

ANTHROPOLOGY

Missions, Unions, and Indigenous Organization in the Bolivian Amazon: Placing the Formation of an Indigenous Organization in Its Context

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This article explores oral histories about the foundation of the Mositén Indigenous People's Organization (OPIM) in Bolivia. In so doing it aims to add nuance to scholarship on Bolivian social movements from 1990 to 2010 by focusing on connections and continuities between indigenous organizations and the systems of political association that predate them. Efforts to organize Mositén communities were spurred at least in part by indigenous desire to establish order within their communities and to resolve local problems. They adopted strategies associated with models of social organization that were already familiar to them, particularly the Franciscan missions and agrarian unions, and adapted them to meet their needs. This process involved ongoing interactions between Mositén yearnings, a particular political and historical context, and the creative capacities of Mositén leaders.

Este artículo explora historias orales sobre la fundación de la Organización del Pueblo Indígena Mositén (OPIM), en Bolivia. Así pretende enriquecer la comprensión existente en la academia con nuevos matices sobre los movimientos sociales en Bolivia entre 1990 y 2010 centrándose en las conexiones y continuidades entre las organizaciones indígenas y los sistemas de organización política que las precedían. Los esfuerzos para organizarse por las comunidades Mositén fueron motivados, al menos en parte, por el deseo indígena de organizar sus comunidades internamente y resolver problemas locales. Se adoptaron estrategias asociadas con modelos de organización social que ya les eran familiares –en particular las misiones franciscanas y los sindicatos agrarios– y las adaptaron para satisfacer sus necesidades. Este proceso implicó interacciones continuas entre los anhelos de la comunidad Mositén, un contexto político e histórico particular, y las capacidades creativas de los líderes Mositén.

Introduction

On a warm afternoon, I sat with Don Braulio outside his palm-thatched house in the community of San Pedro de Cogotay.¹ San Pedro lies within the Mositén Original Communal Lands (Tierra Comunitaria de Origen, or TCO), in the tropical forests in the Alto Beni region of La Paz Department, Bolivia. San Pedro was originally part of the Mositén town of Covendo, a three-hour walk downriver. Braulio recounted to me how it broke away from Covendo and organized itself as a new community:

My brother had the idea, 'Why don't we form a town?' He already knew how to organize because he worked in the Colonization Institute. He saw the people there. He knew how you hold meetings. In that time, he told me, 'you know, we could form a town.' That's how we started. Here, we had a hard time with the people [*la gente nos costaba*]. They didn't want to know about meetings. They wanted to stay like they were. Others wanted to stay part of Covendo Since the highlanders are union members [*cómo los collas son sindicalistas*], since they were here, since they are miners, too,

¹ Where appropriate, personal names have been changed to protect anonymity.

they know about unions [*conocen del sindicalismo*]. With the union, we were able to dominate the people. We joined the union, and then we were able to dominate the people a little bit, since there are penalties and fines for people who don't obey. That's how we were able to dominate. That's how we made this little town where we live now.

Braulio's version of the history of his community stands in contrast to much of the scholarship on indigenous social movements between 1990 and 2010. This literature describes the wave of indigenous national and international activism across Latin America as a novel project that involved new discourses of indigenous rights and identities, new alliances and coalitions, and new conceptions of citizenship and relations to the state. Braulio, however, argues that some of the changes attributed to this wave of activism, particularly the changes to political subjectivities, had been already ongoing before the 1990s and formed part of a much more gradual process. Braulio's acknowledgment of the influence of unions on indigenous political activism in the Amazon calls into question assumptions that the establishment of indigenous organizations involved entirely novel political formations. It suggests a longer trajectory for lowland indigenous organization and a deeper entanglement in the national context (in which unions and other nested affiliations play a key role) than most scholarship recognizes. Further, for Braulio, this process was spurred at least in part by the community's desire to resolve its own local problems, rather than by national or international patterns.

In this article I contrast local interpretations of these processes, such as Braulio's, to academic perspectives and national debates in order to come to a more nuanced understanding of indigenous social movements. The local interpretations come from oral histories collected in casual conversations and semistructured interviews conducted between 2007 and 2015. During the time I conducted these interviews, I made three or four trips per year to the TCO, spending between a week and two months in the area at a time. These repeated return trips allowed me to build long-standing relationships with individual informants as well as to gain a general familiarity with the contours of political activity in the Mositén TCO. Much of this article is based on five long interviews with three former caciques of the main Mositén communities, each of whom served a leadership role within the Mositén Indigenous Peoples Organization (Organización de Pueblo Indígena Mositén, OPIM) once it was founded. These five principal interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015, once I had established a strong relationship with the interviewees. I also draw from dozens of recorded interviews and casual conversations with men and women of different ages and positions. Preferring to err on the side of caution, I have anonymized Mositén speakers, since I may not be aware how comments that seem harmless to me might cause trouble for them if they were shared publicly. For this reason, though I have set local perspectives in opposition to scholarly perspectives, I have not always acknowledged the local observers with the same formality as I have the scholars. I mean no lack of respect by this. Instead, I have tried to take their perspectives seriously by quoting them at length, and letting their stories speak for themselves.

