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Fratricide Identities:

The Land Conflict between Indigenous Leco and Peasant Unions in Apolo, Bolivia

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Abstract

This article explores processes of identity-building and claims-making by rural social groups in the context of recent multicultural and plurinational reforms in Bolivia, focusing on an analysis of the narrative apparatus that underpins a paradigmatic land conflict between an indigenous organization and a peasant union in the Bolivian Amazon. The institutional shift that characterized the country after Evo Morales election has been reflected and absorbed at the local level. Here, however, the new claims for recognition cannot be understood only through the - often abused - lenses of ‘resistance struggle’, ‘cultural oppression’ and ‘political discrimination of minorities’. In fact, these claims are the result of a complex interaction between institutional changes, and social actors’ ability to respond to them, proposing powerful narratives that provide society and individuals with new shared meanings and mechanisms of self-identification.

Keywords: Land conflict; **narrative**; Bolivia; indigenous; peasant; identity.

Introduction

The debate on ethno-cultural (indigenous) movements in Latin America is currently going through a phase of inflexion. The old anthropological school *à la* Levi-Strauss has been widely criticized and accused of essentializing and exoticizing the identities of certain social groups, especially those peoples still relatively isolated from Western culture and nation-state

frameworks (Amselle 2010). Likewise, some scholars have emphasized the relational and fluid dimension of identity-building processes and the dynamic redefinition of their external 'limits' and 'boundaries' (Barth 1998). Under the influence of resource mobilization theories of collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Tilly 1978), the so-called 'instrumentalist' current started to focus on identity, and especially ethnicity, as a resource to which individuals and groups draw on to satisfy tactical needs. In this view, identities gain strength in borderline social zones, where group interests experience higher external threats and where social cohesion is weaker (Baud *et al.* 1996).

It is still difficult to identify a clear 'paradigmatic shift' in the epistemological approach to the 'indigenous issue' and its identity dimension. Yet, a growing need for new categories and analytical perspectives is clearly perceivable in the ongoing debate. On the one side, the romantic narrative that depicts native people as noble/organic minorities reacting to outside oppressions is perceived as normatively biased, functional for an activist and political agenda rather than for the accurate understanding of social phenomena. On the other side, understanding identity as a relational dynamic process makes the distinction 'authentic' vs. 'strategic' simply not relevant. Both these dimensions are part of a process in which no identity is more or less legitimate than another on these very bases (Speed 2002: 222). Therefore, there is a need to go beyond both essentialist and strategic analytical frameworks, and to provide a better account of the process that leads to the re-shaping of collective ethno-cultural identities. The effort should be thus oriented towards understanding, for example, why certain groups self-identify as indigenous while others do not; how this relational process of identity reconfiguration comes about; what are its potential consequences; and its links with the broader socio-historical context.

In the Andean region over the last two decades, a constant increase in the number of land and resource conflicts has been registered (Bebbington 2012, Haarstad 2012). In particular, intra-societal tensions between indigenous peoples and peasant unions have been

reshaping rural conflictive landscapes (Fontana 2014a). From their characteristics, and especially their links with both resource control and collective identity reconfigurations, these conflicts can provide new evidence for the processes of identity-building and claim-making of rural social organizations, contributing thus to the broader debate on ‘indigeneity’ and identity politics.

This paper presents an in-depth analysis of one of these conflicts, whose peculiarity is the fact of being rooted in a process of institutional ethnogenesis. In the region of Apolo in Northwest Bolivia, the creation of the organization of the Leco people (*Central Indígena del Pueblo Leco*, CIPLA) and its claim for the control of ancestral territory triggered a conflict with the local peasant union (*Federación de Campesinos de la Provincia Franz Tamayo*, FSUTC-FT). Since the mid-1990s, tensions have been growing among local communities, reaching a peak of violence in 2007 and still being partially unsolved at the time of writing. This article focuses in particular on the main narratives used by the two parties to organize collective memories on the conflict and to trace the boundaries between the two groups, mainly alongside identity lines.

The paper is structured as follows. After a brief overview on the theoretical framework and epistemological and theoretical approach, a description and background of the case study is provided, followed by a reconstruction and systematization of the two parties’ historical narratives on the conflict. This will show that actors not only have often divergent collective memories of the main phases of the conflict (emphasizing different events and using their own vocabulary to characterize them), but they also have a narrative apparatus that is functional to the perpetuation of tensions. The fourth section is dedicated to the analysis of narratives about ‘self’ and ‘otherness’, as key discursive spaces in which to identify the relevant ‘norms of difference’. Linguistic representations contribute to generating a collective feature of the adversary, at the same time dialectically influencing the representation of the ‘self’. This ‘self’ is mainly built in opposition to what the enemy is or is assumed to be. Yet,

narratives are not only semantic endeavors: “how identities are claimed or made” and “how ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are created through the identification process” has a political relevance and can influence the way in which “new place-projects are pursued in the name of these identities” (Noel Castree 2004: 152).

Collective Narratives and Identity Construction

The focus of this paper is on discursive and narrative representation as mechanisms through which the boundaries for constituting collective meanings and values are defined. Over the last 20 years, scholars from various social sciences’ subfields became interested in narrative patterns as a way of understanding meaning-making processes and the collective formulation and maintenance of worldviews (Elliott 2005). One of the stronger underlying assumptions of this approach is that there is neither a single, absolute truth in human reality, nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text, in his wider meaning (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998). As Shenhav (2006: 246) writes: “The growing importance of the concept [of narrative], especially in the social science, may be rooted in its ability to serve as a tool for describing events and developments without presuming to voice a historical truth”, while this justification would not lead necessarily to relativist assumptions.

Gerald Prince defined narrative in a minimal way as “the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other” (Prince 1982: 4). Sociologists and political constructivists added the key idea of meaning and sense-making: they recognized that there is a significant sense in which our relationship with each other are lived out in narrative form (Gergen quoted in Wetherell et. al., 2001). According to Patterson and Monroe (1998: 315-16) narratives are:

(...) ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own words and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality. (...) Insofar as narratives affect our perceptions and political reality, which in turn affect our actions in response to or in anticipation of political events, narrative plays a key role in the construction of political behavior. In this sense, we create

and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around us. We do this as individuals and we do it as collective units, as nations or groups.

