demanded by indigenous political organizations. Most remarkable are two aspects: the guarantee of collective ownership and communal self-governance by the state as well as the clear rejection of Bolivia as a 'nation'. Article Two of the 2009 constitution guarantees the right for self-determination and self-governance as well as the recognition of their own institutions by the state to the indigenous people of Bolivia.⁴⁵ Article Three emphasises that Bolivian citizenship is not linked to any ethnic group, but is guaranteed to people from all indigenous and inter-cultural backgrounds.⁴⁶ Article 30 furthermore guarantees the recognition of collective ownership of land.⁴⁷

The rejection of Bolivia as a nation and the guarantee for self-governance are not only a direct implementation of the demands made by the social movements, but also a reflection of Aymara philosophy and their conceptualisation of the institution state. In a Western understanding of the state, the existence of self-governing communities within a state fundamentally alters its *raison d'être* since the subordination of all citizens to the same political and legal institutions is regarded as the most basic function of a state. In

⁴³ Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia (2009), Preamble.

⁴⁴ Patricia Chávez & Dunia Mokrani, *Los Movimientos Sociales en la Asamblea Constituyente* (OSAL, 2007), p. 2.

⁴⁵ Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia (2009), Article 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Article 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Article 30.

Aymara philosophy, however, the state is regarded as mediator between existing communities with unique political and cultural institutions rather than as a community itself. Rather than assimilating these communities to one mutually agreed set of political and legal institutions, the 2009 constitution reveals that it is the main purpose of the state to protect these institutions as well as facilitate dynamic interaction between them.

While it has united large parts of Bolivia's indigenous groups, the new political system alienated many inhabitants of the southern region of Santa Cruz, where Bolivia's business sector is located. Despite the strongly inclusive government discourse, the support for Morales and most of his policies are clearly divided among ethnic lines, separating indigenous and non-indigenous. The dissatisfaction with the image of the state portrayed in the new constitution in the Santa Cruz region goes so far that demands for a two-state solution, one indigenous and one non-indigenous state, have become loud among the anti-government protests.⁴⁸

This conflict reveals that the link between identity and the state goes beyond those aspects of identity which the constitution separates from the state, namely language, religion, ethnicity and form of local governance. Social organisation in form of local communities seems to be perceived as universal among members of the Constituent Assembly and by the constitution. The constitution emphasises the recognition and representation of local communities and their individual culture and traditions, language, form of governance etc. on the state level. However, it does not appeal to groups that do not regard themselves as members of these communities. By detaching identity from the state and relocating it to the communal level, the new constitution has alienated those who do not identify with any local community. The enhanced representation of communities has led to the limitation of individuals outside of these communities to be represented. The new constitution is therefore only inclusive if its citizens are organised in *ayllu*-like communities.

⁴⁸ Nicole Fabricant & Nancy Postero, 'Contested Bodies, Contested States: Performance, Emotions, and New Forms of Regional Governance in Santa Cruz, Bolivia', in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2013), p. 4.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the transformation of the Bolivian state which has begun with the social movements and is carried by the current government represents a fundamental challenge to the link between the state, identity and birth rights dominant in Western conceptualisations of the state. This paper has shown how the institution state is imagined in Aymara philosophy. Discourse about the state during the social movements which occurred in the early 2000s reveals the demands on the state made by Bolivia's indigenous population. Most remarkable is hereby the clear rejection of the concept of a nation state and the demand to separate statehood and identity. This is not only a protest against centuries of forced assimilation of the indigenous towards western 'civilized' culture, but also the reflection of Aymara norms and values in the political sphere. Political rights are not guaranteed by birth, but exercised out of responsibility to maintain equilibrium with Pachamama. In many aspects, the new constitution that came into power in 2009 considers claims made by indigenous social movements. Particularly, the declaration of Bolivia as a plurinational state, highlighting the separation of statehood and identity, is a direct outcome of claims based on Aymara philosophy. The concept of a plurinational state is contrasted with the traditional nation-state. Rather than a source of an internally homogenous national identity based on a personified *other*, plurinational statehood facilitates productive interactions among different ethnicities and political organizations which coexist within the same state.

While concrete economic and political changes by the MAS government might be superficial and are vulnerable to reversion if another party assumes power, the party has achieved a long-lasting normative change in Bolivian society. For the first time in Bolivian history, the large masses regard the state as a legitimate arena for participatory policy-making. For the first time, the large majority of Bolivia's indigenous population regards itself as citizens of the Bolivian state with the right and ability to become political actors within that state. The success of the MAS government is not the increase in economic growth and GDP, but the link between indigenous norms and bureaucratic state politics which the MAS has created. The creation of this link represents a fundamental transformation of Bolivian society independent from changing economic and political conditions. The return to a state which

excludes indigenous participation or indigenous movements demanding complete autonomy from the state consequently seems unlikely, no matter which political party will govern Bolivia in the future.
