

Wedding the Nation

Spectacle and Political Performance

On May 7, 2011, the Depatriarchalization Unit of Bolivia's Vice Ministry of Decolonization brought together 355 indigenous couples to be married in a big public coliseum, the Coliseo Cerrado, in El Alto, a mostly Aymara city perched on the high plateau above Bolivia's capital, La Paz. There, in a grand spectacle of "indigenous" religious and ethnic pride, the couples were wedded in a ceremony officiated by Andean religious experts called *amautas*. President Evo Morales played the role of *padrino*, or godfather, to all the couples. This event was part of the government's central agenda of decolonization, a complex project to overturn the legacies of systemic racial domination begun in the colonial period. In the government's view, decolonization requires a new model of the family, based not on the Catholic Church, but on indigenous values and practices, particularly the Andean notion of *chachawarmi*, or gender complementarity. Looking out over the sea of couples brightly attired in their "traditional" clothing, President Morales congratulated the *amautas* for the beautiful "natural" ceremony and the couples for beginning to decolonize themselves.¹ "The family is the center of a community, and for that reason, new families will be central for the plurinational state," he said. "In our families, there is shared responsibility between men and women, shared responsibility in the community, and in the *patria grande, la familia grande* [the homeland and the big family] that is Bolivia" (*Bodas Colectivas* 2011, DVD, 1: 48–49).

The next year, in September 2012, Vice President Álvaro García Linera married Claudia Fernández, a national television news reporter. García Linera and Fernández are both urban white-mestizos with no claim to indigenous heritage. Their union, dubbed "the wedding of the year" by the media, was intensely awaited and blogged.² The main ceremony took place in the Cathedral of San Francisco,

Bolivia's most important Catholic Church, but the day before, they participated in an "Andean" or "ancestral" wedding ceremony at the pre-Inca temple at Tiwanaku, where Morales held his first inauguration in 2006 (see Postero 2007b). Dressed in elegant clothes designed to reflect Andean style, with colorful accents and decorations, the pair were "married" by amautas before hundreds of visitors and community members. The minister of cultures and his team organized the event, which culminated in a ride in a traditional *titora* (woven reed) boat on a nearby lake.

What was the effect of these spectacular ceremonies? How did they enact or produce decolonization? Did they enhance the legitimacy of the "indigenous state"? Using anthropological understandings of performance, I examine how these state rituals reworked the historical and ongoing tensions in Bolivian society, in which the category of "indigenous" has long been opposed to that of "white" or "mestizo." Morales's government asserted that the marriages were part of a radical transformation of Bolivian society by positively valuing the indigenous, but I show how the rituals fit into a long tradition of cultural performances, such as folklore festivals and religious dances, in which elites or the state perform stylized versions of indigeneity in order to incorporate the dangerous indigenous "other" into the nation (Abercrombie 2001; Rogers 1999; Rockefeller 1999). Using ambiguous polyvalent symbols and spatial effects to mediate between the highly charged indigenous-colonizer poles, these wedding rituals performed a managed vision of indigeneity that serves as a foundation for the new plurinational state. Yet such performances are always subject to multiple, contested interpretations by participants and audience members (Bigenho 2006; Mendoza 2000). Using the Rancièrian framework laid out in the Introduction, we could say that while the weddings enacted emancipatory *politics* by explicitly encouraging a new valuation of indigenous culture and attacking the myths of Indian inferiority upon which coloniality is based (Bautista 2010; Quijano 2007), they also worked in parallel ways as a form of *policing*, recontextualizing masculinist colonial state power and foreclosing disagreements about the meaning of indigeneity and who is entitled to represent it.

DECOLONIZATION AS DISAGREEMENT

In the Introduction, I described the polyvalent notion of decolonization that guides the Morales administration's agenda for the plurinational state. As the preceding chapters have shown, "decolonization" can mean many things. The Pacto de Unidad activists at the Constituent Assembly, described in chapter 2, saw decolonization as the creation of a plurinational state based on local self-government and shared decision-making. They, along with many other indigenous activists also saw decolonization as the radical transformation of national development, moving from Western notions of capitalist extraction to ideas of more sustainable

development they call *vivir bien*, or living well. As chapter 4 will show, the Morales state's equation of extractivist development with decolonization underwrote very different ideas about development.

