POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND
THE EVANESCENCE OF POWER:
MAKING HISTORY IN HIGHLAND BOLIVIA

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The Bolivian Quechua community of Quirpini appears to be governed by a number of political institutions whose activities have little capacity for historically transformative action. An analysis of actions by each institution reveals that they either never mobilize people or are set up so that collective action is possible only with the assent and cooperation of the Spanish-speaking elite of the nearby regional capital. What appears to be Quirpini’s system of self-governance is in practice the means by which the village is dominated. (Politics, Bolivia, power, mediation, action)

Until approximately 1984, the major political role of the kurajkuna (political authorities) of the indigenous Quechua community called Quirpini was to perform menial services for the leading officials in the town of San Lucas, the regional capital. Most of the authorities were required to go to town on a weekly basis to do tasks such as sweeping the mayor’s patio, taking eggs to the authorities, and gathering and cutting firewood for them. One of the commonplaces of political anthropology about the Andes region is that a key, if not the central, role of communal authorities is to represent the community to those outside, particularly neighboring communities and to elements of the dominant Hispanic society and government (Abercrombie 1986; Rasnake 1988). Seen in this light, the services provided by the kurajkuna to the officials of San Lucas were not only perquisites enjoyed by members of the central town’s Spanish-speaking elite, but an unmistakable representation of the subordination of Quirpini to San Lucas. By performing menial tasks and giving minor tribute to the authorities of San Lucas, the communal authorities were repeatedly concretizing, if not embodying, the submission of Quirpini to the regional center.

This was the state of affairs before a new priest was assigned to the San Lucas region in the early 1980s. He began a systematic program aimed to reduce the campesino1 communities’ subservience to San Lucas, a key part of which was to put an end to the kurajkuna’s services to town authorities. In Quirpini, the form this change took was an attack on the kurajkuna as the institution then existed. He allied himself with the young head of the communal peasant union (sindicato), Justinianno Cruz. According to Cruz, who provided most of the information about these events, the official leader of the community at the time (the cacique) was ineffective. The union, with the padre’s support, got the community to remove the kurajkuna (including the cacique) from their positions and declare that whereas in the past an incoming authority had been chosen by his predecessor, from then on they would all be chosen at a community meeting by popular vote. Furthermore, where in the past
each authority changed at a different date, according to the cycle of fiestas, now all
the kurajkuna would be chosen together, and take office together. There was no
specific date on which the offices changed hands; rather, the transition was gradual,
as marked by the presence of both old and new authorities at the weekly meetings of
authorities for some weeks after the vote in January. Finally, the community
unilaterally declared that the kurajkuna would no longer perform services for the
town authorities.

The change was instigated by the church and union together, and made the
system by which the kurajkuna were selected more similar to that of the union. It
would be reasonable to suppose that the change initiated a period of union domination
over the traditional authority structures, as happened in the ex-hacienda communities
of the highlands and elsewhere (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990; Izkó 1992). In fact,
however, the union local had virtually no political significance at all, and the position
of local sindicato head was a rotating one-year position treated as a rather minor
requirement of male adulthood, comparable to a lesser position in the school or
kurajkuna hierarchy. It had come to resemble the traditional authority positions more
than they resembled it. But the change did radically alter the role of the kurajkuna.
By the 1980s, most of what the Quirpini authorities did by way of representing their
community to others was to embody the community’s subservience to San Lucas.
With this relationship ended, the kurajkuna have been left with little to do.

The way these events came to pass and their aftermath are emblematic of the
possibilities and limits on action for campesinos of the San Lucas region. This article
focuses on the ways in which people of the region can and cannot take collective
historical action. A close of examination of the various political structures that
purport to govern Quirpini, and of the collective actions Quirpinis take, demonstrates
the severe constraints under which the people and the community operate.

HISTORICAL ACTION

All action by definition transforms the environment in which it takes place, but
some actions are performed in a lived time that primarily remains the same before
and after they are performed, while others are notably disruptive, leaving in their
aftermath a world that is significantly different than it was before. Arendt (1989)
makes a distinction between “labor,” which is work whose product is ephemeral, and
“work,” whose product remains after the action is done. That certain kinds of action
produce an effect that is supposed to last, while others, such as planting a field,
cleaning an irrigation canal, or making a meal imply their own repetition, is clearly
illustrated by Quirpini corn-planting. In Quirpini planting corn is most often done
through reciprocal exchanges of labor (called mink’a), and generally a large group
of men and women are involved in the work. Shortly after the first furrows are
planted, the owner of the field calls the men in the field and the women cooking in
the house over to drink some corn beer. All sit in a ring in a part of the field that
was plowed but not yet planted, and as each person receives a cup of beer (ideally
made from the household’s own corn), he or she pours some out onto the ground before drinking. When asked why people did this, one man replied, “So that we will drink again next year!” This is a concise expression of a certain orientation to activity: doing something so that it can be done again in the future. The libation and planting the corn assure having beer to drink at the next planting (as well as seed corn to plant). The world is transformed, but not in any permanent way; the transformation is a way of keeping things the same.

This focus on the repetitive aspect of planting contrasts with the building of a new bridge for an irrigation canal which serves one of the three zonas (zones) into which Quirpini is divided. The canal is several kilometers long, taking water from the nearby San Lucas River, then running down the valley alongside the river to the bottom of Quirpini. Along the way it crosses several seasonal streams, only some of which have bridges carrying the canal over them. One particularly big one did not, and as a result the canal was washed out every time it rained. I offered the zona some bags of cement for any project they chose, and they decided to build a bridge over the largest remaining unbridged stream. Without this donated cement, they would have had difficulty mustering the resources needed to do the work. When the bridge was completed it was dedicated with a feast at which several sheep were eaten. Afterwards the bones, ears, tails, and other inedible parts of the sheep were burned beneath the new bridge as an offering, to insure that the bridge lasted.