This definition emphasizes some key elements of narratives that are the object of this article:

(a) their collective dimension; (b) their capacity to influence the way in which we interpret reality as well as our actions; (c) their political significance.

Narratives are constructed by single or plural actors and they can be accepted by a certain collectivity (working in this sense similarly to Goffman's frames, 1981). I will call these narratives that have acquired a certain degree of acceptance by individuals and social groups 'collective narratives'. Narratives are dynamic and changeable (Rudrum 2005), but, as collective accepted social constructions, they can become persistent socio-cultural phenomena "situated largely externally of the individual" (Van Gorp 2007: 63). These collective narratives are powerful means to structure the way people think about themselves, affirm sense of the world and the society, reflect socio-political structures and expectations, and orient their actions.

Narratives both create and describe social reality (Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Noll, 2008). In this sense, the truthfulness of the facts told by social actors is not a central concern. What becomes important is the meta-theoretical function of the narrative as a way in which individuals or collectivities organize events to provide them with meaning. Through their power of creating meaning and shared stories and features, narratives have a crucial role in the description and construction of social conflict. Narratives constitute crucial means of generating, sustaining, mediating, and representing conflict at all levels of a social organization. They foreground not only the object of representation (conflict), but the process of representation through which the very conflict is shaped, what Briggs (1996: 19) calls the "representational power of narratives as part of meta-discursive practices". Narratives seem to be particularly relevant in times of rising violence. When uncertainty and social stress grow, people look for reassurance through shared collective meanings to cope with difficult present

conditions and an unsafe environment (Ross 2002). The normative content of these narratives is typically a (or a set of) *norm(s) of difference*, i.e. a norm that requires a sense of group separation or an outsider, adversary group, to give them any value. They “reinforce the individual identification with the group and enhance the separation of the group from the larger society or from another group within the society” (Hardin, 1997: 225). Identity-based narratives constitute one of the most powerful norms of difference. This is why particular attention is devoted to them in the empirical analysis of this paper.

Note on the Case Study and Methodology

This article relies on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2011 using qualitative methods. I chose to adopt a participative methodology to reconstruct collective narratives of social actors. To do that, I facilitated four participatory workshops where those narratives could be produced and recorded, using participatory technics such as the timeline (through which people were invited to draw and tell the different phases and the development of the conflict), the actor map (to describe the relationships between different stakeholders); and brainstorming around the key concepts of ‘identity’, ‘land’ and ‘territory’. For each of the two organizations involved in the conflict, workshops were organized both with the leaders and with the grassroots separately, one in the local capital Apolo and one in the rural community of Puchahui. These choices were guided by the effort to gather heterogeneous and nuanced perspectives on the conflict, which account for different elements at stake, namely geography (rural vs urban), position of power (leaders vs grassroots) and gender. In the region of Apolo, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with social organizations’ leaders and grassroots (both at regional and community level), politicians (e.g. mayor and local councilors), and civil servants (e.g. local Agrarian Tribunal judge, local officers of the National Institute of the Agrarian Reform, INRA). When possible, participant observation was conducted at local meetings of the two organizations. Although, given the qualitative nature of this research,

these methods are not statistically representative of the entire population, measures were taken to ensure that the most important voices and perspective were included, controlling as well for more marginalized groups (from a geographical, political or gender perspective). Complementary research was conducted at the national level (mainly in La Paz) at the Conflict Resolution Unit of the INRA and with both peasant and indigenous national umbrella organizations. To provide an historical background of the conflict, a review of national and local press (from 1997) and other documentary materials produced by social organizations and public institutions was conducted.

Despite the remoteness and micro-political context, a number of reasons can be identified that make of the land conflict between the indigenous organization and the peasant union in Apolo a relevant case worth of particular attention: (1) it constitutes a paradigmatic example of broader dynamics of ethnicization, conflict and institutional change, allowing the study of the effects of these dynamics on a relatively small-scale and ‘controlled’ environment; (2) this and similar conflicts hold potentialities to proliferate and spread, becoming a problematic issue within the current phase of Bolivian political transition and in the broader regional context; (3) because of its link with institutional and legal changes, the features of this conflict contribute to shedding light on problems related to institutional and normative management of ethno-cultural diversity in post-colonial states.

Land Conflict in Apolo: A Brief Contextualization

Apolo is a municipality in the province Franz Tamayo, in the north of La Paz department of Bolivia, not far from the Peruvian border. A large area of the municipal territory is occupied by the Madidi National Park, one of the biggest and with the richest biodiversity of the country. Apolo territory has an area of 15,900 square km and approximately 19,433 inhabitants, of whom about the 84% live outside the urban area. There are approximately 86 communities, 17 affiliated to the indigenous organization and 69 to the peasant union

(Sotomayor, 2009). According to data from the Institute of National Statistics (INE) based on the 2001 census, 93,13% of the population of Apolo are poor. Seventy-nine per cent of Apoleños speak Quechua; 18% Spanish; 1% Aymara; and 0.27% speak other native languages. Seventy-two percent of the population identify themselves as Quechua; 10% as native or other indigenous peoples; 15% do not identify with any indigenous peoples; and 3% identify themselves as Aymara (INE and UNDP, 2006). These data show the relative homogeneity in terms of social and linguistic indicators of the population in the Apolo area, with the majority being poor or indigent and speaking Quechua as first language.