Indigenous Political Movements in Bolivia and Beyond

Research on social movements explores new discourses of indigenous political activism, a growing set of national and international coalitions, and novel political subjectivities that emerged throughout Latin America during the 1990s. Some authors are concerned with the discursive aspects of indigenous politics, asking when, why, and how movements for social justice take on the mantle of indigenous identities (Lucero 2008; Bolaños 2010; Larson 2014; Martínez Novo 2013). While recognizing the possibilities that these discourses have opened for indigenous groups to achieve their political goals, this line of inquiry has raised questions about authenticity and legitimacy (Jackson 1995; Lucero 2006; Mattiace 2005; Warren and Jackson 2002), and brought unexpected limitations on possibilities for legitimate political activism (Oakdale 2004; Ramos 1994, 1998). Others have examined the interplay between indigenous social movements, party politics, and the government in a range of contexts (Birbir and Van Cott 2007; Rice 2012; Van Cott 2005; Maybury-Lewis 2002). Some of these studies explore the tension between demands for inclusion as full citizens and demands for self-determination and autonomy (Gustafson 2002; Ramos 2003). This tension has sometimes led to the production of new forms of citizenship, (Canessa 2006, 2012; Lazar 2008; Postero 2007, 2013), often framed in terms of neoliberal multiculturalism (or liberal indigenism), a process which involves decentralization and the recognition of limited multicultural rights in ways that paradoxically expand state authority by shifting the production of new political subjectivities and forms of control and authority onto familiar, local institutions (Gustafson 2002; Hale 2002, 2005; Jackson 2009; Postero 2007; Van Cott 2002).

Within Bolivia, much of the scholarship on social movements and political activism in rural communities takes pains to distinguish between agrarian unions and indigenous organizations. A system of agrarian unions became the predominant form of political organization for rural communities following the revolution that brought the Movimiento Revolucionario Nacional (MNR) government to power.² This political upheaval ushered in a state-sponsored effort to modernize all aspects of the nation, reconstructing national identity around an ideology of race mixture, or *mestizaje* (Sanjines 2004; Gotkowitz 2008; Gildner 2012) and restructuring agricultural production as a market-based economic engine (Heath 1959). This project included an agrarian reform program, passed in 1953 under pressure from rural supporters of the MNR government, which encouraged the formation of agrarian unions in parts of the country where these did not already exist. The unions that were formed during this time came to play an important role in organizing social and political life in rural communities and served as the principal intermediary in interactions with the government (Léons 1967, 1977; Dandler 1976; Eckstein 1983). They became sites for intimate interpenetrations between communities, political parties, local power brokers, and the government. In many cases, they were tools for enterprising intermediaries who were able to gain access to government programs and exploit the position of dependency of campesinos (who were less literate, less experienced in negotiating with bureaucracies, and chronically dependent on credit) for their own personal gain (Heath 1973; Dandler 1976; Léons 1977; Eckstein 1983). Scholars who describe this process typically reflect a concern with political practice rather than ideology.

Later scholars and activists shifted their focus from practice to ideology, identity, and discourse. Scholarship in this vein tends to draw a marked distinction between *sindicalismo*³ and *indianismo*.⁴ This understanding presupposes that *sindicalismo*, with its Marxist ideology, applies to communities of campesinos, while indigenous activists reject this Marxism in favor of native forms of communal landholding (Albó 1987, 1991; Rivera Cusicanqui 1987, 1990; Hertzler 2005; Canessa 2006, 2012; García Linera 2008; Pape 2009; Fontana 2014). As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1987) describes in detail, agrarian unions affiliated with the Unified Labor Federation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, CSUTCB), served as a location for the claims-making and contestatory politics of the indianista projects that aimed to reconstruct communal *ayllu*⁵ holdings, and even to reconstruct the nation as Kollasuya, the southern quarter of the Inca empire (Reinaga [1970] 2010; Albó 1987; Mamani Ramírez 2011; Stephenson 2002; Van Cott 2005). This Andean indianismo sought to reclaim an indigenous national identity, alter the political ideology of the government, and shift correlations of power within the political party system (Rivera Cusicanqui 1987; Canessa 2006; García Linera 2008; Gildner 2012). The debate between these two perspectives, both in political practice and in academic literature, pits the modernism and ideological realpolitik of *sindicalismo* against the romanticism and radical utopianism of *indianismo* (Albó 1987; Rivera Cusicanqui 1987; García Linera 2008). Yet, as Pape (2009) notes, even organizations that promoted radically different ideological positions share structural similarities.

When the distinction between *sindicalismo* and *indianismo* is applied to the lowlands, colonists are slotted neatly into the *sindicalista* position (Yashar 2005), while indigenous organizations are described as an organic reaction against threats posed by the incursions of new actors into their territories (Bazoberry Chali 2008; Ávila Montaña 2009; Molina Argandoña 2011). Some authors ascribe an influential role to national and international NGOs (Yashar 2005; Lucero 2008; Rice 2012), and others go so far as to describe the whole project of indigenous mobilization as a scheme cooked up by foreign interests (García Linera 2013). The narrative of spontaneous establishment of novel forms of social organization in response to new, external threats frequently treats the 1990 March for Territory and Dignity—which demanded legal recognition, full citizenship, and territorial autonomy—as the debut of Amazonian indigenous organizations on a national stage (Jones 1990; Albó 1991; Lehm Ardaya 1999; Gustafson 2002; Roper 2003; Canedo Vazquez 2011). Just as with the regional literature on indigenous social movements in Latin America, research on the Bolivian lowlands emphasizes the emergence of new discourses, coalitions, and relations to the state. It focuses on conflicts over territory and natural resources, movements to promote cultural rights, and debates about new kinds of citizenship (Postero 2007; Fabricant and Gustafson 2011; McNeish 2013; Schilling-Vacaflor 2013).

² The MNR revolution of April 1952 brought a coalition of middle-class intellectuals, miners, and peasants to power and ushered in an era of modernization, including the nationalization of the mines, agrarian reform, universal education, and universal suffrage.

³ Marxist political activism centered on a class-based ideology that focuses on the economic positions of peasants (or “campesinos”) and workers.