Despite the ongoing contestations over the multiple meanings of the term, Morales and the officials of his government have continued to use the language of decolonization to legitimize their policies. The Vice Ministry of Decolonization (VMD), a department of the Ministry of Cultures, is headed by Félix Cárdenas, an Aymara activist who was a MAS delegate to the Constituent Assembly. The VMD is charged with implementing decolonization and seeing to it that other agencies are acting in accordance with this overarching mandate. The VMD produces texts explaining decolonization and organizes "cultural" events across the country to promote decolonization. In the Introduction, I describe several ways of thinking about decolonization, emerging from different ideological trajectories. The VMD draws most overtly from postcolonial studies, focusing on how colonial forms of domination obscured indigenous ways of thinking and knowing, privileging Western categories and epistemologies in what Aníbal Quijano calls the "coloniality of knowledge" (Quijano 2007; see also *Cambio* 2011). In this view, decolonization requires thinking and speaking from a different locus of enunciation, claiming a new epistemological relation to the state, and recuperating Bolivia's non-Western culture, language, cosmology, and forms of being. Vice Minister Cárdenas often explains that the central feature of colonial domination is still the powerful myth of white superiority that devalued indigenous cultures, religions, languages, and ways of life. For him and other indigenous intellectuals, to decolonize Bolivian society is to cleanse it of such colonial devaluation and restore indigenous pride, forms of knowledge, and practices (see Bautista 2010; Burman 2011b; Cárdenas 2011).

Here a return to Rancière's notion of politics is helpful to explain why the Bolivian state has invested so much effort in what many see as propaganda or "merely culturalist" efforts. In the Introduction, I proposed that, using Rancièrean terms, we can think of indigenous organizing as emancipatory politics intended to draw attention to the "miscount" or exclusion of indigenous peoples from the nation (Rancière 1999). By making their presence visible, the "part without a part" demonstrates the "wrong" committed by the police order, or the structures of society. Rancière describes this in terms of aesthetics, explaining that one fundamental way in which society is ordered is through a "distribution of the sensible." He calls attention to the ways some people are not sensed as real or important, just noise in the system. In this view, we can see the efforts of the VMD to make coloniality visible as an ongoing politics. Given that throughout Bolivia's history, indigenous peoples have been discursively opposed to whites and mestizos, and treated as savage obstacles to modernity and progress, a fundamental task of decolonization is to change these ideas, held at the deepest aesthetic and cultural levels. The collective marriage I describe in this chapter was central to the VMD's efforts to "make

coloniality visible in all its aspects” and to radically transform Bolivian culture by making indigenous customs and norms perceivable (Mamani and Chivi 2010: 25).

DEPATRIARCHALIZATION

The 2011 collective marriage was intended to project a new horizon for Andean families. Why focus on families? Designed by the Depatriarchalization unit of the VMD, the weddings were intended to play a part in accomplishing the unit’s overarching goals: “to make visible, destabilize, and transform patriarchal social relations in the State, society, and economy” (Mamani and Chivi 2010: 10; Chivi 2011b). According to the VMD, patriarchy is not just *machismo*, or sexism. Rather, it is a broader “system of power relations made in the image and likeness of the masculine” (Mamani and Chivi 2010: 28). Writing for the VMD, Amalia Mamani and Idón Chivi trace the history of contemporary patriarchy to sixteenth-century Spanish colonialism, brought to the Americas by soldiers and Catholic priests (29). This follows a large body of feminist scholarship recognizing the ways in which colonialism was always gendered (see, e.g., Choque-Quispe 1998; Rivera Cusicanqui 1996; Rivera Cusicanqui and Barragán 1997; Schiwy 2007). In her analysis of British colonialism, for instance, Anne McClintock argues that “gender power was not the superficial patina of empire, an ephemeral gloss over the more decisive mechanics of class or race. Rather, gender dynamics were, from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise” (1995: 5–7). The precolonial gender system in the Andes has been described as a “dynamic and contentious equilibrium,” where women and men had public and family rights more or less on par with each other (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b: 31; see also Harris 1978), but María Lugones explains that Europeans brought with them a conception of civilization that privileged white men as “the human being par excellence.” This turned “the colonized woman” into an empty signifier, a sort of “non-human” whose sex became a legitimate site of exploitation, violence, and terror (Lugones 2010: 744). This was accomplished in part through Christian understandings of women’s sexuality as evil (745), and in part through the imposition of a strongly heterosexual model of the family. Rossana Barragán explains how this heterosexual model was further embedded during the republican period, when Bolivian legislators adopted a Victorian model of the family in which the paterfamilias acted as the sole public representative of the family, subordinating wives and children under his authority (cited in Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b: 30).

