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In Search of a New Indigeneity: Archaeological and Spiritual Heritage in Highland Bolivia

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ABSTRACT: Bolivians are inventing spiritual practices that fit into the current dominant political discourse of decolonization and revalorization of native beliefs by associating these new traditions with archaeological spaces and objects. This new Bolivia is believed to emerge from the ashes of the old economic and social order, which for centuries oppressed and elided native religious practices, and harkens back to precolonial values. Drawing from long-term ethnographic research, media reports, and scholarly works, I aim to examine these new practices to improve our understanding of emerging indigenous identities in this small Andean nation. I discuss two case studies that exemplify how the urban indigenous are rediscovering the power of ancestor veneration and animism in their heritage to construct a new sense of national belonging.

KEYWORDS: Bolivia, indigeneity, archaeological heritage, Tiwanaku, Andean beliefs

This essay presents two case studies from highland Bolivia to illustrate how Andean religious practices are undergoing a revival in which invented traditions are refashioning symbolism from archaeological heritage to fit a new indigenous national identity. The use of archaeology to invent new traditions out of whole cloth is
a common mechanism in Latin America where the Spanish Crown’s directive to extirpate “idolatries” suppressed many native spiritual beliefs. A large part of these beliefs became syncretized with Catholic orthodoxy and orthopraxy¹ and survived in modified form through the centuries. These syncretic traditions suffered their own significant blow from the wave of conversions to evangelical Christianity that swept through Latin America in the late twentieth century given that these ascendant movements promoted a dim view of and actively discouraged these “heathen” practices.² Most of the population in the Bolivian Andes is native Aymara or Quechua and practices some form of Christianity.³ It was in this religious landscape that Evo Morales (b. 1959) was elected as Bolivia’s first indigenous President in 2006. Morales has been in power for three successive terms (2006–2009; 2009–2014; 2014–2019), in which his administration constructed a new national identity centered on the recuperation of pre-Columbian spiritual traditions as part of a process to decolonize Bolivia.

These twenty-first-century recovered traditions are current religious practices with claims to native Andean authenticity. To illustrate their emergence and scope in Bolivia’s social imaginary,⁴ I analyze the recently instituted national Andean New Year ritual that originated as a celebration of the winter solstice at the archaeological ruins of Tiwanaku. Tiwanaku has a long history of being used for the crafting and performance of nationalist symbols by state politicians, local native communities, and tourists.⁵ My second example is also centered on this site, specifically the role of a stone stela in reproducing beliefs among urban indigenous Bolivians in the divinity and power of sacred objects and spaces called wak’as.⁶ My discussion of these two examples is based on recent scholarship on Bolivia’s nationalist spirituality, reports from local and foreign journalists, and my own long-term ethnographic work in the region. In examining these new traditions, I argue that unpacking the tangled web tying religious practices to archaeological heritage can shed light on emerging identities.

MESSIANISM AND REBIRTH IN BOLIVIA’S NEW SPIRITUALITY

Anthropologist Raymond Firth proposed that religion is a social product that “can symbolize [a] group’s identity irrespective of the particular structure of the government.”⁷ Firth supports his argument about the defining role of religion in the construction of political systems with references to socialist states that justify expunging religion due to its role in abetting exploitation. Yet Firth also points to numerous cases where religious practices adapt and transform themselves to survive under these regimes. Catholic religious and political leaders in Bolivia, a small
Andean nation with a population in which over 60 percent identify as indigenous,\textsuperscript{8} shunned and denigrated native religion for centuries as being uncivilized and the result of lack of education. In the past decade, Bolivia transitioned to a socialist government with a strong discourse on indigenous revindication that rejects Christianity and espouses Andean beliefs. One of the main objectives of Evo Morales’ first administration at the helm of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement to Socialism) political party was to enact a new version of the National Constitution. This document (2009) ended centuries of a Catholic theocracy, changed Bolivia from a republic to a plurinational state in acknowledgement of its numerous indigenous communities or nations, and proclaimed the country a secular state that guarantees freedom of religion and “is independent of religion” (Article 4).\textsuperscript{9}