⁴ Political activism with an ideology that distinguishes between indigenous and western cosmologies and promotes native models of community organization.

⁵ *Ayllu* refers to the traditional communal landholding system in the Andean highlands.

This description glosses over organizational antecedents to this new indigenous movement. While several scholars have previously noted the leftist roots of indigenous activism in the region (Martí i Puig 2014; Rice 2012; Troyan 2008; Yashar 2005), with a handful of exceptions (Wentzel 1989; Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein 2015) they focus on rupture and change rather than emphasizing elements of continuity. Most recent research tends to ignore ongoing contact with other movements and treat the political systems that organized indigenous life prior to the 1990s—such as the Catholic missions in the north of La Paz or the Moxeño *cabildos*—as aspects of traditional indigenous culture rather than as historical antecedents to present-day political activism (Roper 2003; Canedo Vazquez 2011). Yet, from the beginning, lowland organizations were in contact with the agrarian union system of the highlands. The Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia, CIDOB), the umbrella organization for lowland indigenous groups, had links to the national agrarian union system when it was founded in 1982 (following a series of meetings, the first of which occurred in September 1978). Representatives of the CSUTCB were invited to the founding congress (Riester 1985, 74; Van Cott 2005, 60), and it was initially named Indigenous Peoples' Union of the East, Chaco, and Amazon (Central de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente, Chaco y Amazonía de Bolivia), adopting the naming conventions of Bolivian labor unions. It adopted its current name in 1994, as the wave of indigenous activism grew stronger throughout the region. Mosestenes were also in contact with the system of agrarian unions, even as early as the late 1950s, when colonization programs expanded into Alto Beni (Cusack 1967; Dandler 1976; Eckstein 1983; Gill 1987).

I explore these connections through oral histories of the foundation of OPIM, which ascribe an influential (though often adversarial) role to the agrarian unions. I rely heavily on Sian Lazar's description of "nested affiliations" (2008) to describe these unions and the pattern of social organizations that mediate political relationships throughout Bolivia. Lazar's principal aim is to describe citizenship in El Alto as a certain kind of corporative political subjectivity that is based on and mediated through a relationship to a collectivity, rather than a formal, individualized relationship to a state in the liberal model. Here I draw on her work not for its descriptions of those subjectivities and the process of their formation, but rather for its excellent descriptions of the collectivities themselves—the "nested affiliations"—and the ways that they are entangled with state bureaucracies, NGOs, and political parties. Lazar uses the term "nested affiliation" to describe an organizational structure in which local chapters are hierarchically dependent on a series of regional, department-wide, and/or national organizations. She argues that these nested affiliations are not merely patronage networks, expressions of popular will, ideological tools, or venues for making claims. Rather, they are sites that facilitate intimate interpenetration between a range of communities, state bureaucracies, political parties, NGOs, and other actors at each level of organization. This model describes a wide range of organizations, often ones that are ideologically or politically opposed to one another. These include unions, neighborhood associations, cooperatives, parents' associations, and indigenous organizations, among others. Lazar builds on the work of Rivera Cusicanqui (1987), which explores the ideologies and politics of these organizations as they expanded into the rural highlands. But, by shifting the focus away from political discourses and ideological concerns to the particular practices and relationships that occur within these organizations, Lazar constructs a detailed model of the institutional setting that allows these intimate interpenetrations to occur. This article builds on both of these works to describe the adoption of that model by a handful of Mosestén leaders who adapted it to establish order within their communities.

Efforts to resolve conflicts within their communities led Mosestenes to participate in this system of nested affiliations. I make no claim, however, that Mosestenes have adopted the kinds of citizenship practices or corporative political subjectivities that Lazar describes. In fact, the day-to-day relationships between individual Mosestenes and OPIM bear little resemblance to subjectivities or citizenship practices in El Alto. Many Mosestenes express ambivalence about these forms of social organization, simultaneously yearning to produce order within their communities and resenting the violence implicit in such institutions of social control. Stef Jansen calls for anthropologists to treat yearnings for order—particularly yearnings for order that implicate forming connections with larger-order networks, or "upward and outward gridding," as he terms it—as seriously as we take "authentic, autonomous, self-conscious grid evasion" (Jansen 2014, 255). Braulio's pride in Mosestén's inclusion in the union system of nested affiliations is certainly an expression of the kind of "grid desire" that Jansen describes. Yet Braulio also acknowledges an inherent and "hidden violence" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010) in the unions, recognizing them as a means for "dominating" the people. As Rivera notes, this bears the marks of a pattern of colonial domination by European forms of social organization. Other interviewees align more closely with Rivera, expressing greater antipathy toward such efforts to impose an internal order on Mosestén communities. Mosestén political subjectivities seem to inhabit a tension between these two positions, simultaneously yearning for "gridding" of a well-ordered society and resenting the

“hidden violence” that this implies. Though Mosestén political subjectivities are not the primary focus of this article, it is clear that ambivalence about their engagement with the variety of organizational structures that they encounter is a recurring element in the histories they tell. The long trajectory of this ambivalence opens the possibility that the changes in political subjectivities attributed to the indigenous activism of the 1990s may not be as complete or dramatic as they have sometimes been presented.