The region of Apolo has been experiencing a protracted conflict between peasant unions and indigenous organizations for the control of the land. The conflict in Apolo originated in the 1990s, as a consequence of a combination of events. In October 1996, a new agrarian law (the Law of the National Institute of the Agrarian Reform, INRA) was approved, as part of a package of neoliberal reforms. Among the main innovations, the law introduced the *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (TCO), forms of collective titling of large areas for social organizations formally recognized as indigenous. This type of property is inalienable, indivisible, collective, non-mortgageable and tax free, which implies limitations to private property rights and thus to accumulation (Regalsky 2010). This new form of collective tenure accelerated titling processes for indigenous land, also because of the relative ease of mapping the perimeter of large land areas and then issuing a single property title. This was true at least in contexts where no conflicts with third parties and neighbouring landowners were encountered.

The agrarian reform was highly influenced by new international trends (Assies 2007). In 1989, the most important binding rule on the rights of indigenous peoples came into force - the 169 Convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries - which entitled these groups to special territorial, cultural and self-determination rights. The second part of the ILO Convention

specifically contains provisions on the land rights of indigenous peoples, stating that ‘The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised’ (Ulfstein 2004: 16). Bolivia ratified the Convention in 1991.

At the local level, the peasant union (FSUTC-FT) – for decades time the only corporative organization in the region – was experiencing conflict among its leaders for control of political power. In 1997, under the influence of the new neoliberal trends at the national and international level, a breakaway group decided to found a new indigenous movement, the CIPLA. It rapidly started to make contacts with local communities and to disseminate a discourse based on ethno-identitarian claims and on the revival of culture, traditions, routines and customs of the Leco people. The Leco were one of the four dominant groups in the Apolo region in the 16th and 17th centuries (together with the Aguachiles, Tacanas and Quechuas). Following Inca and Spanish colonization, the Lecos mixed with populations of different cultural and ethnic origins (Sotomayor 2009). A few traces of their language and traditions still survive among contemporary inhabitants of Apolo. It is important to note, however, that, based on empirical observation in the region, nowadays no evident cultural, physiognomic or class markers seem to distinguish major subgroups among the local population (consistent with the INE data).

Soon after its creation, the CIPLA was included in the network of the Eastern indigenous movements, joining the *Central de Pueblos Indígenas de La Paz* (CPILAP) at the departmental level, and the *Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia* (CIDOB) at the national level. According to its statute, CIPLA follows an ‘identity-based development model’ articulated around four points: (1) organizational consolidation; (2) territorial consolidation through the recuperation of traditional lands; (3) territorial planning based on sustainable management of natural resources; (4) promotion of sustainable productive alternatives and the exercise of indigenous autonomy as a form of self-government and self-

determination (CPILAP 2009). The issue of land and territory is indeed one of the key features of CIPLA's development model. Its Strategic Plan states that:

We consider it vital to guarantee the consolidation of the land-territory in favor of the indigenous peoples, in quantity and quality enough to ensure their harmonic and sustainable development, according to their values and practices, identities, visions and conceptions of space, and priorities (CPILAP 2009).¹

Moving towards the achievement of these goals, in 1999 CIPLA submitted to the National Institute of the Agrarian Reform a demand for the titling of the TCO-Leco (654.000 hectares of land in total). At the same time, the indigenous organization received the official recognition of the Vice-Ministry of Native Peoples and Indigenous Issues (VAIPO), which issued the Certification of Ethnic Identity and Actual Settlement. The VAIPO declared that 'the claimant people maintain their own identity and cultural practice as indigenous native people', and that this corresponds to the 'Leco Indigenous People/Quechua Native People'. This is a highly ambiguous denomination that eventually brought about problems in the relationship between indigenous and peasant organizations.²

In 2002, the demand of the TCO-Leco was included within the funding plan of the Danish cooperation agency (DANIDA), and in 2003 the cadastral study begun (Sotomayor 2009b, 123). The area was divided into three zones. The study of Zone 1 (almost completely included in the Madidi National Park) was relatively quick (4 months), and in November 2006, the INRA issued the first title to the TCO-Leco (Map 1). This fact triggered the most violent phase of the conflict. In May-June 2007, the conflict reached a critical phase: the

¹ Translations from original documents and interviews are by the author.

² One of the ex-officers of the Vice-Ministry in charge of the process of certification explains: 'We recommended calling the TCO "Leco-Quechua", to acknowledge the presence of Quechuas in the area. However, the INRA did not accept our recommendation and started the cadastral study as TCO Leco' (interview, La Paz, 5 August 2010).

peasants started to mobilize, firstly with marches, blockades, hunger strikes, occupying public buildings and, as an extreme measure, with the invasion of the protected area of the Madidi Park. The protestors threatened to start cutting down the trees if the government did not listen to their claims. These claims were, in brief: the construction of a road between Apolo and Ixiamas (cutting across the Park); the beginning of hydrocarbon exploration;³ and the cancellation of Zone 1's title (La Razón 2007).

On 30 May, a governmental negotiation commission led by the Minister of Rural Development arrived in Apolo. The Minister offered the peasants land in the nearby province of Iturralde, and explained that it was not possible to cancel the Leco title, inviting the union to lodge an appeal to the National Agrarian Tribunal (TAN). Unsatisfied with this offer, the following day the peasants broke the dialogue with the government, refusing its proposal. They threatened to annex their territory to Peru, to take over the Madidi Park and to organize a march towards the administrative capital La Paz (La Razón, 01.06.2007). Meanwhile, Morales denounced the interference of *narcos* organizations and timber merchants in the conflict, who were alleged to be funding the movement. Likewise, he announced the intention to strengthen state presence in the area (La Prensa, ANF, 01.06.2007) with the construction of a 'great military headquarter' in the Madidi Park (El Diario, 05.06.2007).

Two other negotiation attempts were carried out, the first one led by a parliamentary commission, and the second one by the INRA. The impossibility of cancelling the title was reiterated. In April 2008 the peasants presented a formal claim to the TAN. Among the main points of the nullity action, the Federation pointed out the ambiguity of the definition of 'indigenous people':

The Leco Native Indigenous Communities passed by, they were gradually disappearing, and those who survived were integrated into other majority

³ On 13 May 2007, the government issued a decree that authorized the exploration for, and exploitation of, energy resources in Apolo (El Diario 2007).

groups, such as, for example, the Quechua nation (...). The Leco people of Apolo do not accomplish the fundamental requirements that define an Indigenous People with respect to the language or dialect and, as a consequence, their cultural identity is Quechua, not Leco (FSUTC-FT, 2008).