The Morales administration consistently demonized Catholicism and passed laws to promote an Andean revival implementing new rituals that claim to turn back the clock and reinstate pre-Columbian practices. The strategy of his political party is best described as one where the neoliberal republic has been dismantled and replaced with a socialist, decolonized state, justified by an enduring messianic myth of revolution. An oft-cited example of this strategy is that Morales self-identifies as a reincarnated Aymara rebel leader—Túpac Katari (c. 1750–1781)—and proclaimed his election as ushering in the era of the Pachakhuti.\textsuperscript{10}

Pachakhuti is an ending of times; a liminal space where the world as we know it is destroyed to bring forth a new creation, resulting in an inversion of the order of authority and power. The Pachakhuti myth has its origins in the indigenous rebellion led by Katari in the early 1780s, which laid siege to the now capital city of La Paz and almost succeeded in ousting the Spanish colonizers. Legend has it that upon his execution, Katari stated, “I will awaken and come back as millions.” This rebel’s return and the idea that what is now highland Bolivia would once again be under Aymara rule has been used to advance indigenous activist movements for centuries,\textsuperscript{11} and now reinforces Morales’ claim to authority. In early 2016 Morales called for a referendum to determine whether the Bolivian people would agree to amend the Constitution so he could run for a third term. When the referendum initially ruled against him, Vice-President Álvaro García Linera (b. 1962) made several public appearances to warn that “the sun would hide and the moon would run away” and Bolivia would sink into a dark age if Morales, a modern-day Katari, was not permitted to continue as President.\textsuperscript{12}

Morales won his third bid for power perhaps due to these attempts to harness a messianic discourse. However, there is growing disenchantment with his tenure, propelled by mushrooming corruption and extractivism in Bolivia’s Amazon rainforest that blatantly disregards the rights of lowland minority indigenous groups. A new indigenous-led opposition has emerged that challenges Morales on the grounds that
he has harmed Mother Earth, arguing that he needs to beg her forgiveness and step down. Morales has responded in a manner in keeping with his agenda to link the precolonial past to his policies. He stated he would make his way to Tiwanaku and offer to the wak’as there, while absorbing the powerful cosmic energies at the site, and ask his ancestors for advice. The President’s appeal to these animistic forces at Tiwanaku for spiritual guidance and support of his political authority ratifies the importance of ancestor worship for Bolivia’s urban indigenous, a case I examine below.

THE POWER OF STONE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE: ANIMISM AND TIES TO THE ANCESTORS

Tiwanaku is a breathtaking archaeological complex of ruins in Bolivia’s arid highland plateau, located a two-hour drive from La Paz. This pre-Columbian urban site features a massive artificial terraced mound, stone platforms, courts, gateways, a temple whose walls are dramatically punctuated by tenoned stone heads, and imposing stone steleae. Radiocarbon and other archaeological dating place the Tiwanaku civilization between 300 to 1100 C.E. This center of civic-ceremonial architecture would have been the core of a sprawling city with an estimated population of 30,000 to 60,000. The Tiwanaku Empire held administrative centers and colonies in coastal Peru in the west, to the headwaters of the tropical Amazon River in eastern Bolivia, and as far south as the northern coast of Chile.

The ruins of this ancient empire, and their interpretation, have played a key role in the history of Bolivia’s majority indigenous group that self-identifies as Tiwanaku’s descendants: the Aymara. This community is now considered an important shareholder in the nation’s economic and political power thanks in part to a dramatic rise in upward mobility by Aymara working in regional trade, and to the fact that President Morales—who is of Aymara descent—has filled many government posts with indigenous members of the Movement to Socialism. The social structure changes envisioned by Morales and his followers deploy public perceptions of the sacredness of pre-Columbian life. To this end, this movement has encouraged the Andean practice of bonding with landscape features known as wak’as. Libations, sacrifices, and petitions for the wak’as’ intercession are practiced by indigenous peoples throughout the Andes. According to anthropologist Tamara L. Bray, a wak’a can be a space, a rock formation, a river or lake, or any object that links the supernatural to our own world. The term wak’a originated in the Quechua culture of the Inka Empire, and has come to be used in more recent times as a generic label for an archaeological monument or site.
In contrast to the Pachamama, or Mother Earth, whose worship revolves around the agrarian cycle and is tied to the rural, *wak’a* rites moved with indigenous populations to the cities where sacred spaces or sacred objects focus the petitioner’s intentions to communicate with the divine. The most powerful *wak’as* are made of stone, a material infused with an animating essence that has a generative capacity. Stone “outcrops, boulders, or large uprights where . . . ancestral ‘lithomorphosis’ took form”\(^\text{18}\) provide tangible links to the ancestors. Anthropologist Anders Burman notes the importance of the *wak’as* for the urban indigenous with the story of a young Aymara who made his way to one of the high peaks surrounding La Paz. There he touched an ancient rock considered a venerable ancestor, had an epiphany, connected with his indigenous roots, and became integrated with the landscape.\(^\text{19}\) Because the *wak’as* link the living to the ancestral past, Burman explains, urban Aymara can use them to feel connected to a time before the oppression and discrimination that a majority of Bolivians felt for centuries. Despite an apparent distancing from rural rituals by city-dwelling Aymara, belief in *wak’as* and their influence has permeated indigenous urban life.