The following sections recount these histories over three broad periods. The narrators often reveal only a fractured understanding of national politics, and their experiences bear a disjointed relationship to the broader political context. Nevertheless, these local histories of attempts to protect particular communities occur in, and in fact form part of, a broader historical moment and national context. The first section includes stories about social organization during the mission period. The tellers express ambivalence about this period, simultaneously longing for the relative order and certainty of that time and resenting the violence and authoritarianism that maintained that order. The second section traces the efforts of several individuals to resolve conflicts in their communities during the period after mission lands were opened to colonization. These efforts coalesced around a move toward “upward and outward gridding” into a set of nested affiliations. They were marked by experimentation and improvisation throughout. This process ultimately led to a series of increasingly close encounters with state bureaucracies mediated by NGO operators, and to the formation of an indigenous organization that roughly parallels the nested affiliations of the agrarian unions with which Mosestenes were familiar. Finally, the third section describes the effects of the lingering ambivalence that many Mosestenes express about social organizations which claim the authority to dominate people.

Time of the Missions: Stories of Violence and Yearning for Order

Older Mosestenes have direct recollections of life under the mission system. They recall the mission with ambivalence, describing it simultaneously as a time of order and plenty, and as a time of slavery and exploitation. The missionaries acted as sole intermediaries between Mosestenes and the world beyond the Alto Beni region. The mission transported its products—principally cacao, coffee, and quinine—by raft to the Yungas town of Miguillas, and then to La Paz. Compensation for work on the mission lands came in the form of scrip that could be exchanged in mission stores for market goods (Ricco Quiroga 2010). There was no exchange of currency. The mission fathers appointed a series of local authorities, including a cacique, his second, and various “police.” These served as intermediaries between the fathers and the members of the community, in both spiritual and secular affairs. The cacique’s most prominent role was to explain the sermon to the rest of the community at the doors of the church after mass. Along with the rest of the authorities, he was also responsible for maintaining order, cleaning the church, and ensuring that people carried out work in the mission’s cacao plantations. These authorities were also responsible for punishing those guilty of infractions such as arriving late to work or drunkenness. Punishments were meted out in *arrobos*, units of twenty-five lashes. As Don Ernesto, the cacique of Santa Ana when I was conducting fieldwork, put it, “There was a police who used a whip and he was the most dangerous man.”

Don Julio, a traditional healer and frequent interlocutor for visiting anthropologists, recalls this period in some detail. He told me of watching his parents work on the mission as a child. He views the mission period as a time of slavery, during which labor was extracted under the threat of violence:

I was born the year universal suffrage arrived, in 1952. And they said that there wouldn’t be any more slavery. Before that there was slavery on the mission of Covendo. They worked on the haciendas. And in Santa Ana, also. When there was the agrarian reform, I remember that in Covendo there was still slavery. Because the priests had haciendas with ten hectares of cacao. My parents worked there, my grandparents, everyone. I was a child, in ’58, ’59, in those times Whatever punishment there was then, it was the lash. Robberies or they didn’t work, and they had to whip them They say it was even worse before. Whoever didn’t work or missed a few minutes when they arrived, it was the lash. Or whoever did something wrong, like beat their wife, it was the lash. So, it was the lash for everything.

He went on to lament that, while it may have been the lash for everything, it was not the lash for everyone. He told the story of a white accountant, hired by the mission, who embezzled money, but was never punished. From Julio’s perspective, it is clear that the aim of the mission was to extract labor from Mosestenes for the benefit of foreign mission fathers.

Don David, at one time the cacique of Santa Ana, recalled a particular event—the construction of an airstrip in the mission town of Covendo—on which Mosestenes toiled for months so that the mission could

extract goods more easily. He was a small child at the time, but he remembers that whole families worked on the project, which ultimately served for the extraction of quinine by merchants from La Paz.⁶ David recalls entire families suffering in the hot sun. Grandmothers cared for children while men, women, and youths moved earth by hand:

All the people, all the youths, all the women worked. The old women that were there then took care of their grandchildren. They were hung [in hammocks] one next to the other. The old women became nannies. When the children would cry, their mothers came and nursed them for a minute. It was terrible. I used to see my mother, with her whole face sunburned. So much sun. I saw that in my mother and the women who worked. They carried earth in baskets. The men dug, the youths carried earth to level the airstrip. They worked hard. I don't remember how many years it took, or whether it was six months, or a year. Then they didn't travel by raft anymore It was the time of quinine, too. Ages ago, when I was a child. I remember a little bit.

The airstrip, large enough for a Hercules C130 to land, is one of only two such strips in the steep valleys of the Alto Beni. The other was built by military conscripts. The project required not simply creating a clearing in a flat stretch of forest (as is the case in flatlands north and east of Alto Beni), but building it up and leveling it as well, all by hand.

Those who I interviewed described the forced labor in direct terms. On occasion, they also insinuated that ongoing resentment and tension between the Masetén population and the priests simmered below the surface. Some told stories about direct violence against the priests from earlier epochs, for instance the drowning of one mission father when his raft was intentionally overturned, or occasions when particularly abusive fathers may have been poisoned. Don Marcos, who had once been cacique of Covendo, recalls a less violent, but no less direct, act of resistance to the efforts of one mission father to raise cattle on the mission: "For example, one father, Padre Tomás, brought fifty head of cattle to raise. Then the father went to La Paz. There weren't cars then. You had to come and go by raft. One month, two months. The father returned. And the Masetenes had shot all of the cattle with arrows, so that they wouldn't have to work to open pasture. They finished killing them all. When the priest returned, there weren't any cattle left."

We laughed together at the Masetenes' disobedience and willfulness. Then Don Marcos added, wistfully, "And then they said that the father was sorry, and he almost left them," as if he felt guilty about the whole affair.