Other important arguments referred to the irregularities during the cadastral study, including the lack of consideration and information provided to the peasant communities settled on the titled land.

In 2008, tensions reduced and the conflict passed through a phase of apparent calm in which there were great expectations for the TAN's decision. Meanwhile, the INRA started to give priority to some of the peasant communities, since it was afraid that the taking up of contested lands would provoke new levels of violence and mobilization (interview with INRA officers, June 2010). These fears were increased after the rejection of the peasant claim by the TAN, in January 2010. The main arguments of the decision were that the Peasants Federation had no legitimacy to argue for the nullity of the indigenous land claims, since the protected area of the Madidi Park was compatible only with the forms of occupation proposed by the TCO. Furthermore, relying upon the documentation collected during the cadastral study, the existence of a pre-Inca and pre-Republican Leco people was confirmed. It was also clarified that 'the Leco people are entitled exercise for the use and traditional exploitation of this territorial area by its 17 communities' and that 'their language is Leco, but they also speak Quechua and Spanish'. The Peasants' Federation challenge to the TCO-Leco claim was thus denied and the collective indigenous title validated (TAN 2010).

Historical Narratives and the Construction of Collective Memory

Peasant Collective Memory

According to the leaders of the peasant union, the conflict is rooted in a situation of marginalization and discrimination that the peasants in Apolo have suffered for decades. In 1996, Carlos Olagibel became the head of the Federation and, according to the peasants, he was the first to fight to improve their situation, calling it to the attention of the national Ombudsman and other institutions. The CIPLA did not yet exist, and the FSUTC-FT was the main corporatist organization in the region. The actions of the Federation brought to the destitution of the former mayor of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) with the accusation of funds embezzlement. In the same year, another member of the Federation, Ramiro Fernández, failed to be elected at the departmental assembly. From that moment, he started to look for allies within the FSUTC-FT leadership in order to form a new indigenous organization.

In the following few months, eight communities left the peasant Federation to join the CIPLA. The peasant leaders describe the phase of expansion of the indigenous movement as an epidemic: ‘After the creation of the new organization, *this spread as a disease*. Before, there was unity within the Federation. Together we knew how to march for our land and territory, how to achieve our path’.

The main ‘error’ that triggered the conflict was the CIPLA’s formal claim for the titling of the TCO-Leco. For years, peasants had denounced the irregularities in the process that led to the titling of Zone 1. This is how the leaders describe that moment: ‘In November 2006, they [the indigenous leaders] went to La Paz and dressed the fellow Álvaro García Linera [the Bolivian Vice-President] as a Leco. They made a performance to get the TCO title and the identity that they have now’.

The peasants tell to a key episode within their memories of the conflict. In 2006, one of the members of the Federation was murdered, and the peasants consider the Lecos responsible for his death. The leader died on the way back from Torewa, a community where he went to try to resolve a conflict between Federation and CIPLA members, provoked,

according to the former, by the Lecos' attempts to evacuate the peasant population. His body was found on the road the following day, and the circumstances of, and responsibility for, the murder were never clarified.

The worst year in terms of violence was 2007. The Federation's leaders remember, in particular, the occupation of the Madidi Park, but they put emphasis on some elements that did not emerge from the press reports. They explain they were not trying to expand the agrarian frontier, as some journalists suggested, but rather, that they were engaged in a demonstration in order to increase pressure on the government: 'Since they did not listen to us, we took the Madidi to make our voice heard'. It was an extreme measure motivated by the peasants' frustrations and perceptions of injustice in relation to their unattended claims. The same reasons explain the kidnapping of a group of soldiers a few days later: 'We have been militarized: the government sent the police and the army. So we kidnapped the soldiers'.

In general, the peasants consider the various negotiation missions to resolve the crisis (led by the Minister, by the parliamentary commission and by the INRA) as an obstacle for the resolution of the conflict. Eventually, the visit of the INRA's National Director generated some hope, since the 'serious errors' that occurred during the TCO's titling were recognized, and there was a commitment to respect the traditional territories of the peasant communities as well. However their feeling are still very defensive and radical:

(...) if some day it would have an instruction to take the peasants out of here...no!

They are going to take dead bodies out of here. It is for that reason that the peasant communities are still standing up, and they do not recognize the TCO as legal, and they are going to defend their land.

Indigenous Collective Memory

For the members of CIPLA, the beginning of the conflict is situated in the mid-1990s. In 1995, they started to make contacts with other indigenous movements at the national level. One of the leaders remembers: 'It was my first trip to La Paz. (...) We arrived there, they [other indigenous organizations and NGOs advisors] told us about cultures, identities and all those things'. From these conversations, questions and doubts arose about the origin of Apolo. The doubts were followed by concrete inquiries into traces of an indigenous past. In particular, an effort was made to reconstruct the story of Santos Pariamo a Leco leader who organized a corps of arrow fighters to resist Spanish colonization at the end of the 18th century. His statue occupied the center of the Apolo's main square until 2007, when it was destroyed during the disorders. Santos Pariamo is considered a hero by CIPLA, and a crucial reference for the process of identity and cultural recovery.

In 1997, the Bolivian state officially recognized the Leco as one of the 36 native indigenous peoples of Bolivia. From that date, the claims of the new organization concentrated on the land issue. CIPLA leaders comment that, at the time, the law 'favored quite a lot' the demands for TCOs and that an organization at the national level already existed, which could support their struggle: 'There was a strong pressure in the country, and especially in the governors' conscience, to pay attention to those claims. So that this fact played quite a lot in our favor to make steps forward.'