Another factor that may have contributed to the flourishing of this urban belief is that some archaeological monuments were moved to Bolivia’s cities in the early twentieth century, when it was deemed that the safest spaces for this heritage were at the centers of civilization.

**Photo 1:** View of the archaeological ruins at Tiwanaku, Bolivia, taken from the sunken temple. Note the carved stone heads on the wall in the forefront. Courtesy of Mhwater at Dutch Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons.
A noteworthy example is the displacement of a massive stone stela—the Bennett Monolith—from Tiwanaku to La Paz in the 1930s. The return of this sculpture to Tiwanaku almost seven decades later was hailed as a symbol of cultural restitution. The initial removal of this sandstone giant weighing over 20 metric tons to La Paz was made possible by a wealthy gentleman scholar, Arthur Posnansky (1873–1946), who was obsessed with a romanticized vision of Tiwanaku as the ancient cradle of humankind in the Americas. Posnansky made a home for the stela in a plaza in front of the city’s soccer stadium, in an Aymara neighborhood where he thought it would receive a warm welcome.

To Posnansky’s surprise, the stela’s new neighbors loudly complained that since the monolith had been taken away from its rightful home and thus disrupted the natural order, it would be a permanent bearer of ill
will or *khencha*. A *wak’a* as potent as this one, people reasoned, could intercede for petitioners and award favors, or cause great harm if angered or ignored, and its uprooting could only hurt those living in its vicinity. Until 2002 when the monolith was returned to Tiwanaku, the bad luck generated by its displacement was blamed for the many losses of the Bolivian soccer team, the deaths of famous Bolivians, floods and mudslides affecting city neighborhoods, and the right-wing military coups of the 1970s, among other events. I was in La Paz when a team of engineers and museum curators were tasked with the stela’s repatriation. At the time, as well as in my subsequent visits, people from all walks of life reminisced on how the monolith’s ill luck had affected them over its years of residence in La Paz. Everything from the death or illness of a beloved relative, to economic hardship, to falling prey to petty crime, was all blamed on the monolith, reflecting the strength of Andean beliefs in the worldview of these city dwellers.

The residents of La Paz stopped blaming the Bennett stela for adversities after its return to Tiwanaku, yet *wak’as* continue to shoulder the blame for physical, emotional, and psychological ills, and make for a brisk business for Andean shamans—called *yatiris*—who provide their services to stop the effects of a harmful spell. A typical account of this ill luck is recorded in anthropologist Alison Spedding’s compilation of La Paz’s popular religious narratives and beliefs. In one of many stories collected by Spedding’s students, a woman tells the story of requesting the services of an experienced *yatiri* to break a spate of ill luck. The shaman, after conferring with Andean spirits, found traces in the woman’s home of the spirit of powerful local *wak’as*. Her family was near bankruptcy, it was explained by the *yatiri*, because they had forgotten to present continuous offerings to appease these spirits.

The lives of urban Aymara are peppered with these reminders of how divinity operates in their everyday experiences, and Movement to Socialism partisans focused on these for the creation of a new Andean religion. Morales has repeatedly claimed to have tied *wak’as* and their essence to himself. This not only justifies his authority, but, more importantly, creates a new connection of the nation to ancestral roots that many indigenous peoples in Bolivia felt were lost to them through centuries of imposition of foreign beliefs. This connection to the past is a discourse that has clearly changed Bolivia’s social landscape over the last decade, as illustrated by a ceremony that attempts to recreate the precolonial past.