Planting a field and building a bridge (and their related celebrations and offerings) are similar in that they are both forms of production which are also dedicated to the reproduction of the capacity for agricultural production. Nonetheless, there is a difference between the two. Planting the field and drinking at the planting suggest their own repetition; they do so both metaphorically (planting one year is much like planting another year) and metonymically (they plant this year so that, among other things, they can plant next year). In contrast, building a bridge for the canal is not related to rebuilding the bridge or building any other bridge, except to negate it (the sacrifice at the bridge is to guarantee its durability). Rather, it relates metonymically to activities like distributing water, irrigating fields, and ultimately to planting and harvesting. The bridge is one of the conditions under which repetitive action like planting and irrigating can take place.

Bridge-building is an example of historical action. It is action that both transforms the world in a nonrecurrent way and creates new conditions for repetitive action. Historical action creates the governing conditions for other, nonhistorical or less historical actions. When Quirpinis built the bridge they altered how they would go about cleaning and maintaining the irrigation canal and how much labor it would require. Since historical action creates the conditions under which repetitive action is carried out, repetitive action can potentially become an index of the action that created its conditions. More concretely, when people are cleaning the irrigation canal and pass over the bridge they may recall the action that created the bridge. It is this sort of reasoning that led the main authority over the canal to have his name and the date inscribed on the top of the bridge. In other words, historical action has the
potential to create historical memory. The scale of a historical action (how historical it is) has a great deal to do with how many people’s routine actions are affected by it, and thus are liable to remember it. Building a bridge is a particularly simple and small-scale historical action, when compared with moving borders, fighting wars, or putting an end to obligatory services to the leaders of a dominant ethnic group. Humble though it is, however, building the irrigation bridge is the kind of action that history is ultimately made of. The question asked in this article is under what circumstances people (in this case, people of Quirpini) perform historical action collectively. Any answer to this question requires an understanding of how the institutions in Quirpini which are dedicated to bringing people together so that they can act historically in practice fail to provide a basis for lasting action. This inability to make history arises from the local political conditions that govern collective historical action. The question is particularly apt for a place like Quirpini because of the stark ethnic division between the town’s Spanish-speaking elite population and the campesinos, and the subtle and indirect ways the elite maintain power.

San Lucas is a town of about a thousand people, located at an elevation of 3,000 meters in the narrow San Lucas River valley. Surrounded by highland plateaus, the valley descends to the north, ultimately flowing into the Pilcomayo River, which lies to the east beyond the highlands. Most of the region’s population live in small communities or hamlets. Perhaps half of the town residents are native speakers of Spanish, while almost all the residents of the outlying communities speak Quechua as their first language. The regional economy is primarily agricultural, based on production in subclimates suitable for wheat and potatoes in the highlands, maize and peaches in the upper valley, grapes in the warm lower valley, and peppers in the hot Pilcomayo valley. Quirpini lies five kilometers south of San Lucas. Roughly five hundred people live there, but an exact population figure is impossible, as many people maintain dual residence. Almost all of the men have migrated for wage labor at least once, and many former residents now live elsewhere permanently. The one household in which people do not primarily speak Quechua is that of a member of the town elite who maintains several hectares of land in the community. The community’s arable land is used almost exclusively to produce corn and peaches for consumption and sale. Decreasing rainfall in recent years has made people almost entirely dependent on irrigation to grow crops. For some Quirpinis, wage labor in San Lucas is another source of income. While there is little sign that the town elite maintain direct relations of coercion with the community, the hamlet is dominated by the town. Most community members maintain asymmetrical fictive kin ties with townspeople, who dominate regional political posts, and when campesinos and members of the town’s elite encounter one another, the deference of the former and expansive assertiveness of the latter clearly indicate their relative positions.
KURAJKUNA AND SAN LUCAS ELITE

When asked about communal authorities, people in Quirpini invariably referred me to the kurajkuna, never mentioning various other authorities, such as the school committee or peasant union leader. It was difficult, however, to establish exactly what these authorities have authority over, and what each one does. Finally I asked someone to go through the functions of the various kurajkuna, and it became clear why learning the role of each one was so troublesome. There are six of them, arranged in a hierarchy. Ideally every man\(^2\) of Quirpini occupies each position for a one-year term, in a set order: first caminero, then alcalde segunda (sic), followed by alcalde mayor, then kuraka, and finally (until recently) cacique. A few years ago the community petitioned for and was granted a new authority, corregidor auxiliar. Legally this office is a local assistant to the corregidor, the highest representative of departmental\(^3\) authority in the region, but in practice it is the culminating position of communal responsibility. Apart from the caminero, who is in theory charged with seeing that the main paths through Quirpini are kept in good repair, and the corregidor, who is able to authorize certain decisions made at the weekly authority meetings and co-ordinate the activities of other kurajkuna, the only function he could attribute to each position was to settle land disputes and mediate people’s disagreements. He also said that as a group they could charge fines, but they appear never to actually do this. Outside of fiestas and the weekly authorities’ meetings, the only times I saw the kurajkuna acting in their official capacities was when they were called upon to mediate other people’s disagreements.

In what sense were the kurajkuna authorities if they didn’t appear to do anything? If they were not the institution through which Quirpini took collective historical action, what was? There were two answers to these questions. On the one hand, the kurajkuna were only authorities in a very limited sense; they did not mobilize action, nor did they represent the community to outsiders. They mediated relations, for the most part between community members. On the other hand, insofar as there were any authorities, in the sense of an institution or group which could mobilize collective action, they were not in Quirpini. Not only I but many people in Quirpini displayed considerable confusion about where power lay, and this confusion is a key part of how the region’s dominant elite maintain their power.