In 2011, I visited the offices of the VMD and spoke to the director of the Depatriarchalization Unit, Doña Esperanza Huanca. She, too, had been a delegate to the Constituent Assembly, and we remembered meeting in Sucre at the inauguration in 2006. Now, years later, she worked in the VMD, in the crowded Ministry of Cultures building in downtown La Paz. The office buzzed with conversations

in various languages, and its walls were covered with colorful posters advertising workshops on decolonization as well as important tourist sites. The great majority of the officials and employees self-identified as indigenous, and as a result, visiting the office is a very different experience than my many interviews of government officials in the 1990s. Then, officials were almost all mestizo men, dressed in formal suits. Now, the Depatriarchalization office was filled with indigenous women dressed in clothing that marked them as indigenous. A trained eye could identify which region and linguistic group each belonged to from their hats, blouses, and skirt styles. Doña Esperanza was proud to tell me about the collective marriages. Sitting under a poster of Evo Morales smiling down over the office, she explained that to confront colonial legacies, the new plurinational state must create new families. She pointed to Article 62 of the new constitution, which says that “the state recognizes and protects families as the fundamental nucleus of society, and guarantees the social and economic condition necessary for its integral development.” The collective marriages were an opportunity for the state to help instill into these couples these important values of the “new family”: horizontal relations of rights and duties as to their children; ending sexual, physical, and psychological violence; and shared responsibility for domestic labor (see Chivi 2011a). They began this effort with several inspirational talks at preparatory meetings for the wedding participants.

Vice Minister Félix Cárdenas was also enthusiastic about the weddings. He began our 2011 interview by describing his political trajectory from his early work as a labor leader in the peasant unions in Oruro to his struggles with the national labor union, the CSUTCB, around the 500-year anniversary of the invasion of the Americas. He described his experience as a delegate to the Constituent Assembly, where he had been the head of the *Visión del País* (Vision of the Country) Commission. Our job, he said, was to ask “what kind of country are we going to construct? And to do that we had to understand our identities, our history, and the myths we have been told since childhood.” This trajectory, he said, explained the excitement and the energy he brought to the VMD, where the first assumption was understanding that “today we are a colonial state.” That state is “reproduced permanently on the basis of two fundamental axes: racism and patriarchy.” To decolonize, then, is to “deconstruct that colonial state, and understand that all the institutions of the state are colonial and racist and patriarchal.” So, the weddings were intended to begin the process of changing those axes. He told me:

We want to re-position our spiritual thinking, our spiritual practices, and recuperate our ceremonial places and practices. . . . We want to revalorize our amautas, our Aymara priests. Through these weddings we are holding, we want to understand that [Catholic] marriage has a patriarchal and *machista* foundation in which the man is the owner of the woman, the children, and even the future of the family. We want

to put forth a new model of the family, marrying people with our own priests, and instituting families that live in complementarity, in solidarity, and fundamentally in co-responsibility. (personal interview, August 2011)

This argument faults European-based patriarchy as the source of gender discrimination, and holds out indigenous values as the idealized solutions. But does all gender discrimination come from colonialism? Does chachawarmi perhaps also conceal an autochthonous form of gender inequality, as Anders Burman suggests (2011a: 75)? These questions have been the subject of substantial debate and study across Latin America, as indigenous women have organized and mobilized for change (see, e.g., Oliart 2008; Richards 2004; Sierra 2001 Speed 2008; Speed et al. 2006). In her review of this now extensive literature, Stéphanie Rousseau concludes that indigenous women activists can find themselves caught between their support for their movements' collective projects of decolonization and autonomy, on the one hand, and their critiques of patriarchal practices and norms within their communities, on the other (Rousseau 2011: 9). For instance, she suggests that their role as agents for preserving and reproducing the community can be empowering, since this strengthens endangered identities, but it can also act as an obstacle to full participation in public or political roles. Even more problematic is the revaluation of customary law, which does not always embody women's rights (ibid). Yet scholars have documented the creative ways in which these women have used indigenous ideas of complementarity to struggle for justice within their communities and within their families. While some reject feminism as a Western bourgeois notion and defend indigenous *cosmovisiones* as a more legitimate space of resistance, others have increasingly put forward new forms of "indigenous feminism," in which their positions as both women and indigenous are mutually reinforcing (Hernández Castillo 2010; Speed 2008). In a provocative intervention into this debate, the Bolivian sociologist and public intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues that indigenous organizing focused on recovering territories in fact ignores the issues most important to indigenous women who live and work in cities—exploitative labor and sexual violence. By limiting their activism to questions of political or territorial rights, she says, male indigenous leaders are missing broader and potentially more liberatory notions of rights (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b: 49–50).

