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Maqanakuyku: Bolivia’s Diachronic Tinku

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Scholars often describe the *tinku* of Northern Potosí, Bolivia, as a ritual battle\(^1\) between opposing rural community groups or individuals.\(^2\) The participants themselves—mostly subsistence farmers and herders—often simply say in Quechua, ‘Maqanakuyku,’ or ‘we hit one another.’ Whether one prefers the academic description or the more authentic ‘campo’ description, it is certain that the battle component is the defining element of this ritual that also includes many rites and traditions performed in a festival atmosphere.

The *tinku* is a ritual of pre-Incan origin\(^3\) that has important religious, historical, socio-political and cultural significance for its modern day participants. In religious terms, participants may consider bloodshed during these battles an offering to the *Pachamama* (Andean earth deity) and may consider the occasional death of a *tinku* warrior the sign of a good harvest for the year to come.\(^4\) In historical terms, the participants link the *tinku* conceptually with the pre-Incan *ayllu* political system that was once dominant in this area by selecting opponents based on residence in either the upper moiety or the lower moiety of the *ayllu*.\(^5\) In socio-political terms, the fighting can serve as a mechanism to ameliorate tensions over border disputes between communities or personal disputes between individuals. In cultural terms, *tinku* warriors can acquire a sense of identity as rural Quechua subsistence farmers, or *campesinos*, (as distinct from *vecino*, *mestizo* or *ladino* identity) through participation in the ritual. Similarly, return migrants from urban areas can re-establish their identity as a member of the community where the *tinku* is performed. Finally, communities often consider fighting in the *tinku* a rite of passage for younger participants.

However, the social fabric of northern Potosí is changing daily in terms of religious diversification, economic activity, technological advancement, and migration practices. Whether these changes are desirable, inexorable, or externally or internally
impelled is beyond the scope of the current study. But few would challenge their existence.

In a longer work that I am currently undertaking, I explore what I call the ‘diachronic tinku.’ I believe that as a society changes, the rituals that manifest that society’s zeitgeist may similarly change. Thus, scrupulous and sensitive attention to a society’s rituals over time can provide a window onto its changing constitution. I suggest that by looking at the tinku’s modified performance over time, we see a reflection of a society continually reinventing itself, with many ambiguities, paradoxes and complexities.

Today, I will emphasize the religious facet of this change, while only touching on the other thematic areas that I mentioned.

The performance of the contemporary tinku in Bolivia is limited to a handful of towns in the region referred to as northern Potosí. Tinkus are performed in festivals on one of several Catholic saints’ name-days that occur during the region’s dry season which runs from approximately March to mid-October. This period coincides with the time between planting cycles, when land is left fallow. Michael J. Sallnow, in his study of pilgrimage cults in Peru, Pilgrims of the Andes, describes this time of the year as a time when the earth is “angry,” “open,” and “alive,” and when “[t]he nature spirits are particularly restless, seeking payment for the benefits they have bestowed.” Many increase rituals take place in the communities where tinku warriors live the during this time period, such as this one between Luciano and his friend upon breaking ground for the first time in the new agricultural year.

One sees similar agricultural increase rites in the preparations of tinku warriors before embarking on the pilgrimage from their communities to the town where the festival will be held. Andean shaman, or yachajkuna—literally, ‘he who
knows’—prepare mesitas, or ‘offering tables,’ with gifts for the Pachamama, or the Andean Earth Diety. Community members sacrifice animals to the solemn prayer of ‘Sumaj cusechananpaj,’ or, ‘Let there be a good harvest.’

After a pilgrimage from the rural communities to the pueblo where the festival will be held—a trip that can take from a few hours to a few days over rugged terrain—community groups enter the town one by one, parading through the streets. Imilla wawas (literally, ‘girl children’) wave white flags, or whipalas. ‘Whipala’ is a word that means ‘warlike’ in Quechua. Men—most of them tinku warriors—play traditional Andean instruments, such as zamponias.

The community groups will carry out many processions through the pueblo’s streets, passing through the main plaza, and often genuflecting at the doors of the town’s Catholic church. Groups often carry their community cross—sometimes called tata wilakruz (‘Father Vera Cruz’)—to be blessed by the Catholic priest. Often this cross is adorned with pictograms of agricultural products of the region. Many participate in the procession of the patron saint—in this case, Tata Santiagu, or Saint James, in English—through the streets and to the Catholic church.