The kurajkuna’s mediating role helps explain the curious demographic distribution of their positions. Quirpini’s basic authority structure is somewhat anomalous among Andean communities because of its simplicity. The classic structure for traditional authorities of a social group is segmentary: a number of local groups each has a head, and these groups are united in more inclusive groups which also have heads, and so on until there are between two and five levels, often called ayllus. Sometimes the group has a single authority, who may be called the kuraka, but more often this whole is made up of two moieties, each of which has an apical head, and there is no one leader of the whole (Platt 1978; Turner n.d.). Quirpini is only one part of what was once a large and complex system of ayllus (Abercrombie
1986; Langer 1989) controlling most of what is now referred to as the region of San Lucas. Sometimes called Kellaja in the past (Zulawski 1985), this entity consisted of three large ayllus, each of which had its own kurajkuna. Each controlled widely scattered territories which were interspersed with lands and peoples of still other unrelated social groups. Each of the three main ayllus had its own hereditary lord (kuraka) and the subsidiary groups had lesser authorities in the classic pattern (except that the whole was divided into three parts). In this century the ayllu-based integration of the region has been both dividing and reforming itself, with the subayllus separating themselves from the greater ayllu, and their constituent parts in turn separating off in many cases. Once Quirpini was the dominant part of the dominant ayllu, and included five subayllus, but today only three of these remain as the zonas of Quirpini; one of the others having become a small community on its own and one having joined a neighboring community. Quirpini is now independent of any inclusive ethnic whole. The community’s internal structure is tripartite, yet the zonas have no political authorities or structures of their own that would provide a basis for further splitting. These changes have resulted in Quirpini having an authority structure with no segmentary organization. While there is only one of each kind of authority, in practice the kurajkuna nevertheless do reflect the tripartite division of the community.

First, at the community meetings to choose new authorities, there must be three nominees for each position, one from each zona. There is usually little or no discussion of the voting and no one campaigns for these positions. (One nominee insisted that he would not accept the position if chosen because he was planning to go to Buenos Aires for work that year.) At the end of the voting each zona has two of the authorities among its residents, and people say that the positions should rotate among the zonas. If the kurajkuna are understood as representatives of the community to those outside there is no obvious reason for this, but the sense of this arrangement becomes clear if the kurajkuna are seen as mediators of conflicts within the community. Then, in the case of conflict between zonas, or between people or families from different zonas, each side of the conflict is guaranteed to have a mediator available.

How the kurajkuna are able to mediate conflicts can be seen in an incident from the fiesta of Santa Wila Cruz, which is most prominently celebrated in Sakapampa, one of the three zonas of Quirpini. During the 1993 celebrations a youth from Villcasana zona left his bicycle in the courtyard of a house near Sakapampa’s chapel. Late that night he went to retrieve it. The owner of the house, who had been drinking and was now asleep, awoke to hear somebody stumbling around his patio. Thinking it was a thief, he grabbed a large stick and attacked the intruder, injuring the boy severely. Over the next few days the incident became an issue between the families of the two parties, and then between the two zonas (which have a history of conflict). The problem was finally resolved when the senior kurajkuna from both zonas got the two families to talk together and negotiate an agreement whereby the man agreed to pay for the youth’s medical care.
In another case, a youth in Villcasana zona married a girl from a fairly distant highland community. They never got along well; they fought often, and she frequently threatened to go back to her father. Finally, in a particularly bad fight, she beat up both her husband and his mother and left for her home. The young husband went to the corregidor, and together they traveled to her father’s house, where after long discussion they convinced her to return to Quirpini, where they went back to fighting as they had before. In this case, when she returned to her father (who was distant from the husband both geographically and in kin terms) the best way to mediate the conflict was by treating it as an intercommunal problem, and sending the community’s highest authority. This strategy worked in part because this authority was a relative of the husband.

Generally, when people in Quirpini have conflicts, whether conjugal, between neighbors, between users of irrigation canals, or between members of different zonas, the first step to resolving the problem is to find one or two mediators who are not involved in the situation that divided the antagonists, and so can take a neutral position. Ideally this mediator is from the lowest possible level, the person who is the least removed from the relationship while not being part of it, such as a relative or fictive kin. Thus, when Adrián Paco drunkenly attacked his wife Eugenia, their neighbor, also a cousin and the godfather of one of their children, intervened and cajoled them into making up. In such cases the logic is to seek mediation with the closest person who can take a neutral stand in the conflict. If there is no such person, both sides are represented by an uninvolved party. In marital disputes there is normally no need to go to the corregidor unless, as in the case described above, the couple represents a broader social divide than is usual. With that couple no one in Quirpini could reasonably take the wife’s part, or claim to stand in a neutral position between them, as everyone around was her husband’s relative or neighbor, and had not yet developed any strong relationship with her. The stories here also show how the kurajkuna can shift between different social levels in their mediation. While the corregidor may represent a Quirpini in his dispute with his wife from another community, he might also represent his own zona in a conflict between two zonas, or take a neutral mediating stance in a clash between two households of his zona. Here the apparent vagueness of the role of the kurajkuna begins to be more comprehensible. Their position is defined not by their ability to lead or to orchestrate certain kinds of action, but by their ability to mediate relations. This they can best do when they are able to reposition themselves freely in relation to the factions involved in the conflicts they are mediating, and they are most free when their role is most undefined. Nonetheless, this vagueness also disguises the extent to which they are incapable of either initiating major historical action or of mediating relationships beyond a certain limited context.

There are limits to the kurajkuna’s mediating ability, and thus limits to the community’s autonomy. A Quirpini man lamented that the community was not able to manage its own affairs, in particular its internal conflicts. He explained that if two people had a dispute over land that escalated to a fight, as things stood today they
would go to the police officer in town, who would decide in someone’s favor and charge fines all around. Had the two gone to the kurajkuna instead, they could work out a compromise acceptable to both parties, which would prevent the dispute from recurring. Furthermore, no one would pay a fine.

When Quirpinis spoke of the political vulnerability of the community, one of their most common idioms was that of resolving internal conflicts. They treated the fact that any dispute that reached a certain level of seriousness would be referred to the police, the judge, the corregidor, or even the priest, as an indication of their own lack of power. One of the main reasons for this was the presence of these external authorities and their willingness to intervene when asked. In this situation, anyone who was sufficiently displeased with the kurajkuna’s mediation of a problem could appeal to higher authorities until one that had the power to enforce a decision was reached. No authority in Quirpini has this power.