The titling of Zone 1 triggered a conflict that has dragged on for almost a decade. According to CIPLA members, peasants 'did not like' the indigenous land being granted title and had the impression that the whole process was conducted out of their sight. However, those are false accusations, since 'the titling process was not carried out all at once'. According to the Leco, the georeferentiation and the cadastral study were conducted in a transparent way, and not secretly. It was decided to give priority to Zone 1, because it was thought that in this area there were no peasant settlements. However, during the field assessment, six private properties and a peasant community were found. According to CIPLA,

‘after many conversations with them, the community made the decision to support our demand, and this was possible also thanks to the INRA Law’, while five out of six private properties were declared abandoned.

In 2007, a massive mobilization of the two parties took place: the indigenous affiliates gathered in the community of Inca, 12 km out of Apolo, while the peasants blocked the entrances to the village. ‘The whole village was paralyzed, without exception. We did not have any access, we even sent children to buy something. Even with them, they took them, they whipped them’.

Although the TAN resolution was an important success for the indigenous organization, the conflict did not diminish.

On the 30 January 2010 we witnessed the greatest defeat of the brothers [peasants], since we had the honor to win with the Agrarian Tribunal, and this shows the great step forward for our organization. But, so far, we continue with the same problems (...). Threats, punches and leaders’ kidnapping are still ongoing.

The conflict is now in a phase of ‘suspension’ and ‘apparent calm’. The peasants keep on fighting but with a lower profile. According to the CIPLA leaders, this is also due to the ‘protections’ that were recently included in the legal framework, with the approval of the new Constitution and the implementation of indigenous autonomies⁴. The CIPLA members feel more protected by this new legal system, while they consider that the peasant fight is losing ground.

⁴ In 2009, a new Constitution was approved through a referendum. Among the most important innovations, Bolivia was declared a plurinational state and a regime of indigenous autonomies was recognized, moving in the direction of the implementation of at least partial forms of self-government.

Narratives of the 'Self'

The Indigenous Narrative of Identity

CIPLA members describe the conflict with the peasants as a struggle for their rights and cultural identity. According to them, it is a process of 'identity and cultural recovery of their routines, customs and their origins'. They do not deny their past within the peasant Federation and they describe the split as a process of emancipation, motivated by the need to find their local historical roots.

From that day on which we started to rescue all our traditions and customs, *we are true indigenous with identity*. Therefore, we had also to suffer a bit with the brothers of the Federation...they maltreated us, kidnapped and flagellated us. (...) Those are the roots of the claim for our culture.

We keep on strengthening the fight for our rights and for the reproduction of our cultural identity (...). When we discovered that the Leco existed here, that they organized a resistance, their way of living and all those things, thus, this was the root of Apolo. This is the identity, and *we have got possession of this identity*.

The rediscovery of indigenous origins was mainly based on the memories of the elders. Thanks to those oral memories, the Lecos started to rebuild their religious traditions, and revitalize the Irimo sanctuary, which has become, according to them, the most important of the whole region.

A highly controversial issue refers to the language. According to Leco leaders, some elders speak the Leco language in a few communities but 'they do not want to talk easily. For

example, if one begins a conversation, to *coquear*⁵ a bit, late at night, they started to talk (...). One should wait for them to speak'. However, in one of those communities people told me that, there, the Leco language had been lost, and only Quechua and Spanish survive. Other elements that are considered footprints of the Leco past are some typical surnames: Pariamo, Aliarchimi, Carpa, Cari. As a consequence of the CIPLA's awareness campaign, they have been used as a clue of the indigenous origin of many Apoleños.

However, the Lecos themselves recognize that the population is now mixed with and 'contaminated' by Quechuas and Spanish, which is why a surname it is not a fundamental element in order to be recognized as indigenous. According to them, the most important difference between a Leco and a Quechua is the 'world vision': 'indigenous' is community-oriented and has close ties with nature, while 'peasant' is individualist and tied to the colonial past. Other differences lie in ways of living and in the modes of production: 'The peasant could go to the field, could work the land, and afterwards he uses it and he goes away. In contrast, indigenous peoples, we live here, we hunt, we fish... this is our traditional form of living. Peasants make the most of that space and they go away, they migrate'.

I report here a quotation from an interview with a CIPLA leader that can help understanding how the indigenous organization conceives the process of affiliation and transition from an identity to another:

Interviewer: What are the requirements for one to become Leco, let's say, living in Apolo?

Interviewee: There is no requirement, you should only make your decision and identify yourself.

IN.er: And if I identify myself, then I get in contact with the organization and I am in?

⁵ To chew coca leaves.

IN.ee: Sure! Depending on who you are. It is hard to say no, generally we are going to accept you.

IN.er: If I am Italian, it would be hard that I could become Leco, wouldn't it?

IN.ee: Sure, but we respect you for who you are and you join us.

IN.er: How many generations back do you count descendent?

IN.ee: One or two

IN.er: This means that your parents were born here and your grandparents as well?

IN.ee: Sure

IN.er: But if it is the case of the Quechua people, would you recognize them as Leco?

IN.ee: From various conversations and analysis that we made, for example, the Quechua did not come with his wife so that he could remain a pure Quechua, fully native. So, the Quechua came, just a man, and here met a Leco woman.

As it emerges from this conversation, there seems to be a double dimension of the 'conversion' process: on the one side, there is the issue of the origins, the blood ties that could testify Leco roots; on the other side, there is the organizational affiliation, which does not imply strict requirements, but simply the will to ascribe and to identify oneself as indigenous.

The Peasant Narrative of Identity

Conflictive elements clearly emerge when comparing Leco and peasant narratives. Peasant narratives use similar rhetorical resources to highlight the inconsistency of the indigenous identity. In particular, members of the Federation pay attention to some cultural features, especially the language issue: for them, the fact that no Leco language formally exists invalidates the legitimacy of the claim for recognition of an indigenous culture and identity.

An equation is established between ethnic group and language, which highlights that it is through language that the identitarian representations are shaped and legitimized: ‘This indigenous people was born only in 1997, because in reality we are all Quechuas here. Quechua and Spanish, two languages only. There is no other language here in Apolo. Lecos do not speak; they don’t have their own language’.