In Bolivia, these debates have revolved mainly around the issue of whether Andean culture can be claimed as a source of empowerment or is, rather, just another site of patriarchy—precisely the question this collective wedding brings up. The Aymara feminist Julieta Paredes told me that there are two forms of patriarchy: an ancestral patriarchy that can be seen from the period of the Incas on, and a colonial patriarchy brought by the Spanish. These are linked and reinforce each other. For her, depatriarchalization can only be successful if it recognizes

both forms, that of the European conquerors towards indigenous people, but also that of the indigenous men vis-à-vis indigenous women (personal communication, August 2012, see also Paredes 2011). The Aymara intellectual María Eugenia Choque-Quispe agrees, pointing out that the colonial order radically transformed gender relations between indigenous men and women, since the latter were transformed into a commodity whose value hinged on their reproductive capacities (Choque-Quispe 1998: 12). As a result, she rejects the concept of *chachawarmi*, characterizing it as a romanticized and deeply conservative notion that serves to conceal the ongoing subordination of women in their communities (15). This sentiment is echoed by some of the Aymara activists interviewed by Anders Burman (2011a), who recognized the gap between the indigenous *ideal* of *chachawarmi* and the way it is *practiced* in contemporary indigenous communities—where women are often still silenced and subordinated to indigenous men. Nevertheless, they still saw great emancipatory potential in revitalizing traditional gender practices as part of the decolonizing process. Clearly, the VMD takes this last approach, as we see in the collective wedding.

PUTTING ON A WEDDING FOR 355 COUPLES

The VMD began by broadcasting an invitation on the radio in Spanish and indigenous languages on the radio stations that are the main source of information in the rural areas. The written convocation said the goal of the marriages was to “promote and recuperate the culture of tolerance through the plurinational weddings in order to facilitate the process of the institutionalization of the diversity of religious practices, strengthening spiritual beliefs in accordance with the *cosmovisiones* [worldviews] of the indigenous originary peasant nations and peoples, to live well in harmony with Mother Earth” (Bolivia 2010).

Besides the opportunity to take part in this unique public celebration of cultural diversity, there were several important material incentives for participating. First, the VMD was footing the bill. In Bolivia, there are two forms of wedding ceremonies. The first is a civil marriage, called *registro civil*, officiated by a notary public, with two witnesses. Since 1911, this has been all that is necessary for a marriage to be legal and recognized by the state.³ But many people, including many indigenous Andeans, also celebrate a religious ceremony in the Catholic Church, and have their marriage license signed by the priest. As I describe below, this is usually followed by a costly wedding celebration. This expense is a big obstacle for poor people who often wait years to gather the funds and social capital to be able to hold such ceremonies.⁴ Many of the couples that participated in the collective wedding had been together for many years and had children, but they had never been able to afford to formalize their relationship. So it was significant that the state promised to cover the costs of whatever documentation was necessary,

such as procuring birth certificates or *carnets* (national identity cards), as well as the cost of the civil marriage registry and all the costs of the collective celebration. Every couple I spoke to said the cost was the main reason they participated in the collective wedding. I would also suggest that this was an easy pathway to state documentation: by participating in this state ritual, they avoided other much more complicated and costly bureaucratic rituals.

Potentially more significant was the state's offer to build each of the couples a house. The VMD paired with the Vice Ministry of Housing and Urbanization to establish a special program called "El Casado Casa Quiere" based on the common saying, "Cuando la pareja joven se casa, casa quiere" (When a young couple marries, they want a house).⁵ In many Aymara communities, the couple's parents and neighbors build the couple a new house. As Denise Arnold has shown, in the Andes, the construction of the house and the final roofing ceremony serves to weave the house and the couple into the network of the community and the cosmos (Arnold 1992). Citing Article 19 of the new constitution, which declares that all people have "the right to adequate habitat and housing," the VMD argued that the state, as the "big community," should support the couples with housing (Chivi 2011b). This was also part of a larger home building project that the MAS government began in 2006, called the Programa Vivienda Social y Solidaria (Social and Solidarity Housing Program), intended to meet the serious problem of lack of housing in the rural areas.⁶

The morning of the wedding, notary publics set up shop in the Coliseo Cerado, allowing those couples not already married under the registro civil to accomplish this legal step. As is the norm in Bolivia, notaries required the couples to swear before God. Photographs from that morning show couples swearing with the common hand gesture of thumb and first finger crossed in the sign of a cross, evidence of the continuing influence of the Catholic ecclesiastic traditions. The event organizers had been very clear in the pre-wedding meetings that the couples should wear "traditional" clothing. What did traditional clothing mean? I asked. For Natalia and Crispín,⁷ a participating couple I spoke with in 2012, it meant old-style clothing (*ropa antigua*) made of sheep's wool. This was not like the Western-style clothes they wear now in their rural community near Tiwanaku, but rather clothing such as their grandparents wore. They had inherited such clothing, which they kept for special ceremonial or civic events. Gregorio and Amalia, from another rural hamlet near Tiwanaku, had to buy these clothes, quite an investment, but one they were happy to make. They felt that the old customs were being lost, so it was fun to be involved in "recuperating" them. For couples that live in the city and regularly wear Western-style clothes (*de vestido*), this meant buying clothes marking them as indigenous. Beauticians offered free haircuts and styling, as well as makeup for the women. (Rural women rarely wear makeup, something considered more appropriate for urban women.) Urban women, few of whom wear their