Even though mediating conflicts is the main political activity available to local political authorities, they are notable for the limits on their ability to mediate. This is important because mediation and the establishment of alliances is generally a key part of any collective action. Where conflicts are successfully mediated, the effect is to create new conditions for the parties’ interaction that restore peaceful relations. The identity and social position of the mediator(s) are of central importance because he or she plays a major role in creating the conditions for further social action. In this sense, mediation is another example of historical action.

These examples of how the kurajkuna exercise political power relate to one of the key elements of regional domination by the elites of San Lucas: they are able to insert themselves into relationships between campesinos in many crucial areas. In so doing they can either obviate unity among the campesinos or, even worse, make their own participation a requisite of that unity, so that whatever is achieved through it has to take into account elite interests. Insofar as the interests of the campesinos and the elites conflict, the campesinos will have difficulty acting autonomously. Abolishing services to the San Lucas officials was conceived as politically liberating for Quirpini, and designed to give the community a certain measure of autonomy from the town. It achieved this at least insofar as it freed Quirpini from the old landed families who generally occupied the leading political positions in the town. But it had some other consequences as well. First, getting rid of the communal authorities’ role as representatives of Quirpini’s submission to San Lucas deprived them of most of their role as external representative of the community.

The change created a new political reality, but it was not one in which any institution in Quirpini was able to operate independently of the town. By undermining the role of the kurajkuna, the reforms further dispersed power within Quirpini, and made it necessary for any action to be based on an alliance with an external power, most often one based in San Lucas. It was clearly an instance of historical action, and changed the way that further historical action can be taken by Quirpinis, as it attenuated the relations of domination between the Quirpini authorities and the San Lucas authorities and showed the priest as someone who could be involved in an
alliance against some sectors of the town's elite. It did not, however, alter a situation in which Quirpinis could only take historical action on a matter of collective interest if they were in alliance with some elements of the San Lucas elite. What changed was to which of the elite they could turn.

The Spanish-speaking elite of the town are in no way united except by sharing a central position in regional politics. Interestingly, Quirpinis do not have any single generic term with which to designate them. They are variously called caballeros, refinados, gente del pueblo, gente decente, and occasionally wiraqchusas. The bulk of the elite are drawn from the landowning class of the valley. These people never owned large semifeudal holdings, or haciendas, because the native lands of the upper valley were never taken from the campesinos. Elite lands are concentrated around the town, in the broadest and most fertile part of the valley, and are far larger than those of the campesinos. This landed group generally supplies the mayor and corregidor of the area and the lesser government functionaries. Most of the stores and trucks in the town are owned by members of this group. San Lucas is unusual in that almost all of the region's schoolteachers are from the area. Teachers are overwhelmingly drawn from the landed elite. Other members of the elite are generally drawn from elsewhere, and have no land in the area. These include the priest, the region's single policeman, the judge, and most employees of the local office of the government development agency. The judge and priest are well educated and generally come from relatively prosperous families. Except for the priest, these temporary elite, expected to remain in town for only a few years, are seen as highly corrupt and abusive, intent on profiting from their positions while they can. Members of the landed elite engage in constant factional disputes, some going back for generations. They routinely try to recruit other members of the elite to their sides. Party politics also frequently become a vehicle for these rivalries, which can at times make it nearly impossible for certain people and groups to work together.

All of these positions of power are based on larger regional, national, and international relations and institutions. For example, the development agency is a departmental government entity that funnels money from several international granting agencies. The priest has money and considerable prestige, thanks to his role as local representative of the Catholic Church, an international organization with a long tradition of power at all levels of Bolivian society. The judge and police, as well as most of the lesser public officials, are local instantiations of national bureaucracies. The schools are a crucial place in which people are reproduced as Bolivians. The national school bureaucracy is huge and the teachers' union is one of the most militant in the country. The local landed families draw their power fundamentally from controlling the distribution of goods to external markets, as well as from having access to most of the goods that come in from elsewhere. Almost as much as with government functionaries, their power comes from elsewhere.

All these differences and conflicts make nonsense of any idea that the elite are a single faction united to maintain its own power. On the other hand, the interests of all the elements of the town elite are served by a situation in which San Lucas
dominates the campesino communities of the area, and they in turn dominate San Lucas. They share a position of power based on their ability to articulate the relationship between people and groups of the region and external agencies. This brokering role gives all the members of the elite a common interest in maintaining the political centrality of San Lucas and their dominance there. As their situation is neither static nor secure, many of the efforts of the San Lucas elite are devoted to coping with massive and rapid social and economic changes. The position of the landed elites has been eroding since the land reform of the 1950s and the subsequent rise of the peasant union. The town's political reach has been severely curtailed, and today it holds unchallenged sway only in the valley. The communities of the surrounding highlands have considerably freed themselves from the town's control and are actively working to reduce its power further. A series of infrastructural improvements carried out by the national government in the 1980s also weakened the town elite's control over the movement of goods, labor, and money between the region and Bolivia and elsewhere.

The issue of political domination by a small group of people is well-trodden ground in Bolivian studies (e.g., Healy 1982; Dandler 1976, 1984; and Lagos 1994). This article adds to the insights by showing how even the ways in which the campesinos of Quirpini are able to act historically create the conditions that limit that action. The fecklessness of community leaders in the face of the regional elite's superior abilities to form alliances and mediate relationships explains why the kurajkuna are spoken of as authorities when they usually do little. The rest of this article looks to a number of other institutions which are also treated by Quirpinis as if they have some mobilizing potential, to determine whether they can be the source of independent historical action or if, as with the kurajkuna, their power is evanescent.