**THE ANDEAN NEW YEAR AS PERFORMANCE OF DECOLONIZED RELIGION**

Twenty-first-century Aymara have adopted global capitalist practices and become savvy entrepreneurs while staying rooted in their Andean
faith and close-knit communal and familial ties. The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a new wealthy indigenous bourgeoisie evidenced in the booming industry of Aymara female high fashion, real estate, trade, and architecture inspired by Tiwanaku iconography. Imagery taken from this ancient culture’s monumental architecture is ubiquitous in Bolivia’s government media communications and records, and in the ritual paraphernalia of practitioners of the new spirituality promoted by the state. These icons invoke a precoplonial past, free from ideological impositions and oppression, and have been used in identity-building discourses from the birth of the Bolivian republic in 1825.

This phenomenon is also prominently displayed in La Paz’s numerous religious festivities. Festivals can take over the streets of the city for several days when thousands of folkloric dancers promenade in an impressive and lavish spectacle. Urban Aymara use these spaces to re-affirm their roots, mimicking similar festivals tied to the agricultural cycle that occur on a much smaller scale in rural villages. The faithful sacrifice time and money to dance fraternities, and dedicate their efforts simultaneously to Christ, the Pachamama, and the wak’as. The blessings obtained from this set of deities reward the participants with commercial success in the coming year, creating a lasting connection between ritual and material wealth.

The Aymara New Year is a recent addition to this festival calendar. An Executive Decree from 2014 declared 21 June, the date of the winter solstice, a national religious holiday commemorating the celebration of the Andean New Year. Elizabeth Andia Fagalde has written a detailed study of the yatiris who organize this event, and confirms that the notion of celebrating the winter solstice at the Tiwanaku ruins and creating a ritual to ask for the blessing of the wak’as was instituted by a local shaman in the 1980s. This yatiri would host like-minded university students, intellectuals, and friends for a pilgrimage to the archaeological site at dawn, where burnt offerings were made while they waited for the sun to rise and bless them. These meetings were clandestine at first as they took place during one of Bolivia’s military dictatorships, and the gatherings could be mistaken for those of a resistance group. The meetings were also small as, despite the ubiquitous nature of Andean beliefs, there was an underlying feeling that these activities were frowned upon by fellow Christians.

Andia describes the growth of this celebration after it was officially endorsed by Morales’ government when its organization was taken over by younger yatiris better able to navigate between remembered practices and westernized expectations of what a rite entails. The Andean New Year celebration at Tiwanaku is perceived by all who participate as a “theatrical representation” with recently invented costumes, hymns, and invocations representing a lost past. Writings by Aymara intellectuals, tourist expectations of New Age spirituality, and political
discourses are all combined in the ceremony. For instance, ñustas, young virgins in the Quechua Inca tradition, sing hymns modeled after those in Christian churches, with references to the cosmos, around an Aymara altar and offerings. The integration of all these participants creates a true sense of *communitas*, or what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner dubbed an intense community spirit. At the celebration itself, the shamans bless the crowd before altars burning tobacco, sweets, sacred plants, and llama fat that are meant to “feed” the Mother Earth in the fallow winter months and hail the new cycle of renewal. *Yatiris* take turns reading coca leaves to visitors and local pilgrims to help define risks in new ventures. They provide charms and prayers for travelers, officiate Aymara baptisms and marriages, and lead chants at the moment the sun rises behind the ruins and bestows blessings for the coming year. The sense of reverence when the sun’s first rays shine through the iconic Gateway of the Sun while native wind instruments go off in the distance and everyone holds their hands up and sinks to one knee is inspiring.

The ceremony in recent years has acquired more commercial trappings such as the celebration held the night before the solstice at the town of Tiwanaku and in the city of La Paz. At both places, dozens of folkloric groups dance on a massive stage, and popular Andean rock bands play for the crowds. The Ministry of Tourism and its Vice-Ministry of Decolonization have a long list of travel agents who take groups of visitors to Tiwanaku and other archaeological sites and work hard to promote this celebration to both local and foreign visitors. The festivity has grown to the point where the original organizers have lost control of these supplementary activities. Bolivia’s government declared 2017 the year of the Andean, Amazonian, and Chaco New Year, thus joining the three ecological regions where indigenous peoples make their home. The government also compiled a list of two hundred official sacred sites nationwide where communal rites would be held and indigenous groups would usher in the New Year with their own unique traditions.