hair in the long braids common in the rural areas or in the *cholita* style in the city, had their hair braided by the hair stylists. As several of the couples I interviewed told me, the long white wedding dress and suit in which so many people marry these days doesn't suit them. Luis, a neighborhood activist from El Alto, told me he was happy to be able to wear these clothes as an example for his children. His wife Celestina, an urban merchant who normally dresses *de vestido*, told me "I felt different, I felt good in these clothes!... This was an opportunity to be part of decolonization."

Here we see the critical importance of clothing in marking the categories and meanings of indigeneity. Cecilia Salazar has explored how the Indian has been continually recreated through the "manipulation of signs and corporalities," especially clothing choices. She argues that as biological racism gave way to social racism, clothing acted as a "second skin" that makes visible class and power (Salazar 2006: 10). In her analysis of folkloric performances in Ecuador, Rebecca Tolen argues that dress is by far the most important icon for portraying the place of indigenous people in the nation—tied to a timeless, rural ethnicity opposed to civilized whiteness (Tolen 1999). But such signs undergo constant reinterpretation. Rossana Barragán described how the clothing of the *chola paceña*—the icon of feminine ethnicity in Bolivia—all borrowed from European fashions. The large skirts of the *pollera*, flowered Manila shawl, and Borsalino bowler hat were originally adopted in acts of cultural mimesis intended to give indigenous migrants to the city social mobility and access to markets (Barragán 1992). In recent years, this style has been "converted into a form of resistance against cultural assimilation, as the clothing items have come to be seen as emblems of an oppressed and subaltern ethnicity" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b: 46). This is ever more the case since the election of Evo Morales, since government ministries like the VMD are filled with self-identifying indigenous women in polleras. Yet, as both Rivera Cusicanqui and Barragán have pointed out, this donning of polleras by chola women in La Paz remains ambiguous. On the one hand, it highlights and negates indigenous differences of gesture and conduct, but it may also mask assimilationist aspirations and self-perceptions as "mestizas" or "middle-class" women (ibid; Barragán 2006). (I return to the complex issue of the intersection of race and class in chapter 6.) I suggest the wearing of "indigenous" clothing in the wedding ceremony is equally ambiguous, and productively so. While it marks its wearers as indigenous, the theatrical context allows the participants to adopt the part for the spectacle, and then shed that "second skin" after the event if they want. Nonetheless, as signs of a newly valued identity, such clothing can also be enormously meaningful, especially in a ritual context.

The big event began with the couples entering the brightly decorated Coliseo Cerrado in groups, community by community, carrying flowers. They formed an enormous circle around the edges of the arena. Then, the *amautas*—pairs of

men and women ritual experts—entered, blowing conch shell horns and burning incense. Seated before ritual *mesas*, small tables with flowers and ritual objects, they chanted, invoking the deities of the mountains and the Pachamama. At the center of the arena was a dais, where the governor of La Paz, the vice minister of decolonization, and the minister of cultures were seated. From a doorway at the top of the arena, President Morales descended to the arena, where he greeted all the couples, followed closely by the ministry's video team. Then a collective theater group of 120 actors and dancers performed a drama showing the violent process of evangelization and colonization by the Spanish. Spanish colonizers and priests whipped, kicked, and enslaved the indigenous peoples, until the end, when the indigenous peoples rose up, killing the oppressors, to the applause of the audience and the president. A final dance showed the return of the Inca gods and warriors. Then, the amautas performed the marriage ceremony, giving each couple words of advice, blowing incense smoke in their faces, linking them together with ropes, and sprinkling alcohol on them and the ground.

Finally, President Morales spoke. Morales, who is single, joked that seeing all these families in *nuestras vestimentas* (our clothing) made him want to get married. Calling on the couples to continue to decolonize themselves and be an example for their children, he urged them to share responsibility in the home and in the big family of Bolivia. The event ended with Morales posing for pictures with each community group and then the couples going outside to make offerings at the ritual *mesas* prepared by the amautas.