THE REPRODUCTION OF ELITE PRESENCE IN COMMUNITY MEETINGS

In August of 1993 Quirpini held a general meeting to discuss its boundary with a neighboring community, Cumuni. Cumuni used to be a zona of Quirpini, but had gradually separated itself over the preceding fifteen years. The meeting was supposed to include the two communities, but hardly anyone from Cumuni turned up. Those present quickly decided to go and mark the new boundary along the line that everyone from Quirpini agreed was the traditional boundary of the former zona. Led by the school authorities and with the support and the official imprimatur of the teachers, a group immediately set off to set up a series of stone border-markers. The location of each marker was established by the general agreement of all present as to where the previously unmarked zona border had always been. The next day, people from Cumuni knocked them all down. As things had now reached a crisis point, another meeting was quickly arranged and held on the road where it crossed the newly marked boundary. The groups from Quirpini and Cumuni were accompanied by the teachers of their respective schools, who brought along the community
record books, in which resolutions and agreements are recorded and signed. The teachers opened the meeting, described the agenda, at various points summarized what the issues were, and freely suggested solutions for problems, shifting between advocating the position of their respective communities and taking a neutral position between the parties to the dispute. In the end the meeting determined that the border markers would be put back in place, with the exception of two where the new border met the borders of other communities. This resolution allayed Cumuni fears that they would be unable to pasture their livestock in Quirpini land. It is not yet clear whether this solution will be durable. The manner in which the teachers handled this meeting is indicative of the way teachers in general, and the rest of the Spanish-speaking elite in San Lucas, maintain their political position. They received no direct benefit from their participation, except to maintain and expand the role they already had established in running the school and community meetings.

Quirpini's highest decision-making body is the reunión general, the periodic meeting in which the whole community deliberates questions of general importance. Any community-wide corvée has to be approved by a reunión general, as does any special charge levied on the families of the community. Reuniones are also where all authorities are chosen by popular vote, including the kurajkuna, the school authorities (junta escolar), and the sindicato leader. They are also often the site of appearances by important outsiders, such as development workers. The reuniones are called by the kurajkuna and junta in their weekly meetings according to need, and in practice are held roughly once a month. Word of an upcoming meeting gets around in advance, but the authorities visit each household early on the day of the reunión to give everyone official notice. Normally they are held at ten in the morning. Attendance is mandatory in the sense that every family is theoretically required to send at least one adult member to every meeting. In practice there is a chronic problem both with attendance and promptness, and the start of some meetings may be delayed over an hour until the quorum of 50 per cent of the households in Quirpini is present, but I know of no one who was ever sanctioned for not attending meetings.

How the meetings are run is indicative of how Quirpini represents itself to itself as a political entity. By requiring that each family be present, the reuniones invoke a community whose constituent parts are households, rather than individuals or more inclusive entities such as lineages or zonas. At the same time, it is in communal gatherings such as reuniones and collective work parties that the zonas take their most central role: the attendance list, from which the name of each head of household is read at the start of reuniones, is divided into zonas. This entails fudging some ambiguity of residence. Zona residence has no legal meaning apart from this list, and many households have land or residences in more than one zona. The reuniones represent Quirpini to itself as made up of resident households divided into three zonas. Those who own land but have no residence in the community are not on this list.
As with the kurajkuna, one can see in the reunión general the possibility of an autonomous source of power by means of which the community could act on matters of importance. The main limit of its potential to be this lies in the way it is run. The meetings are held in the school's auditorium, a large room with a stage at one end and stepped concrete seats at the back wall. For reuniones, there is always a table and chair in front of the stage. Attendance at a reunión is usually between 75 and a hundred people; most of the men sit on benches lining the wall. The women (fewer than the men) usually sit near the door at the rear of the room, many sitting on the stepped seats, others sitting on the floor or on the benches. The male community authorities (the kurajkuna and members of the junta escolar) sit on the benches, toward the front of the room. (If an authority family is represented by a woman, she sits on the floor with the other women.) At the front end of the benches sit whatever teachers attend the meeting, as well as any respected visitors who might be present. During the school year when the director is present, he sits at the table facing the campesinos and runs the meeting.

The positioning of people by their gender and their political and ethnic status reflects the unbalanced power relations in the meetings. Campesina women hesitate to talk in meetings, and when they do they speak low, quickly, and briefly. The teachers (male and female) speak easily and freely exhort the campesinos to what they regard as appropriate decisions, even though teachers are not part of the community and are unable to vote on any decisions. The school director has tremendous discretion as to how he will handle the agenda, how much time he will give to various points, when he will call for a vote, and so on. On one occasion the director spent twenty minutes alternately haranguing and cajoling the assembled comuneros when he disagreed with their rejection of an offer of free breakfast for the schoolchildren. In the end no one was swayed, but he or another teacher are the only people who could have been so aggressive.

The reunión general, one of the key moments when Quirpini displays itself to itself, is not only run by someone from the dominant element outside the community, but is physically structured in such a way that the power relations that are farthest from its supposed function are inscribed into the meeting's very enactment. That is, the reuniones do not privilege men over women, given that they are run on the principle of household representation, nor do they have to be run by outsiders: in many parts of rural Bolivia, similar meetings are entirely the province of the campesinos. Quirpini's political being is here represented as mediated through the community's inclusion in an entity dominated by the San Lucas elite via the education system.

THE SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

To an extent not widely recorded elsewhere in Andeanist literature, the entity most able to represent Quirpini in dealings with outsiders is the junta escolar, whose official role is to run the school. During the border conflict between Quirpini and
Cumuni, it is significant that when Quirpini unilaterally put up stone markers, each group was led by a school official carrying a Bolivian flag, and that the members of Quirpini who took the most active role in the subsequent meeting were the school officials. Throughout the San Lucas region, having a school appears to be the primary requisite of being a community. One of the first things that Cumuni did in separating itself from Quirpini was to put up its own school, and some people in Avichuca spoke as if building their own school were identical to establishing a separate community.

The institution that is ostensibly in charge of the school is the junta escolar, a group consisting of six authorities who are elected annually. Much as with the graded offices of the kurajkuna, men and their families are expected to progress through the hierarchy of junta positions, from auxiliary through president. Apart from this hierarchical distinction and the treasurer’s job of handling the school’s money, the roles of the members of the junta are for the most part interchangeable. They must attend community meetings and the weekly meetings of community authorities, and the men do repairs on the school, while the women prepare meals for the children. All junta family members plant and harvest the school’s field. Some junta members at times spoke as if they were really in charge of the school, or had direct authority over the school building, but in practice all important decisions are taken by the director or the reunión general.