On the main day of the festival, the tinku battles begin. Men are the principal fighters, but women fight at times as well. Men often wear hardened leather helmets called monteras that resemble conquistador’s helmets, even to the detail of the feather plume. Or, as this tinku warrior in Macha, one might make good use of an army surplus helmet.

The fights can take a variety of forms, from strictly controlled fist fights between individuals in the main plaza of the pueblo, to large brawls between groups in the back streets of the town or rock slinging episodes between large groups (either thrown by hand or hurled with an honda, a slingshot, the traditional Andean weapon).
An azuteru (person with a whip) stands behind his or her soldiers, whipping them during the battles so that they are brave and do not run from the enemy. The azuteru can be man or woman, mestizo, campesino or vecino. Both the very old and the young participate in tinku battles. Interestingly, alongside agriculturalists eager to shed blood as repayment for last year’s harvest or to increase next year’s harvest, return-migrants participate in the tinku as a means of reconnecting with their birth villages. Here are two residents of Cochabamba, an urban center of 800,000 that lies 140 kilometers away, who participated in the 2003 tinku in Toro Toro.

When a tinku warrior falls or begins to bleed, the action stops. Here, a woman attends her fallen husband. The whip in her hand suggests that she was his azutera, whipping him on during the battle to make him face his opponent bravely, and not to run. Warriors proudly display bloody noses and garments as a red badge of courage after their battles. Most injuries are slight, but some can be more serious.

Allusions to the now fragmented ayllu political system inform the performance of the tinku. When a fighter falls, children yell out, “Laime kasqa!” or “Pampa kasqa!” identifying the fighter as being from either the upper moiety (Laime) or the lower moiety (Pampa) of the ayllu. This identification of warriors with the highlands or the lower valleys completes an important symbolic link to the ayllu system mentioned above.

On several occasions, I would ask tinku warriors, “Imarayku maqanakunkichej?” (Tr.: “Why do you fight?”)

Most would laconically respond, “Es costumbre, pues.”

Occasionally, someone would respond, “Sumaj cusechananpaj.” (Tr.: “So that there be a good harvest.”)

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I now turn to the ways in which the tinku is changing.

Different towns have, at times, prohibited the tinku’s performance, both in northern Potosí and in other areas of the Andes. Sometimes this prohibition is for religious reasons, other times this prohibition is imposed by authorities after the death of a participant. These maps of Peru and Bolivia show former sites of tinkus, in red, and current sites of tinkus, in blue. While by no means comprehensive, this map suggests that the area in which the tinku is a live ritual is slowly being reduced.

The most common source of opposition to the tinku has been the Catholic Church.9 Traditionally, the Church opposed rituals like the tinku through its historic “Extirpation of Idolatries” campaign.10 Recently, however, an increasingly Protestant influence has opposed the tinku. Here is an “evangélico” poster that was hung in a rural school outside of one of the towns where the tinku is performed, Toro Toro.11 The poster is composed of two panels with the phrase “Entremos a la Misión: Hagamos Nuestro el Camino de Jesus” separating the two panels. The upper panel shows pleasant, healthy and happy characters engaged in productive activities apparently because they follow the “path of Jesus.” The bottom panel portrays a stark contrast as people appear ill, unhappy, angry, and venal, apparently because they have chosen to follow a different path. In the upper left-hand portion of the bottom, ‘bad’ panel, four or five people are engaged in what appears to be a tinku-like fight. One angrily hurls a rock as three others charge toward him, while another twirls an honda (slingshot) in his hand, ready to sling a rock at his opponent. The resemblance to actual tinku battles is striking.

Interestingly, though, the erosion of the tinku is anything but linear. In Toro Toro from 1992-2000, two successive anti-tinku Catholic priests prohibited its performance in town. This prohibition was aided, assumedly, by an odd alliance with a
Campesino Central president who was opposed to the *tinku*. Many people say that he opposed the *tinku* for religious reasons, because ‘él se hizo hermano,’ that is, he became ‘evangélico.’