CULTURAL PERFORMANCE AND MORAL REGULATION

This wedding spectacle provoked all kinds of responses in Bolivia. Anarcho-feminists protested the event's heterosexual privileging.⁸ Aymara activists from the Pukara group argued that this event reduced struggles over fundamental questions of power and domination to a silly symbolic "culturalist" response, focusing on things like dress and music (Turpo Choquehuanca 2011).⁹ In talking with many different Bolivians about these collective weddings, however, the overwhelming response I received was one of cynicism: "Es un show, no más" ("It's just a show"), they say. There is no doubt that this marriage was a show. It was intended to be. This was a performance carried out by the state, invested with state resources, using elements of folklore and theater to accomplish a political agenda. But this was a special kind of cultural performance: a public performance of a ritual we normally associate with private domestic relationships.¹⁰ Before analyzing the effects of this spectacle, I want to consider first why a state would choose ritual and performance to accomplish its political work, and then ask why it might intervene into the family sphere. Then I turn to how it used symbol and imagery to accomplish its goals.

Cultural performances are key sites of meaning making. David Guss defines performances as clearly framed events set off from normative everyday reality, which involve dramatizations that enable participants to understand, criticize, and change the worlds in which they live (Guss 2000: 9). This is possible because such performances are profoundly discursive: they are dialogical and polyphonic fields of action where competing claims can be challenged and negotiated, producing new meanings in the process. This means that cultural performance is not merely reflective of social experience, but also productive of it (10). Relying on Clifford Geertz's work on the theater state in Bali (1980) and Emile Durkheim's work on collective consciousness (1915), scholars have demonstrated how political actors use ritual and performance to gain legitimacy and to create and strengthen social solidarity. Festivals and cultural performance have been especially important mechanisms for forging new national identities, a sort of "social dramaturgy" intended to instill faith in new states. Nationalism was often supported by invented traditions based on forms of commonality imagined to be authentic (Guss 2000: 13; Anderson 1991; Hobsbawn and Ranger 1992).

Yet the question of authenticity or invention has proved to be a tricky one. As Stuart Rockefeller notes, folkloric performances are not really about "truth," but are more productively considered as vehicles for teaching. For him, the question is who is making the representations and who is benefiting from them (Rockefeller 1999: 124). While performances can produce social solidarity, they can also be used to contest power, or as processes of negotiation (Bowie 1997). Especially in class-structured or conflicted societies, struggles between different ethnic and social groups can result in intense semiotic battles (Lukes 1975: 305; Stepputat 2004). Jean Comaroff famously argued that in oppressive societies, resistance is a "struggle for the possession of the sign" (1985: 196). Yet a fundamental attribute of cultural performances is that they often utilize ambiguous symbolic elements that can be interpreted in very different ways (Cohen 1982; Guss 2000). This multivocality enables political actors to build solidarity in the absence of consensus, but also allows for creative utilization of such symbols to contest domination (Bowie 1997: 43; Gal 1991; Kertzer 1988: 11).

Rituals are a particularly powerful form of performance. They work by linking political interests to symbols of commonly held values, and especially to the sacred (Turner 1967; Kertzer 1988). Here I am defining ritual as symbolic actions that give meaning to actions in the here-and-now by linking them to the past (Kertzer 1988). Through dense semiotic links between elements internal to the ritual scene and others outside it, rituals "make present" something outside it through a felt quality of contiguity (Stasch 2011: 161). Thus, rituals can have what Rupert Stasch calls a "world-making" effect, as ritual actors "bootstrap into existence" the very conditions the rituals represent (163). Another reason for the efficacy of ritual is that it unites a particular image of the universe with a strong emotional



FIGURE 7. *Amautas*, or Andean spiritual practitioners, at an international meeting in Cochabamba in 2012. The Morales government utilizes them frequently to give events an “indigenous” identity. Credit: Juan Manuel Herrera/OAS. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>.

attachment to that image (Kertzer 1988: 40). As emotions are heightened, people focus on a limited range of symbols, and can easily accept the simple and often dualistic messages presented, especially imagery defining “us” and “them” (99–100). So, when the VMD wanted to challenge the myths of colonialism, it opted for a cultural performance combining ritual, pageantry, folklore, and history.” This “intertextual mixing of genres” accomplishes an important “representational shift” (Rogers 1999: 5–6; see also Rockefeller 1999). By drawing behaviors and cultural matter from one domain of experience, in this case, the sacred space of weddings, into another, in this case, a public state-sponsored spectacle, the behavior is “re-realized” through a mimetic act that reorganizes the world and makes sense of what appears to be given (5–6). One result is that the plurinational state is invested with a sense of the sacred.