Schools are explicitly devoted to social reproduction, as well as often being the only communal institution that routinely handles money, owns property, and initiates work projects. Having a school means having a junta escolar, setting aside some lands as communal property, creating mechanisms for realizing and enforcing collective decisions, and in general creating a political entity with clear agentive potential. All this might suggest that the school is an institution capable of initiating independent historical action. Yet the original schools and juntas were created by elites, and the school is the one area in Quirpini where members of the town elite can intervene in communal affairs and act like authorities. The community’s most agentive institution is also the point at which elite authority has the clearest and most legitimate role.

The school’s acting director in Quirpini is a case in point. He took an active interest in the well-being of the school, offering free transport in his truck for supplies destined for the school, occasionally intervening with town or development officials in favor of the community, and taking time off during weekends and vacations to help with school projects. When we crossed paths in town during his mayoral candidacy, particularly in the company of a Quirpini, he often pointed out that the Quirpinis were his “favorite children,” that he had done them many favors, and that he therefore expected them to turn up in large numbers to vote for him. By maintaining patronage relations with a central institution of the community, he was able to turn the Quirpinis’ participation in regional politics to his own purposes, and did win the election.
THE CAMPESINO UNION

Since the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, with some hiatuses and with varying levels of effectiveness, the peasants of Bolivia have been represented by a national union (Confederación Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos Bolivianos, also known as La Unica, or the Sindicato Campesino), which has acted to unite and mobilize campesinos to fight for their rights. The union has the advantage of a national segmentary structure, which makes it possible to co-ordinate decisions and action at different levels and scales. In the highlands of the San Lucas region the sindicato has a history of activism, and most highland communities are today substantially run by the union, a not uncommon situation in rural Bolivia (Izkó 1992; Rivera Cusicanqui 1990). The central, or regional command, of the union is dedicated to ending the regional domination of the San Lucas elite. In response to the very centrality of the elite to intercampesino relations, the union has set up structures of action that exclude the town. The subcentral unit for the valley rotates its meetings from community to community, but never meets in San Lucas. Furthermore, any man is allowed to join (women are excluded), unless he lives in the town. These measures make it clear just which class and ethnic interests the union represents, and which it is fighting.

The struggle against San Lucas’s regional dominance takes many forms. One aspect of the town’s pre-eminence has long been the three commercial fairs held there every year, and the town authorities’ control of revenues from fairs held throughout the region. These fairs are part of a large and growing system of annual fairs that bring together local agricultural producers, urban itinerant salespeople, salt vendors traveling from the distant salt flats of Uyuni, and pepper producers from the Pilcomayo River valley to the east. The union managed to assert control over the revenues from the largest highland fair over a decade ago, and today has taken the battle to the town, as it were, by trying to undermine fairs in the valley. The main raison d’être for the fairs is the trade in peppers from the Pilcomayo valley. Since San Lucas is nearly at the end of the main transitable road going toward the valley, traders and producers from the valley bring their harvest by donkey to fairs in the region, and traders drive to the fairs to ship the peppers elsewhere. Between the town and these hot valleys, however, lie the main highland regions. When an improved road was built to this area in the early 1990s, the local union branches set up a series of fairs on the same days as the fairs in and near San Lucas, hoping to divert the pepper trade to their own towns. Initially they went so far as to block the roads so that pepper-carriers would have no choice but to remain at the highland fairs. While they were forced to abandon these strong-arm techniques, their strategy is having an effect, and the fairs in town are shrinking every year.

While the QuiRPIni union played a central role in ending the kurajkuna services, it has since then fallen into inactivity, and today plays almost no active role in community social or political life. The position of general secretary of the local has come to be treated as just another social and political obligation which adult men
have to fulfill, and is normally occupied by young men with little political standing. This loss of influence has come about mainly because the struggle between the sindicato and San Lucas has turned into a conflict between highland and valley. Quirpini and the valley communities are economically more tied to the town than are the highland communities, because valley communities use transportation that is based in town, and valley campesinos who produce a surplus sell either to San Luqueños or depend on the fairs in the valley for access to consumers and an opportunity to sell their own produce easily. When union militancy is turned primarily against the economic and political centrality of the valley as a whole, Quirpini takes the town’s side of the struggle, and the union is unable to serve as a way to mobilize collective action there.

Another way to look at this situation is to understand the union as an effort to alter the terms on which history is made in the region by offering an alternate means of creating alliances that do not necessarily involve the town elite. For this reason, the union has a segmentary organization that can form alliances of varying breadth. Since Quirpini is opposed to the union on one of the most important regional power issues, the community’s branch of the union cannot mobilize Quirpinis to engage in this system of alliances. So like other communal institutions, the main place it can turn for a strategic ally is the San Lucas elite. This is what happened in the kurajkuna reform, when the union local formed an alliance with the priest.

**ZONAS AND CANALS**

Perhaps in this case historical action cannot be organized on a communal level, but requires smaller-scale groups or institutions. The two most significant subcommunal entities, the zonas and the irrigation canals, are politically tied up with one another, and often carry the same names. Of the three zonas, the one called Quirpini has the simplest irrigation system: a single canal that waters virtually all the fields of the zona. A second canal, drawing water from a small tributary to the San Lucas River, watered a few fields until its waters were taken for the benefit of the residents of San Lucas in 1993. This canal has little political significance. The main canal, the large Quirpini Larqha (Quirpini Canal), starts above the territory of the zona, in the neighboring community of Cumuni, with an immense stone water-intake (*toma*). By the point where it crosses into Quirpini territory it has climbed the steep banks of the river onto the main flood plain where the fields are. Here smaller canals draw off water to several fields. Where a bridge takes the canal across the Castillo Mayu River, there is a sluice that allows water to run back into the river to be used by the lower canals of Villcasana and Sakapampa. Below this outlet the canal divides and the two branches continue down river, serving two areas before rejoining near the bottom of the zona and its lowest fields.