Similarly, other arguments used by CIPLA to prove the existence of the Lecos based on the analysis of surnames and of other cultural features (such as local dances) do not have any credit with the peasants. They deny the existence of typical Leco surnames and they consider the Leco dance a local cultural feature shared by all the communities, as a memory of the old inhabitants of the region.

The peasants’ lack of recognition of the existence and legitimacy of the Leco people renders the identity claim an issue of ‘belief’ that has no tie with what really matters: the roots and the ancestors. In this sense, the peasants develop a sort of alternative mythology of the origins:

Forever, from our ancestors, we have been syndicalists. We belong to the departmental Federation. But now the fellows [the Lecos] believe they are another organization. They believe that they are well linked to the government. They want to diminish us through concealments, misleading us.

Peasants argue that ‘we are syndicalists’ now because of their roots in an ancestral past - ‘we have always been syndicalists’. The members of the Federation have a strong sense of belonging. By no means do they consider themselves colonizers and, for that reason, they feel a great resentment towards the CIPLA: ‘They treat us as settlers, as the Spanish that arrived here. We did not feel settlers (...). We are natives. Our grandfathers were born in these lands’.

For the peasants, the process of identity recognition is grounded in verifiable data (such as the place of birth, the language and blood ties), rather than in the kind of self-identification process that is valued by the CIPLA. Indeed, the indigenous proselytism is perceived as a deception: ‘You are Italian. And I tell you that you should be Bolivian and speak Quechua. Impossible. That’s gonna be hard. It is the same but with deceptions. They want to persuade us’.

However, within the peasant syndicate, discordant visions around identity coexist. By the second half of 2010 (at the time of my fieldwork), during a Federation meeting (*ampliado*), some peasant leaders proposed changing the name of the organization to ‘Native Indigenous Quechua’⁶. The argument was that this would improve the position of the organization with the government and the international community, enhancing chances of gaining access to economic resources. Moreover, in some areas where there are conflicting land claims, ‘putting the CIPLA members in a minority’ could be a tactical solution, using an identity-based demographic parameter as a conflictive tool.

If we stay where we are, we will lose our resources and rights. (...) The TCO will be made, and we won’t have rights any longer. This is the argument of some of our leaders to *convert us into ‘Native Indigenous Quechua’*, in order to push the government to recognize that we are the majority (...). The community is now discussing this issue (...). We are going through a moment of change, and we want all of us to have their own autonomy, not only some of us that have been advantaged for long time ... [like] those false Lecos.

Narratives of the ‘Otherness’

⁶ A similar discussion, taking place in the late 1990s in the Santuario de Quillacas municipality, is reported in McNeish 2010, 244.

Peasant Narrative: The Negation of the 'Other'

The peasant narrative marks a 'before' and 'after' time: the time in which indigenous peoples did not exist and the moment in which 'false Lecos' appear. Both moments are characterized by different organizational belongings and ethnic identities: *before*, they were affiliated to the Federation; *afterwards*, they created their own organization: *before*, they were Quechua; *afterward*, Lecos. In the 'before' time, the peasants shared a sense of belonging to the same people who now call themselves Leco. This original equal condition increases the feeling of resentment about the separation, which is considered a betrayal of a common identity, origin and corporatist affiliation: 'Lecos are like us. They were here with us, there was no Leco here. They were affiliated to the Federation. All of them have old documents [in which it is proved] that they were leaders, general secretaries of the Federation. (...) They are like us: native Quechua'.

For the Federation's leaders, the causes of the separation have to do mainly with the fights within the syndicate, fuelled by the resentment of some of the leaders and their personal ambitions and search for power. At the same time, for the peasants, the creation of the indigenous organization cannot be considered a struggle for neglected rights and identity recognition, but is mainly a successful strategy to attract the attention of the state and economic resources of international development agencies. Moreover, they emphasize aspects of manipulation and deception that they thought CIPLA used to reach its goals.

Those people that now are Lecos come from the peasant movement. They got dressed up as *chunchos*⁷, as louts, they've got photos taken and, with those pictures, started to say that there are Lecos here! But there aren't! The government is listening to the lies that the supposed Lecos have presented. Right now I can put

⁷ Inhabitants of a silvan region far from the Western civilization. It is often used with a negative meaning.

some leaves on, I take some pictures and I am Leco! This is what they've done.

And with that they think that they are native, and we are not. But of course we are native!

The logic behind the negation of the other's existence is characterized by a double movement: firstly, the 'other' is differentiated with respect to the 'self' and, secondly, it is hierarchically situated on the side of error, sin, lies, ignorance. This hierarchical positioning is evident in some sematic details within the peasant discourse. For example, the peasants frequently use expressions such as 'false Lecos', 'supposed Lecos', 'self-denominated Lecos'.

During a workshop with peasants in the community of Puchahui, a narrative with clear colonialist features emerged, when one of the oldest participants made reference to the different degrees of civilization that characterize the two identities. He described the persuasive mechanisms that the Lecos put in place as a conversion effort from one identity to another, from one 'truth' to another:

They want to get us back, as we were just getting civilized, as in the East side, where there are true indigenous that do not even have their legal dressing as we have. We already know how to pray the "Lord's Prayer", we are Catholics, Christians. How could they convert us if we believe we are syndicalized, organized peasants!?

Through this type of narrative, a most traditional colonizer discourse is perpetuated. This discourse is rooted in the difference between the place of the *logos* and the place of the *ritual* (Calderón, 2010a): the 'other' – the autochthon, no civilized *indios* – embodies the ritual, i.e. the magic, folkloric, pagan, chaotic reality; the *logos* (the sphere of reason, progress and Catholicism) is the place of the Western whites, and it is here embodied by the peasantry.

This is an example of how, especially soon after the national revolution of 1952, peasants have undergone a process of ‘whitening’ of their status that would justify their social superiority in terms of race and culture (Canessa, 2005).