In 1999, after years of the *tinku*’s prohibition in the town center, community members took it upon themselves to organize a *tinku* battle outside of the town of Toro Toro. The battle was carried out with little of the religious and traditional rituals that used to accompany it, and it was staged on a day other than that of the town’s patron saint.

This battle outside of town was significant because most participants seemed anxious to vent pent-up frustrations from rankling personal feuds. That the participants cared enough to stage an informal *tinku* outside of the town center and devoid of the other rituals normally accompanying it during the Christian festivals implies that the *tinku* is a current and important means of ameliorating tensions between disgruntled parties. It has special importance in this region, where people are not accustomed to reliance on formal institutions for such matters.

But, in this case, the *tinku* was restored by popular demand in Toro Toro during the 2000 town festivals. That year, the town’s Catholic priest, unpopular for a number of reasons in addition to his prohibition of the *tinku*, was run out of town, and the Campesino Central president was voted out of office. The new priest, padre Nicanor, a person with a reputation as “un tipo muy simpático,” was amenable to the *tinku*’s performance in town. With the opposition to the *tinku* gone, the ritual was staged in the center of Toro Toro once more during the festival of Santiago.

Many Andeanists explain conversion to Protestantism as a means by which ‘peasants’ escape the religious fiesta system and avoid the expenses in Catholic rituals as well as the heavy drinking.” It is not unreasonable to expect that an aversion to the
tinku might be a factor in someone’s decision to ‘hacerse hermano.’ One might demure on participating in the tinku by hiding behind the cloak of his new religious affiliation: ‘Mi religión no me permite,’ he would say, while breathing a figurative sign of relief at not having to participate in what he has come to see as a cruel ritual.

I suggest that the details of these prohibition/reinstatement feuds over the tinku in Toro Toro and the above perspective of Protestant conversion combine to portray a more complicated picture than some studies of evangelizing have. Though many religious actors oppose the tinku, as the evidence above suggests, attitudes and actions toward the tinku are not always easily generalized. In his study of the “Extirpation of idolatry” campaigns of the Catholic Church in the Peruvian Viceroyalty from 1640 to 1750, Idolatry and Its Enemies, Kenneth Mills, states the following:

I write about the “faces” of Christianity in an attempt to displace the monolithic images that studies of evangelization too often spawn, and to capture instead the different undercurrents and approaches that coexisted and jostled in each other in the Central Andes.¹³

I think that Mills’s approach is a sound one. In my thesis, I further explore the personal interactions that come to a head around the issue of the tinku in a religious context.

Finally, in addition to the religious issues surrounding the tinku—which I have only begun to touch upon here—a number of trends and themes coalesce in this ritual. One sees intimations of the region’s past in the tinku’s allusions to the ayllu system. One sees intimations of the region’s present in the participation of return-migrants in the ritual side by side with subsistence farmers. Regarding the future, the map showing the Andean towns where tinkus have been prohibited provides a bleak picture of what might come to be for the tinku of northern Potosí.

I leave you with a photo that, for me, exemplifies the paradoxes and complexities of the contemporary tinku, and, I suggest, Bolivian society itself. At the
center of the picture you see a tinku warrior with traditional sikas, or leg coverings, which are worn by participants during the fighting, atop a pair of Converse brand sneakers. It is in this juxtaposition of the eminently old and traditional with the eminently new and seductive that Bolivia sees its reflection.


2 This study of Bolivia’s tinku is based on my personal experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) in Northern Potosí living in Torco Toro, Charcas Province-Second Section, from September 1997 to August 1999, and in Ocurí, Chayanta Province-Fourth Section, from December 1999 to October 2000, and from fieldwork conducted in and around Toro Toro in 2003. I have attended the following tinkus: Toracari-Oct. 1998; Macha-May, 1999; Ocurí-May, 2000; and Toro Toro, 2003. For a copy of accompanying maps, photos and PowerPoint slideshow, contact Brian Norris at norribrlee@hotmail.com.


6 Sallnow, 132.


11 The “Misión Extraordinaria-Norte Potosí” Evangelical poster was collected for me by an informant in October of 2002 from a casa comunai (community meeting hall) in the small community of Viscachani, which is about two hours outside of Toro Toro and is only accessible by foot along mountain pathways.


13 Mills, 3.