States have enormous power to use ritual and performance to accomplish what the historical sociologists Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985) called “moral regulation.” This can happen in many ways, but Michael Warner points out that marriage is one key “institution by which the state regulates and permeates people’s most intimate lives” (1999). For instance, Sara Friedman shows how the People’s Republic of China worked to reform “backward” feudal marriage practices, urging

women to form the affective ties necessary to the modern conjugal bond, and, in the process, become productive, liberated subjects of the socialist nation (Friedman 2005: 312). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, state authorities tried to undermine the power of traditional religious systems by inventing new civil ceremonies for various rites of passage, such as baptism, funerals, and weddings. “Red wedding” ceremonies brought together folkloric elements with overtly nationalistic ones (like busts of Lenin) to link the individual and the Soviet state at the most intimate and momentous times of life (Lane 1979; McDowell 1974; Schmemmann 1983).

State regulation of domestic arrangements like weddings can also act as a site of racial and ethnic definition. Gender roles, marriage, and the family have been primary foci for nations striving to create a coherent nation out of heterogeneous populations (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Canessa 2005a; Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). This has been particularly clear in Bolivia. For instance, Brooke Larson and Marcia Stephenson have documented the ways in which modernizing Andean nation-states struggled to manage their indigenous populations in the early 1900s. “Nationalist ideologies,” Larson says, “quickly fastened on the family . . . to promote cultural reforms designed to reproduce healthy, efficient, patriotic citizen-workers or peasants” (2005: 34). The Bolivian state, worried about the rising indigenous insurgency in the countryside, mounted an extraordinary project of rural education that focused on *el hogar campesino*, (the peasant home). The child and the family were the “object, mechanism, and rationale for state intervention”—through which “bodily habits of hygiene, consumption, clothing, diet, housing, and sexuality were targeted for resocialization with the goal of creating docile indigenous subjects (39). All of these inscribed social and cultural meanings on to the body’s surfaces, thereby producing the difference between dirty/pathological/disordered indigenous bodies, and clean/normalized/modern mestizo bodies (Stephenson 1999: 121). Sometimes elites focused on building a nuclear farm family, sometimes on urging indigenous peasants to leave behind their indigenous practices so as to take on mestizo status, and sometimes on converting rural women into modern domestic housewives. The central goal of all these interventions was to fix “racial, class, and gender hierarchies in ways that subordinated the Indian peasantry to the state” (Larson 2005: 35).

As I describe in the Introduction, by the 1940s, this effort to modernize indigenous peoples gave way to a more overt and determined effort to make cultural *mestizaje* the central unifying nationalist project. The historian Laura Gotkowitz (2007) describes how the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR; National Revolutionary Movement) also focused on women to accomplish its goals. Instead of targeting indigenous women, President Gualberto Villarroel López and the MNR made the “working-class, mestiza mother the icon and vehicle of a strong nation” (174). In a key reform of family law, they legalized common-law marriages (*concubinato*), securing legal status for the “self-sacrificing, valiant women” whose

reproductive and productive labors formed the basis of the Bolivian nation. Gotkowitz also documents the ways in which the Villarroel administration used state ritual to express this vision of national harmony. In 1944, he made Heroínas (Heroines) Day, a regional celebration in Cochabamba honoring a group of mestiza market women who fought in the war of independence, into Bolivia's sole national holiday. In a spectacular show, Villarroel appeared at the annual parade sponsored by a merchant association, broke ground on several public works projects, and called on the heroic women to become the model for the "new Bolivia." Gotkowitz argues that the mestiza market women became the ideal image for the new mestizo Bolivia because "they bridged private and public spheres, for they stood simultaneously as mothers of a healthy 'race,' custodians of an abundant market, and brave patriots who died defending national independence and honor" (184). These studies and others document an unrelenting effort by the Bolivian state to use the family as a site of both discursive and institutional interventions to create a unified nation. Moreover, we see how the same oppositional elements (indigenous vs. white-mestizo, savage vs. civilization, etc.) have been utilized over and over in these symbolic battles with a goal of creating a consensus about the position of the Indian in the nation.