Indigenous Narrative: The Negation of the True Identity by the ‘Other’

The historical point of inflexion within the indigenous discourse is the Bolivian National Revolution of 1952. According to the Lecos, the revolution was a colonizing process that imposed Western models of corporatist organization – the unions – and a dominant class-based collective identity – the peasantry – on the rural population. This ended up weakening the native indigenous communities that, as a result, started to acknowledge their origins only relatively recently. However, parts of the population are still resisting this process of indigenous revitalization, and do not want to join the struggle, denying thus, according to the CIPLA members, their *true* identity.

Before, there were no laws that guaranteed us as indigenous peoples, because from 1952, with the agrarian revolution, they converted us. Before there were indigenous territory, nations and peoples. But they didn’t exist any longer. This is how they made us lose our way of living, our customs. But with the current government, here we are again! It recognizes us, the Constitution itself, the United Nations, the International Labor Organization ... it provides us with guarantees, it supports us and *we are now constitutionalized*. However, in spite of this, there are persons that do not understand yet what is identity, history. In Apolo for example, they [the peasants] are as well native indigenous, *we are all indigenous Lecos, but they do not recognize their identity*.

According to the Lecos, the peasants also suffered the negation of their identity. In this sense, they feel they are in a condition of implicit equality with the peasants. However, the peasants still need to pass through a process of individual and collective emancipation (or catharsis) to recognize their true identity. The peasants refuse to recognize key evidence of their indigenous identity, such as the existence of past cultural features, collective memories preserved by the elders, typical dances, surnames and toponymy, thus denying their origins and identity.

There are communities, for example, that still have a Leco name.

Rivers...everything, which means that the Leco culture is still alive. This is what we are building and claiming for.

Analytical Perspectives on Identities and Narratives

Some key patterns can be identified from the analysis of the narratives of the two parties in conflict, which provide some more general information on self-identification and the definition of a conflicting 'other' as well as on the mechanisms of social interaction of collective actors between each others and with their environment.

The organization of time within narratives (timelines or time sequences) is not casual and can shed light on the way in which people conceive social change. A key turning point (or climax) can be identified both within indigenous and peasant narratives. This is a temporal reference that social groups use to find a path through the historical continuum and frame their oppositional identity in the conflict.⁸ One of these key points is the creation of CIPLA. This moment has been presented and discursively reproduced in different, often incompatible, ways by the FSUTC-FT and the CIPLA. Incompatibilities have to do not only with changes at

⁸ On the relevance of how rural communities in Bolivia draw on the past to build a narrative and image to support different strategies, interests and collective behaviors, see also McNeish 2010: 247.

the corporatist-organizational level, but also with a reconfiguration of local socio-political dynamics around a new collective subject with its own identity, culture and history. The conflict is thus fuelled by opposing visions of the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ times that the CIPLA’s foundation marks in the historical trajectory of Apolo.

For the peasants, the ‘before’ was the time in which the Lecos did not exist, and the ‘after’ time is when the ‘false’ Lecos appear. An epoch in which the Lecos were ‘real’ and ‘true’ is indeed conceived and corresponds to the pre-Inca period. After this, Lecos became extinct and it is therefore impossible for them to come back to life. The people that now call themselves and self-identify as Lecos have no real existence or truthfulness. They are a hologram without substance. And on this ground, their claims for recognition and for collective rights are illegitimate and unjustifiable.

Lecos also refer to a ‘before’ and ‘after’ time, but the key turning point is interpreted as a liberation moment, a breakthrough with a past of repression and cultural domination. Furthermore, their argument is based on a hierarchy of more or less legitimate identities: being the direct product of colonization, the peasant identity is ‘illicit’ and less legitimate than the indigenous identity (the only native one). In relation to ‘authenticity’ and ‘nativeness’, a different nexus between identity and blood is established. Both groups consider their identity as the ‘most native’ and, at the same time, they label the ‘other’s’ identity as ‘false’, either for its illegitimate origin (the colonial) or for the absence of a concrete substance (the indigenous).

Critically, these narratives embody potentials for high levels of conflict. Both peasant and indigenous narratives are rigid, widely based on stereotypes, and rely on the crystalization of identity boundaries. Both have an important historical dimension, which articulates around key turning points. These referents strongly limit a fluid reading of time and of the dynamism of social change, rather relying of static interpretations and emphasizing the potential traumatic effects of disruptive events in the time continuum. This is the case for instance for

the indigenous narrative on colonization, as well as for the peasant narrative on the creation of CIPLA.

The indigenous narrative of the genesis of their organization appears to be slightly more fluid and interactional than that of the peasants'. However, it is rooted in a messianic dimension, which emphasizes the moment when the 'truth' of local identity was revealed. Interestingly, when a dynamic dimension is introduced, it is frequently in a negative sense. A telling example is the metaphor of the 'spreading disease' used by the peasants to describe the growing importance of the indigenous organization among local communities. Another recurrent concept is the one of the 'conversion' from peasant to indigenous as an enforced, violent process based on a misleading interpretation of identity and values.

Both groups conceive the possibility of coexistence of multiple identities in certain cases but not in others. On one hand, they recognize the coexistence of religious, cultural and social identities. For example, both groups affirm their Catholicism, which is not incompatible with the fact of being Leco or peasant. On the other hand, two identities that, from a theoretical point of view seem to be compatible due to their different spaces of reference – the peasant as class identity and the indigenous as ethno-cultural identity – in practice, become incompatible and totalitarian. This depends in part on an historical process of polarization, which radicalized these identities and made them absolute. At the same time, it is the result of a precise decision by the two parties to take control of important 'means of production of identities' – i.e. narratives – with the aim of mobilizing them in favor of their own interests in conflict. In this sense, identity narratives become tactical weapons in the here and now of the conflict. That is, it is convenient for the Leco to say that peasants are essentially colonizers and, for that reason, incompatible with the true indigenous identity; while it is functional for the peasants to introduce ethnic framings of their discourse on the 'self', discussing for example, the possibility for an ethnically connoted denomination to be a matter of choice.