The only official whose purview is Quirpini zona is the water mayor of the canal. He directs the semianual canal cleanings, makes sure someone is available to make occasional repairs and to open and close the outlet at allotted times, and,
most crucially, allocates water to the zona’s fields. The judge is chosen at an annual meeting of all the landholders who receive water from the canal; meetings of this sort are the only political activity that brings together residents of Quirpini zona as such. There are no indications that Quirpini zona has the ability to act as a whole except through the water mayor and other structures related to irrigation. The zona restricted its collective action to issues directly related to the canal, such as negotiating water times with other canals and enforcing work obligations. Considered as an entity capable of action, Quirpini zona has no existence apart from its canal.

Villcasana zona follows a similar pattern. Its lands are watered by two canals, the larger of which irrigates lands belonging to some 25 households, while the smaller waters that of about eleven households. Like the Quirpini canal, each of these canals is administered by a water mayor chosen at a meeting every year. Also as in Quirpini zona, there is no political structure not related to irrigation canals. But since there are two separate canals in the zona, no political entity can act in the name of the zona. Seen as an agentive entity, Villcasana does not exist. This institutional absence is mirrored in action, as I never knew Villcasana to do anything as a zona. The householder on each of the canals were able to act together, although they never did so in relation to anything not pertaining directly to the canal, but Villcasana as a whole never did. For instance, when I offered to give it some gift, it quickly became clear that zona Villcasana had no way of deciding what gift it wanted, or how to accept it. But as members of a canal, people could tell me that they wanted cement for canal improvements. With the cement, they had no difficulty organizing themselves to do the improvements.

The other zona, Sakapampa, has one large irrigation canal that is named after the zona, two small ones, and a tiny fourth. In the last fifteen years or so, the political functioning of the lesser canals has been absorbed into that of the larger one. When the users of the larger canal built themselves a chapel and meeting room, it came to serve as a meeting place for everyone in the zona. Throughout the community every important canal used to have a cross to protect the crops of its fields from hail. These crosses belonged to particular people, had names as well as their canal designation (e.g., Ibarra Cruz, Quirpini Cruz), and at least one of them appeared in the divinatory dreams of its owner. For most of the year they were stored in the houses of their owners, but every Christmas Eve, popularly regarded as the start of the hail season, the water mayor carried his canal’s cross to a mass in town, where the priest blessed all the crosses. Once blessed, each cross was carried to a specific hilltop and placed in a prepared shrine, or calvario. There they stood until Santa Wila Cruz, which marks the end of the hail season, when the owner of the cross had to take it down and throw a small celebration. Except for Sakapampa, this custom had not been observed for several years. There used to be at least three crosses in Sakapampa, one for each of the larger canals. The cross for the largest canal was initially on top of a high peak above the zona, but people decided that it was too dangerous having a fiesta there because people often fell off the mountain while drunkenly walking home afterwards, and so they moved it to a lower hill. About a decade ago, they moved
it again, this time to the new chapel they had built. At about the same time, the other
three canals retired the crosses corresponding to their canals, and the chapel with its
cross has become the focus of ritual participation of the whole zona. While the
celebrations for Santa Wila Cruz on the canals in Villcasana and Quirpini zonas are
modest, usually attended only by those with land on the canal, in Sakapampa it has
become a large celebration, drawing people from neighboring communities, and is
the only religious celebration in the community attended by traveling vendors from
San Lucas.

As a result of this ritual subsumption of the minor canals into the main one, the
lesser canals have also been partially included in the main canal’s political structure.
The meeting room next to the Sakapampa chapel is the site of zona meetings, and
people with no land on the main canal join in collective work parties related to it. In
addition, the Producers Group (Grupo de Productores), an organization set up in the
zona a few years ago by the local office of the development agency to facilitate co-
operation between Sakapampa and the agency, helps to blur the distinction between
Sakapampa as a multiple political entity and a single entity. This integration of the
zona has left Sakapampa with the greatest capacity for collective action. The Grupo
and canal administrations serve as foci of intentionality, and the zona as a whole is
able to act collectively fairly often. For instance, the Sakapampa chapel was built
with no apparent outside influence, and shortly before my arrival in the area a large
part of the Sakapampa households descended on the house of the water mayor of
Villcasana canal, because he had been cutting short the hours when they received
water. They forced a resolution with no outside interference.

Viewed from within, the three zonas of Quirpini are so widely different as to be
hardly comparable. Where Villcasana in effect has no internal structure, Quirpini has
a simple one which does not lend itself to many kinds of group action, and
Sakapampa has a complex structure founded in political action within and outside of
the zona. From this internal point of view, one can reasonably question whether a
zona is really an entity in any meaningful social sense. From the perspective of
Quirpini in its entirety, however, a different picture emerges. As mentioned above,
at reuniones generales people’s names are enumerated according to zona; and each
zona must have two representatives among the kurajkuna each year. In addition,
people are often distinguished by which zona they come from. Zonas, then, are
unquestionably significant entities and indeed appear to fill the community to the
point that it contains almost nothing that is not part of a zona. The school is the only
institution that has some concrete existence which cannot be dissolved into the three
zonas. This is a key part of the inability of the community to do much by itself: the
zonas are meaningful only in terms of the whole community, but the whole
community tends to dissolve into the zonas. Again, institutions that people speak of
as the basic political elements of the community on closer examination vanish, or
show themselves to be incapable of action. This both makes regular group action
very difficult and opens up a field for all sorts of individual and improvised action.
It might seem that individual, extra-official action is where we should look for the
start of historical action. While collective historical projects often begin with individual action, and such action is often effective where institutions are unable to act, the same constraints that limit action through the political institutions of Quirpini apply here. That is, individuals are able to act in a political arena mainly through alliances, and in the San Lucas region the most effective alliances for most purposes involve some member of the elite, and have a patron-client form. Such relations will under most circumstances have obvious limitations on their capacity for transformative action. (For more on how patron-client relations have limited the possibilities for campesino political action, see Dandler 1976 and Rivera Cusicanqui 1990.)