In spite of the violence and the sense that Masetén labor had been exploited by the mission fathers, many Masetenes also express a nostalgic yearning for the order of earlier times. This happens particularly as older Masetenes reflect on the current state of their communities. Certainly, one aspect of this yearning is that they view the mission period, prior to the arrival of colonists, as a time of fellowship and plenty, in which food was shared and money had not yet corrupted their relations (Ricco Quiroga and Sturtevant 2016). Another aspect, though, is a yearning for a more orderly world. For instance, Marcos protests at length about the disorder that he sees in present-day social organization:

That's why I protest about these authorities. They make so much noise to do nothing. They're on the loudspeaker at night, for example. Then they say "meetings." Shoot. Why don't they analyze something good, so that they aren't talking nonsense? ... If I was one of them, and I had to be part of the people, I wouldn't be so bossy. They have to guide people in how it should be, and organize their work; not just watch them, not just sit around and yell I mean, we aren't slaves. There's a democracy now. We have to go in good form. We aren't in the old days. Pharaoh still managed everyone like a slave, but us here, no. That's what makes me think. I protest. Because I know how you have to be. You can't be full of yourself or authoritarian. It doesn't work to be proud. You have to share.

In Marcos's mind, what is lacking in the present-day leaders is a capacity to plan and organize communal labor through humility and shared commitment. For Marcos, good leaders operate by persuasion and example rather than through violence or an overbearing attitude. This type of coordination is precisely the role that the caciques and their police played in the social world of the mission, though they had the authority of the church and the violence of the whip to back it up.

⁶ Typically, quinine extraction is associated with the early nineteenth century, but the bark of cinchona trees was still being harvested from the Alto Beni in the middle of the twentieth century.

David, on the other hand, told a story that suggests that something beyond the threat of violence was at the root of the missions' capacity to direct labor and organize social life. He followed his story of the airstrip by recalling how Mosevenes received the bishop in the days before the construction of the airstrip, when he had to travel by boat:

Before there was the airstrip in Covendo, the father would come. The Monsignor would come. And they would receive him like we receive the government now. That was the tradition back then. The women with flowers, the kids. Shoot, it was like flower confetti. That's how they received the Monsignor. On the beach, with musicians, with violin, with singers Playing a march, "boom, boom, boom." They would go to the river, "he's coming." They set off the first stick of dynamite. "The Monsignor is coming!" The community was joyful [*contenta*]. Ooooooh! We would go out to wait on the beach. That's how I remember it a little bit. We would go down to the beach, and when he was closer, another stick of dynamite. The musicians waiting for him with a march, "boom, boom, boom." Four musicians, or six.

This nostalgic reflection on the pomp and circumstance contrasts starkly to his recollection of the construction of the airstrip. Taken together, the two remarks reflect ambivalence about the mission. He rejects the suffering associated with the forced labor that made the mission run. At the same time, he waxes nostalgic about the pageantry of the church and the reverence that Mosevenes showed to the person of the priest.

Marcos's experience is also exemplary of the contradiction and ambivalence that Mosevenes lived under the mission fathers. He recalls vividly how, as a child, he witnessed a Mosevén man whipped nearly to death for the crime of stealing a married woman. That image of violence still colors his experiences of the mission fathers. Yet he also speaks admiringly of the organization and orderliness of the mission system, particularly compared to the disorder he sees in the present. As a youth, Marcos became a novice and trained to become a priest. His experiences offered him opportunities to learn about the world beyond Alto Beni. He learned to read and write, and to sing in Latin. The Redemptorist fathers brought him to live in La Paz and Buenos Aires. Yet he "worked like a slave," and the fathers exercised strict control. He was not allowed to wear a watch or buy his own clothes, but instead was issued two shirts per week. He told me of his gradual disillusionment with religious life, describing the priests' authority as paternalistic, like a father sheltering and controlling his children. Ultimately, he felt suffocated in his life as a novice. When he returned to Covendo after his father had been gravely injured in an accident, he decided to abandon his training and stay in Alto Beni. There he inherited the role of cacique from his uncle, eventually joined and subsequently left the agrarian union, and played an important role in founding OPIM.

The nostalgic yearning that Don Marcos, along with many other Mosevenes, feels for the well-ordered society of the mission system presents Mosevenes as actively engaged in a process that goes well beyond merely responding to abuses by outside actors. Rather it shows them to be proactively envisioning a community that they would like to create. While Jansen's work in the suburbs of Sarajevo finds that this yearning is expressed in projects through which people strive to grid themselves "outward and upward" into the state (Jansen 2014), in the Mosevén TCO, it was projected not onto the state itself but rather onto the mission, agrarian unions, and eventually their own ethnicity-based organization. In practice, Mosevenes demonstrate considerable ambivalence about these institutions and the people associated with them, both the Mosevén leaders and the outsider-intermediaries with whom they worked. The following section explores the experimentation and innovation that Mosevenes carried out in order to found just such an organization. The sense of ambivalence—simultaneous yearning and resentment—that is obvious in their recollections of the mission period also arises in more subtle forms in their encounters with unions and NGOs.

Forming an Organization: Stories of Unions and NGO Outsiders

The end of the mission brought a period of uncertainty, disorder, and conflict to Mosevén communities. Beginning in the late 1950s, the MNR government sponsored a colonization program in Alto Beni, transporting farmers from the highland deserts around La Paz to the territory of the former Mosevén missions, and building a new road to connect the region to the city. The project was funded by the Bolivian Development Corporation (Corporación Boliviana de Fomento, CBF) and USAID (Cusack 1967; Crist and Nissly 1973; Fifer 1982; Torrico 1982; Stearman 1985; Wentzel 1989).⁷ Colonists formed unions to petition

⁷ Responsibility for the colonization project was later shifted to the Colonization Institute (Instituto de Colonización).

the Colonization Institute for land and represent their interests with government more broadly. In addition to these government actors and unions, several NGOs, including the Peace Corps, the British Tropical Mission Society, and the Bolivian Evangelical Methodist Church, also supported the colonization project, according to Jim Hoey, a Methodist missionary who worked in the region starting in 1966. The colonization program—with its coterie of unions, government institutions, and NGOs—exposed Mosestenes to new models of social organization and a new set of actors who sought to influence life in Mosestén communities.