Narrative analysis also allows to elaborate on the interactions between collective actors and their social environment. In this sense, the concept of ‘fitness’ proves useful to define the capability of social actors (also through their narrative production) to adapt to environmental changes, their degree of adjustment and suitability to a particular environment and to environmental changes, and the relative ability to prosper. Both peasant and indigenous narratives show a high degree of fitness to the socio-historical context in which they are embedded, actively responding to exogenous inputs and, at the same time, contributing to changing the context itself. Their narratives reflect the specificities of the historical moment in which they live— the late 1990s and early 2000s and the implementation of multicultural reforms – and the determination of social leaders to take advantage of the new opportunities for active participation in national and local political life. This can sound contradictory with respect to what I have just said about the rigidity and exclusionary nature of identity narratives. Yet, it is not, since the two concepts – fitness and rigidity – aim to describe different characteristics of collective narratives and of social actors. The former depends on the nature of the environmental change and the adaptability of social actors to that specific change, while the latter is a general measure of (in)flexibility with respect to the context. Indeed, fitness cannot be considered as a linguistic meta-structure of the narrative since it is completely context-dependent. In summary, both indigenous and peasant narratives and identities are flexible with respect to the context (they have a high degree of fitness), but, at the same time, they rely upon essentialist and dogmatic meta-structures (they have a high degree of rigidity).

The high degree of fitness of the indigenous narrative is evident from the fact that it has been deeply influenced, as the actors themselves recognize, by changes at the regulatory level (and in particular by the wave of political and institutional multicultural reforms of the 1990s). The fitness of the peasant narrative manifests itself in two ways: first, through the emphasis on a discourse rooted in tradition and blood ties as a response to the rise of the

indigenous rival; and, even more explicitly, in the debate about the possibility of changing the name of the Federation to ‘native Quechua’. What becomes evident is therefore the rise of a competition for the same, or similar, semiotic space defined by the concepts of ‘indigenous’ and ‘native’, and their intersections. This competition and overlapping is not only relevant in the framework of this conflict in some remote area of Bolivia, but it has manifested, through different declinations and circumstances, also at the national level, for example in the longstanding discussion on the nature of a new subject recognized in the 2009 Constitution: the ‘native indigenous peasant’. These subject made of the three main rural identities has been the result of a negotiation between different social sectors that was functional to reach an inclusive agreement. In the post-constitutional phase of implementation of legal and institutional reforms, however, the tensions embedded within this concept are rising alongside a new dispute to define and operationalize identity boundaries which will have important implications for access to specific rights (Fontana 2014b).

Conclusions

Through the analysis of the narrative apparatus that supports a paradigmatic land conflict between the indigenous organization and peasant unions in the Bolivian Amazon, this paper has aimed to contribute to the understanding of the process of identity-building and claims-making of rural social groups in the context of multicultural and plurinational reforms. In particular, this case shows how the discursive space becomes a privileged ‘battle field’. Here is where new identities are shaped and stories and mythologies are reinvented (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). This fact, however, does not imply that they are less authentic than other traditions, which do not claim to be old. Yet, what is interesting is the trajectory that leads to the emergence of new identities and the reasons why drawing from an ancestral past is a recurrent feature of contemporary social struggles. In the case of Apolo, a new indigenous tradition and identity can be read as the main platform to legitimize a claim for resources and

in particular, for land. I would like to conclude with three remarks on this point. I argue that the effort to understand the Apolo conflict cannot disregard: (a) the impact of exogenous incentives and political opportunity structures; (b) the fitness of collective actors and their ability to rapidly build new collective narratives and reshape the identification mechanisms; and (c) the importance of the match between new narratives and the local pre-existent socio-cultural context.

As both peasant and indigenous actors explicitly recognize, national and international reforms played a key role in the conflict. The strengthening of an institutional framework that, inspired by multiculturalism and theories of recognition, put in place a normative apparatus linking identity with resource allocation constituted a powerful window of political opportunity for rural collective actors. It provided new incentives, which eventually have an impact on the re-articulation of local conflicts, claims-making and identity-building mechanisms.

This institutional shift at the national and international levels has been reflected and absorbed by the local reality of Apolo. In this context, the claims for recognition cannot be understood only through the, often misused, lenses of ‘resistance struggle’, ‘cultural oppression’ and ‘political discrimination of minorities’. They are indeed the result of a complex interaction between institutional changes and social actors’ ability to respond to them. The fact that some leaders started to refer to an authentic indigenous identity and past as a tool to improve their access to resources and power, does not necessarily imply that the Leco culture and identity have never existed or are not real now. Yet, the current identity-based claim is not (or not only) the result of a widespread perception of cultural discrimination and lack of recognition of specific ethnic origins; rather, it is related to a process of adaptation to new contextual opportunities and constraints, or in other words, to the agency of traditionally marginalized social groups in order to resolve longstanding socio-economic problems.

Finally, the match between the new narratives and the pre-existent socio-cultural characteristics of the context should not be disregarded. To be successful, it is paramount for the new narratives to include socially accepted references, such as symbols, stories and stereotypes often pre-existent in local culture. In this sense, the success of the indigenous narratives in Apolo cannot be understood without considering the history of the region and the fact that cultural elements belonging to an indigenous tradition were already shared among the population and part of the local culture.

All these characteristics make of the Apolo conflict a paradigmatic case to explore a broader trend in Bolivia towards the ethnicization of identities, as a result of a combination of endogenous and exogenous changes that reproduce themselves, with slightly different characteristics, at the local and national spaces. Moreover, this type of conflict stands out as one of the possible sources of tensions that could increase and worsen in the near future. Indeed, the new Constitution approved in 2009, as well as the latest agrarian reform (2006), not only reaffirmed the TCO as main form of title for indigenous peoples, but they introduce new territorial autonomy based on ethnicity (Chumacero 2009; Albó and Romero 2009). This is likely to trigger new demands for territorial control by local communities and organizations, in a legal context that still lack operational mechanisms. Further research is therefore needed to understand the implications, especially within local spaces, of the implementation of indigenous rights and multicultural/plurinational reforms at the national and international level.

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