CONCLUSIONS

The institutions that appear to govern Quirpini in practice do little. This is partly because the roles of various institutions are ambiguously defined, but mostly because the mestizos from San Lucas are able to insert themselves into many key aspects of the campesinos’ relations with each other, both within a community and between communities. The sindicato, the one institution not subject to this insertion, is unable to work effectively in the valley, except when aided by some faction from town, such as the priest. Ending service to the town authorities or negotiating a new boundary between neighboring communities are collective historical actions, in the sense that they can only be done when people co-ordinate their actions to some common end, and they transform the social environment in an irreversible and nonrecurrent way. All the political institutions discussed here are perfectly able to carry out repetitive changes, but historical transformations are harder for them to undertake on their own.

My difficulty in recognizing this elite insertion was reflective partly of the way it is systematically obscured from view. Quirpinis frequently spoke as if their community were autonomous of the town, and could point to the fact that formally, this was largely so. Yet what appear to be power structures operating in Quirpini are in effect extensions of the town’s power (mostly through the school and the church). The power of Quirpini’s many political structures appears to almost everyone to be the mechanisms of power in Quirpini, but in practice they are the means of disempowerment. Here it is instructive to recall Marx’s famous comment, “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (1972:15). While people in Quirpini are certainly engaged in making their own history, the San Lucas elite are just as busily working to maintain control over the conditions under which they do so.

Today the elite find that the conditions under which they themselves make history are also changing: e.g., the national transportation infrastructure has been vastly improved, which weakens the San Lucas elite’s positions as brokers. With improved transportation the region has become more integrated into the national and
international economy. The number of people migrating, mainly to Buenos Aires, has increased dramatically in the last two decades, and today some campesinos are returning from their travels not just with new consumer goods, but with capital. A few have set up stores in town, and one who recently returned from Argentina has a large new truck, the first owned by a Quipirpi. These changes in campesinos’ ability to be autonomous are rapidly undermining the elite’s capacity to act as mediators and brokers.

Another factor is that in many ways Bolivia’s urban elite and the central government are antagonistic to local elites throughout the country, seeing their power as not only often unjust and repressive, but a regionalist threat to national integration. This conflict is behind the antagonism of the last two priests to the town elite, which has managed to take a good deal of the landed elite’s influence for the church. A more recent and dramatic example of this antagonism is the recent reorganization of local government called Participación Popular, which in the name of decentralization is largely bypassing the traditional regional power brokers (including the campesino union) and establishing a more direct relationship between the government and the populace in general.

In response to these changes, the elite today are on the move in several senses. First, the national elite are taking more power, squeezing out regional elites in the process. In response, Bolivia’s rural elite are trying to become part of the national elite, moving out of places like San Lucas into the cities and sending their children to universities. The position of the rural elite is today far more precarious and marginal than it was 50 years ago. The number of prominent old landed families in San Lucas is dramatically reduced from a few decades ago, but where few of the elderly elite have even secondary school degrees, their children go to college or technical school after completing high school, and many have advanced degrees. Most members of this younger generation have moved to or were born in the cities. The final movement of elites in San Lucas is the movement of some relatively wealthy campesinos into the town, where some of them are on their way to joining a newly constituted elite, moving into the space abandoned by the old families of the town.

The foregoing analysis can be taken as a treatment of the limits on action in normal times, and in effect how such times are kept normal. Others have shown what happens when the system of alliances available to campesinos ceases to limit their ability to change the conditions for their own actions. Dandler (1976, 1984) has shown how the campesinos of the Cochabamba area found that they could form an alliance with the radical new national government against the local landowners to force serious land reform. Lagos’s (1994) study of autonomy in a rural Bolivian town shows how the complex and delicate web of alliances that normally constrains transformative action can, under certain circumstances, generate it. While the divisions among the San Lucas elite have not become so severe that any faction would enter an alliance that seriously threatens the primacy of the town, any number of historical contingencies could facilitate real change. Were the highland unions to
win their struggle against the town, or were the valley communities to switch allegiances in this struggle, the San Lucas elite would probably be rapidly marginalized. A more radical church presence or a populist central government could form an alliance with the campesinos that would put them in an entirely new position. There is nothing absolute about the San Lucas elite’s control. They are able to limit the campesinos’ means of action but not negate them entirely.

NOTES

1. Normally translated as “peasant,” in Bolivia and many parts of Latin America campesino has taken on a historical and ethnic specificity that the English word lacks. Since the Revolution of 1952 it has been the preferred term for indigenous people, replacing the denigrating term indio. In this article the term refers to small-holding native speakers of Quechua who live in the rural areas around and in the outer parts of San Lucas.

2. Quirpinis generally talk as if the positions were passed by men, although in fact they are passed by households, or even extended families. When the kuraka, for instance, acts in his official capacity he is often referred to as tata kuraka (father kuraka); his wife would then be called mama kuraka. At meetings either member of the couple can fulfill the obligation for authorities to be present, although in rituals they appear together, and if either one has to be absent, the place is taken by someone of the same sex.

3. Departments are the first politicogeographical subdivision of the Bolivian state, analogous to provinces in some countries, and to states in the U.S.A.

4. Until the 1980s there were five zonas and five authorities, so each zona had a single authority every year. With the secession of two zonas and the addition of corregidor to the kurajkuna, the present system came into effect.

5. This arrangement also allows the authorities to serve as representatives of their zona to the weekly authority meetings.

6. They are never called vecinos, mestizos, or misíis, common terms in other parts of the Andes.

7. This gendered seating pattern is nearly universal when Quirpinis gather indoors.

8. In Quechua this official is called the yaku alkalti (water mayor), while the Spanish title (often used in Quechua speech) is juez de agua (water judge).

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