Colonization also opened territory that Mosestenes had typically depended on for their livelihoods to resource extraction by private actors, other than the church. This amplified the already existing cycle of boom and bust extraction (Ricco Quiroga 2010; Ricco Quiroga and Sturtevant 2016), and sparked new conflicts for Mosestén communities. These processes ran different courses in each of the three Mosestén communities, but in each case, the arrival of outsiders led to conflicts. Mosestenes experimented with a number of responses to these conflicts, including strategic migrations to less populated areas (Gómez-García Krust 2006), efforts to work within the agrarian union system, and ultimately organizing Mosestén communities together into a hierarchy of nested affiliations parallel to the union structure. Below, I recount oral histories from three leaders, one from each of the major Mosestén communities, regarding their efforts to restore a sense of order to their communities and resolve internal conflicts. All three talk in depth about their encounters and relationships with outside actors—unions, religious figures, NGOs, and bureaucratic agencies—as they explored and experimented to find a way to establish order within their communities.

Santa Ana: Don David

Santa Ana was the community that felt the impacts of colonization earliest. The main road to La Paz crossed the river on a ferry just below the community. It was one of the first areas to be included in the government's colonization plans and a number of colonies were established nearby. Don David told me that he joined the agrarian union and showed me his union card from 1972 to prove it. Agricultural lots were granted to colonists and Mosestenes in alternating plots, and a *junta de vecinos* or neighborhood commission like those common in highland cities took over the organization of the community. Putting Mosestenes in close contact with colonists, it was hoped, would encourage Mosestenes to overcome their perceived laziness and become more productive economic actors, like the colonists all around them (Sturtevant 2015). As with similar experiments elsewhere, the result of this policy was that Mosestenes lost their lands to colonists and were subsequently forced to more marginal land, farther from town.

Don David sought to resolve this conflict which was alienating Mosestenes from their land. By the time he was chosen as cacique in 1977, he was already familiar with NGOs and the Colonization Institute, having worked as a translator and boatman during the road construction project and having dated a Peace Corps volunteer. He had also begun to feel the sting of exclusion from the agrarian unions through which colonists represented their interests. Initially David tried to work through the union to gain title for collective lands for Mosestenes in Santa Ana, but these efforts were soon frustrated. David tells that he approached the union's lawyer seeking assistance in titling communal lands for Mosestenes.⁸ The lawyer asked for 50 bolivianos in advance, and told David to bring the relevant paperwork to the Colonization Institute several days later. David arrived with all of the paperwork, but the lawyer never appeared. For a year, David bounced back and forth between the union and the Colonization Institute. Finally, on a journey from La Paz to Santa Ana, he arrived in Sapecho (the main transportation hub in Alto Beni at that time) too late to travel on to Santa Ana, and sought refuge at the convent of a group of Brazilian nuns who were working in the region. He lamented that he was discouraged and wanted to give up as cacique. They encouraged him to stick it out and offered to find help for him on their next trip to La Paz. They set up meetings the Lay Movement for Latin America (Movimiento Laico para América Latina, MLAL), the subsecretariat for indigenous affairs, and other institutions, and sent a note asking him to meet on a certain date at an office in La Paz.⁹ At the appointed time, Don David was unable to find the building. He walked back and forth, lost and increasingly disappointed. Finally, he heard a shout from a window above the street. "Cacique! Cacique de Santa Ana!" It was one of the Brazilian sisters, waiting for him in an office with a range of people—lawyers, coordinators, a gringo—who were all there to help carry out the coming work.

Though this was only the beginning of a long *trámite*, or bureaucratic process, the support of these groups bolstered David's resolve. He grew more animated as he described the experience of walking into the meeting

⁸ While David identifies the lawyer as representing the union, it is likely that this was the lawyer who worked for the Colonization Institute. The error is telling, though, in that it associates the Colonization Institute with the colonists to the exclusion of Mosestenes.

⁹ It is unclear from David's telling which organization's office this was.

arranged by the nuns in La Paz and finding a host of lawyers, consultants, anthropologists, and coordinators waiting for him and ready to offer their assistance. "It's not easy to do a *trámite*. It's hard. You need territory documents, a lawyer, coordinator, human rights, so that they see you [*attender el trámite*]. If you have a lawyer, coordinator, human rights, then you are strong [*ya tienes fuerza*]." He was relieved to encounter this system of bureaucratic support that was designed specifically for indigenous peoples of the lowlands. David had previously been unfamiliar with CIDOB, but he recognized instantly that it was "for *originarios*." He could now bypass the agrarian unions that had frustrated his earlier attempts to title land for Mosestenes. As he puts it, "they decided to help with the *trámite* . . . 'You don't go to the lawyer for the Colonization Institute any more. Come directly to this office.'" Finally, David had a parallel system for people like the Mosestenes. After many years of processing the *trámite* as cacique, and countless trips to and from La Paz, David finally gained a collective title to eight thousand hectares of land around Santa Ana for Mosestenes.¹⁰ For David, the unions served as an example for how an organization could possess the force necessary to negotiate with the state and earn some protection for Mosestén lands. But these unions represented colonists' interests and kept Mosestenes like David on the margins. It was the outsider-intermediaries (nuns and NGO activists) that directed David toward the network of nested affiliations and state support that helped them gain leverage in their bureaucratic odysseys.