Number 116 on this list is the archaeological site of Inkarakay featuring the ruins of an Inca fortress in a valley 400 kilometers from Tiwanaku. Here, hundreds of locals and visitors rode by car from the nearest city and then trudged up a rugged, steep path to receive the rising sun’s healing energy.

Brandishing multicolored flags representing the indigenous nations, the participants huddled in the predawn chill to wait for the sun’s first rays, chanting invocations in a mix of Quechua and Spanish. Many pressed folded wads of money in their palms as they held up their hands up to absorb warmth from the sun, representing health and prosperity. The ceremony was short but followed the general outline of the one at Tiwanaku, with participants celebrating with drinking and dancing for many hours. Although far from the political and religious epicenter, here too was found a sense of shared values and community.
stories and social media the following morning proclaimed the success of these hundreds of celebrations that “united all Bolivians under common spiritual beliefs.”32 These reports and the exponential growth
of this Andean New Year’s ceremony across all walks of life seem to indicate the successful emergence of a new Bolivian indigenous national identity.

CONCLUSION: SYNCRETISM AND INDIGENEITY

Anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena ponders on the rebirth of native beliefs in the Andes where regional indigenous groups and urban intellectuals deploy their know-how to endorse “packages of Andean culture they offer for tourist consumption.” Andean shamans, she muses, are now in high demand as part of these packages that satisfy the *wak’as*, the urban indigenous, and their visitors. De la Cadena traces these symptoms for the resurgence of Andean spirituality and argues that rather than creating a new religion, these are new combinations of the cultural hybridity between Christianity and native traditions. In a similar manner, the nationwide practice of the Andean New Year, and the strong belief in the power of *wak’as* by a younger generation of urban indigenous in Bolivia signal not so much a stripping of the old order, but a current incarnation of Andean syncretism that Bolivians are adopting as part of an emerging indigeneity.

Bolivian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui describes the term *decolonization* as a magic word that “covers everything and nothing at the same time.” As we have seen in these case studies, a representation of former times can be performed and valued, yet this does not bring back the unsullied past. If decolonization means returning to ancient times, then Morales’ mandate has failed given that the new religion he sponsors continues to mix and blend Christian and Andean practices. Morales’ claims of decolonization, as Rivera has noted, mean little when taken literally. However, they can mean everything if taken as moving forward into a society where the formerly disparaged indigenous is now a prized and highly visible piece of Bolivia’s social imaginary. In these new syncretic practices, the deployment of Tiwanaku and other archaeological heritage will no doubt continue to play an important role in crafting community and national identity.

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ENDNOTES

1 See Josef Estermann, *Cruz y Coca: Hacia la descolonización de la Religión y la Teología* [Cross and Coca: Toward a Decolonization of Religion and Theology] (La Paz: Librería Armonía, 2013).


4 I use the term “social imaginary” here as a cultural model of shared, implicit knowledge. Benedict Anderson proposed that nations are imagined political communities because their citizens will never meet or know all members in the group, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” See, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* (London: Verso, 1983), 5.


6 Throughout this essay I use the term *wak’a* to refer to the Andean religious concept of a sacred space or sacred object inhabited by a powerful spirit. I use the Aymara pronunciation and spelling instead of the Spanish *huaca* or *guaca*.


16 Estermann, *Cruz y Coca*, 73.

The monolith was discovered by archaeologist Wendell C. Bennett (1905–1953) on his sole expedition to Tiwanaku in 1932, the purpose of which was to define a chronology for the ruins. Other than giving it its name, Bennett played no other role in relation to the fate of this stone stela. For a detailed narrative of the monolith’s discovery, its transportation to the nation’s capital, and part in shaping Bolivian nationalism, see Isabel Scarborough, “The Bennett Monolith: Archaeological Patrimony and Cultural Restitution,” in Silvermann and Isbell, *Handbook of South American Archaeology*, 1093–95.


28 Andia Fagalde, *Suma chuymampi sarnaqña*.
30 Divination by blowing on coca leaves is a common practice in the Andes meant for the shaman to communicate and share with the wak’as. See Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 234.
31 *See 21 de Junio: Año Nuevo Andino Amazónico y del Chaco: 5525 Años* [June 21: Andean, Amazonian, and Chaco New Year: 5525 Years], Estado Plurinacional de


de la Cadena, Earth Beings, 199.