Covendo: Don Marcos

In Covendo, conflict over land titles and contact with the agrarian unions also spurred Mosestén experimentation with new forms of organization. Covendo, unlike Santa Ana, was located at a significant distance from the main road, and the community initially had much less contact with colonists. Furthermore, the mission fathers titled land for each Mosestén family between 1958 and 1964 but kept the details of these titles hidden from the population until 1975. Given the relative isolation of Covendo, granting individual titles did not have the same effect of alienating Mosestenes from the land as it did in Santa Ana. It did become a source of conflict, however, when a timber company opened a sawmill in the nearby village of Popoy. Conflicts arose between Mosestenes over the boundaries of lots where valuable trees were growing. These conflicts sparked significant social disorder in the community of Covendo. Mosestén experiments with the agrarian union system did little to resolve local conflicts or establish order, but instead plunged Mosestenes into national conflicts in which they had little interest.

Marcos, the erstwhile cacique of Covendo, described these experiences in distinctly negative terms. On the advice of two union authorities, Marcos abandoned the position of cacique and became the general secretary of Covendo. A year later, he switched back, citing the dishonesty, manipulation, and political maneuverings of the union leaders. Marcos was concerned principally with organizing and improving social life in Covendo, while the leaders of these agrarian unions were concerned that Mosestenes support them in their pitched struggles with the national government. Marcos describes these leaders as outsiders seeking to manipulate Mosestenes for their own ends:

Chuck: Did you join the Agrarian Union?

Marcos: Yes, I think it was in '80. It must have been '80.

C: Under whose advice was that?

M: It was Francisco Muchia. And then there was that guy Gutiérrez. Juan Gutiérrez. They organized us. They knew how to organize blockades, also. Yes. I remember it. Shoot. Like I said, they lie to the people. They roped us in. Since it wasn't an agrarian government at that time, they said that there were soldiers coming. They said that they were persecuting the unions then. They mixed that all together to scare the people who don't know. So they blockaded the airstrip. What do the Mosestenes know about blockades? I even asked them why they got involved in these things. In the city, it's one thing, but here, why would you do those things?¹¹

C: And was Francisco Muchia Leco?¹²

M: He was Leco.

C: And Juan Gutiérrez?

¹⁰ David was cacique for seven years and finished his term once the land was titled. Extrapolating from this story, this communal title would have been issued in 1984.

¹¹ This appears to have occurred during the coup that brought Luis García Meza to power in 1980.

¹² *Leco* refers to a neighboring ethnic group.

M: He must have been from somewhere near Chulumani.¹³ I don't know. I think he was trained in union organization. He was good at talking, at convincing people.

C: He must have had his interests.

M: He must have been some kind of leader who they gave something to so that he would organize people. Like the brothers, the evangelists, the pastors. They travel here and there so that people join. The unions have to be like that, so that there are more members.

Another resident of the TCO recalled that Gutiérrez was a member of “the Cuban party,” referring to the communist party. However, it is not his ideology that makes him remarkable in Marcos's story, but rather his position as a union leader with the personal charisma of an evangelist, aiming to add more members to the union. He was able to amass some support within the Masetén territory, but ultimately Masetenes abandoned not only Gutiérrez but also his network of union organizations and political party patronage. This set of nested affiliations did not offer Masetenes in Covendo a solution to local conflicts, but instead refocused their energy toward national struggle.

Muchane: Don Horacio

Muchane, the most remote Masetén community, which was still not served by road during the time I conducted fieldwork, was far more isolated from the colonization program and the agrarian unions. The process there took a different, and much longer, path. Don Horacio, the erstwhile cacique of Muchane, recounted to me that he and a handful of other families refounded the abandoned mission of Muchane. As the road was under construction, Padre Martín encouraged Horacio to go to Muchane to occupy the land in defense against the impending arrival of colonists. But in the end, colonists were not the source of conflict for Horacio and his group. The source of conflict turned out to be timber extraction. Juan Torrez Chuquimia, a former member of Parliament, contested the Masetén settlement of Muchane and asserted that the community was part of his timber claim, producing as evidence documents that none of the Masetén inhabitants could read. The conflict escalated for some time, and Don Horacio claims that he would have killed Juan Torrez, except that he worried that his young children would witness. Instead, he visited an *ingeniero* that he knew in the land office in La Paz and discovered that Muchane was not part of Torrez's claim. The engineer encouraged Horacio to contest the claim. As Horacio recalls, the engineer advised, “If you do it, if you are strong, you'll get the land. The leader has to make a demand [*el dirigente tiene que venir a reclamar*].” Nevertheless, the conflict intensified.

As Horacio tells the story, Juan Torrez “got mad and went to Rurrenabaque [a town two days downriver from Muchane] to get police.” They arrested Don Horacio and transported him to Rurrenabaque under close guard. Once there, they held him for two days and eventually tricked him into signing a document acknowledging that he had agreed to leave Muchane to Juan Torrez. When he was released, he returned directly to La Paz and to the office of MLAL.¹⁴ Riccardo Giavarini, an Italian lay missionary who served as the head of MLAL in Bolivia, brought Horacio to denounce the owner of the timber company on three different radio stations. Then, “Monday we had a meeting. All of them! The *dirigentes* from all twelve stories [*pisos*] were there. All of them that help indigenous people. The minister, too. Everyone was there. Don Riccardo knew that they were there and he told them. They wanted to know which cacique was really a Masetén.” They brought Don Horacio to the parliament, where he spoke in Masetén and Spanish, explaining that he was fighting for territory for his children and grandchildren. They met for four days in La Paz.

The “important people assembled there” insisted that “there has to be a president of the Masetenes.” Don Horacio's telling leaves out other key events that might have also contributed to laying the groundwork for the foundation of OPIM, but he too highlights the need for someone to represent Masetenes before the state. Tellingly, he argues that it was the state that insisted on that. For Horacio, the crucible in which their organization was formed is precisely this encounter with the state actors. “OPIM arose from that,” as he puts it. That is, the formation of nested affiliations for indigenous communities is intimately linked to encounters with the state.

¹³ A town in the Yungas region, a coca-producing area located between Alto Beni and the city of La Paz.

¹⁴ Though Horacio was imprecise with his dates, it is clear that there was an ongoing relationship with MLAL, since he was already familiar with the offices of the organization.

An Organization Formed ... and Ongoing Ambivalence

Shortly after these events, on August 20, 1994, at a meeting in Santa Ana, OPIM was officially founded. OPIM was initially affiliated with the CPIB (Central de Pueblos Indígenas del Beni), which was, in turn, affiliated with the CIDOB. Its first president, vice president, and secretary were the caciques from Santa Ana, Covendo, and Muchane. They were sworn in by CPIB representatives in the church in Santa Ana in the presence of representatives from various other organizations, including the Consejo Chimán and CIDOB. The presence of these organizations inaugurated OPIM into a series of hierarchically organized, nested affiliations structured much like the agrarian union system, with communities represented by local chapters that are in turn affiliated to departmental and national organizations. Like the agrarian unions, they serve as sites for intimate interpenetration between the government and indigenous populations, through patronage, coalition building, and redistribution as well as claims making and contestation. The formation of OPIM represented an attempt to respond to the yearning for order by incorporating Mosestén communities into a series of nested affiliations that would engage with state bureaucracies.

It marked the beginning of a new phase of Mosestén organization. Within a local context, the principal advantage that ethnicity-based organizations (and their NGO allies) presented was that they recognized that Mosestén interests did not coincide with those of the colonists and their agrarian unions. Riccardo Giavarini, of MLAL, recalls that OPIM “always had a conflictive relationship with the agrarian union.” When the local agrarian union organized a blockade, OPIM refused to participate on account of “different visions about development.” Further, Mosestenes rejected the participation of colonists in a project to be funded by the European Union, fearing that the colonists would take over the management of the project and redirect all of the funds to their own communities. Yet, in spite of the good will extended by some Mosestenes to OPIM and its NGO allies, these organizations were not inoculated from resentment and ambivalence. Rumors began to circulate that OPIM was working to secure land for European outsiders. These rumors encouraged resistance to both the formation of OPIM and the consolidation of the TCO. Many individuals who might otherwise have met the criteria to be included in the census that would determine the size of the TCO declined to self-identify as Mosestenes, on account of the suspicions that they harbored for the NGOs that conducted it. Still, many Mosestenes continue to yearn for order and the resolution of conflicts within their communities. Several young leaders of OPIM shift the blame back onto the communities, claiming that Mosestenes do not respect the organization as they should. Lamenting the relative debility of the Mosestén organization, some of these younger leaders today advocate for a return of the system of disciplinary violence that the priests implemented on the missions. Such punishments would encourage participation in and compliance with the organization’s directives, and produce a well-ordered society of their nostalgic yearnings.

Don David’s response to these criticisms shows the new role that the organization had come to play in situating Mosestenes in a national political context: “Now OPIM is like the Federation of Colonists [i.e., the agrarian union]. The people from here don’t understand that. They say that OPIM doesn’t have any strength, doesn’t have anything. But according to the institutions and the lawyers for the coordinator [for indigenous affairs], OPIM is like the federation that the colonists have. That’s what OPIM is; it’s the highest authority [es *cargo más alto*].”

David’s reflection makes the point that OPIM is strong not because it makes a radical break from past forms of organization, but precisely because it adopts the kinds of political organization already existing within Bolivia and adapts it to Mosestén purposes. Don Marcos’s reflections on Mosestén involvement with the agrarian unions, above, describe a situation in which representatives of the unions tried to co-opt Mosestenes into their organization in order to expand their membership into a new territory and strengthen their position in national political struggles. David describes a situation in which Mosestenes have co-opted the agrarian unions’ strategies in order to establish order in their communities and engage with the institutions of national politics on their own terms. Instead of incorporating themselves into the *sindicato* system, Mosestenes established a parallel equivalent.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the ways that the formation of such an indigenous organization—incorporated into a hierarchy of nested affiliations, but organized around ethnic identity—reflects important continuities with already existing models and connections with a national context. Focusing on a particular local case reveals complexities in indigenous social movements between 1990 and 2010, complexities that are both local and national in scope. They are local in the sense that specific processes, practices, and yearnings motivated efforts to consolidate an organization, national in the sense that their histories reveal their ongoing participation in and long-standing interactions with national political processes and strategies.

Efforts to organize Masetén communities drew on the familiar models of Franciscan missions and agrarian unions in the hopes of achieving this goal, whether this involved founding a community, as Don Braulio tells us, or titling land, as Don David recounts. At the same time, they evoke a clear, though ambivalent, yearning for the production of order within their communities that many associate with mission times. The political moment of ethnic mobilization in the 1990s presented an opportunity to expand the pursuit of these goals (Gustafson 2002; Hale 2005; Postero 2007), but both efforts to organize their communities internally and their contacts with national institutions predate that period. These efforts were neither a direct response to the abuses of outside actors, nor a co-optation of indigenous peoples by outside agents, but rather an inventive experimentation which involved ongoing interactions between Masetén yearnings, a particular political and historical context, and the creative capacities of Masetén leaders.

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