This can also be seen in the large literature on folkloric cultural performances in the Andes (Abercrombie 2001; Bigenho 2006; Guss 2000; Mendoza 2000; Paulson 2006; Rogers 1999; Weismantel 2001). In these performances, such as dance and music festivals, beauty pageants, and folkloric presentations, we find multiple actors enacting, reproducing, and contesting images of indigeneity. While all these performances begin with the assumptions of separate, coherent, and primordial cultural differences recognizable in "indigenous," "traditional" culture and customs, this separation is blurred by the playful dramatizations. In performances in the late 1990s described by Mark Rogers (1999) and others, for example, participants assumed identities other than their own everyday personas. White-mestizos took on the roles of indigenous people, and indigenous people danced as mestizos but also portrayed stylized versions of indigeneity, all distorting reality so that indigeneity was relieved of its threatening components and prepared for incorporation in a white-mestizo hegemony (10). Thomas Abercrombie's description of the iconic carnival celebrations in Oruro describes how this interchange between supposedly closed cultural systems works. White-mestizo participants dressed as wild Indians and pre-Columbian devils dance and enact the "Indian within," until the climax, when they shed their wildness and hear mass before the Virgin in the Catholic Cathedral. The suppressed and dangerous identities are enacted, domesticated, and then re-repressed, allowing the development of a national identity based on a distinctive Indian past firmly under control of a modern nation (2001). What emerges most strongly from this research is a calling into question of essentialized notions of indigenous culture and

its opposition to Western culture, and an understanding, instead, of identity as constantly being formulated through dialogue in particular and often contested political and historical contexts (Tolen 1999).

I want to turn now to how the collective weddings again reproduced and reworked these traditional oppositions. I argue the state ritual again put images of indigeneity and European in conflict to depict a new Bolivia unified by a strong state and a manageable form of indigeneity.

IMAGINARY WEDDINGS

Let us look more closely at the wedding spectacle. First, the event brought together couples from three departments: La Paz, Potosí, and Oruro. There was an enormous heterogeneity of cultures, languages, and social status in this group. There were Aymara families from communities near La Paz, many of whom are merchants or transporters who live part time in El Alto; monolingual Aymara couples from rural communities; Afro-Bolivians from the Yungas area, who speak their own Afro-Yungueño dialect and practice African-inspired dances and religious rituals; urban Paceños who dress *de vestido* and speak only Spanish; and an assortment of indigenous groups from Argentina and Chile. Despite this variety, the speakers lumped all of them together, referring to “our” tradition, “our” identity, and “our” *amautas*. Here the state was creating a fictional unity for its purposes, inventing the sort of commonality often invoked by nation-states (Guss 2000). The linguistic references were key to this, as the terms “us” and “our” indexed a presumed category into which all the participants fit. This was reinforced by the symbolic references to the past, especially the theater production about the conquest. There, in dramatic relief, the oppositions between “us” and “them” were made horrifyingly clear. “We” are the (good, noble) “indigenous” victims of (bad, evil) “them,” the Spanish/whites. The emotions evoked were remarkable: people watched with serious, almost scared looks on their faces, and then applauded loudly as “we” took revenge. The ritual made it appear that the *amautas*, the Andean spiritual practitioners, were the bearers of the wisdom and teachings of one coherent, age-old sacred tradition.

Second, the event created a new marriage ritual and asserted that it represented the authentic way of marrying according to “our tradition.” Let me be clear that I am not disqualifying this ceremony as inauthentic—as I have made clear above, all traditions are invented and constantly evolving. Rather, I point this out to highlight the particular political configuration in which this new tradition was produced. But the orchestrators of this wedding did not explain they were creating something new, like patching together the remnants of the past to make something meaningful and relevant for an indigeneity under construction, as in the case of the Colombian indigenous communities Joanne Rappaport describes (2005), or

inventing new secular rituals to support socialism, as in the Soviet case Christel Lane describes (1979). Instead, they declared that this was a “recuperation” of real, past traditions that had survived and resisted the centuries of colonization. In doing so, they not only obscured the practice’s invented nature, but also its political implications.

Scholars of Andean cultures suggest that in most Aymara and Quechua communities, marriages are established over time and in several stages. This takes time, sometimes years, while the couple is already living together and having children. The religious wedding ceremony tends to be the last stage of this longer process of becoming married. Customs vary widely from community to community, of course, and are changing rapidly as more and more rural people move into the city. However, scholars report some general trends across the Andes. The first stage of the process is the initiation of the new relationship. Couples make their own decisions about whom to marry, and often start sleeping together clandestinely. In some places, it is common for the man to “steal” the woman (*robo*, or *raption*) in a sort of elopement (Balán 1996: 81).¹² Then, the man and his family petition the woman’s family, repeatedly bringing food and other material goods to show the young man’s intentions and suitability. Once both sets of parents agree, the bride and groom move in together, usually into the home of the man’s family (although this varies). This begins the second stage, when the couple begins to acquire the resources to form their own household and form new kinship relations by finding *compadres*, a respected couple who will help finance the wedding. The sociologist Jorge Balán explains that this relationship is a lifelong one, tying the families together in a complex set of rights and obligations within wide bilateral kinship networks (Balán 1996: 72). This period also gives time for the families to prepare the gifts of land, animals, tools, and cash necessary for a wedding ceremony, and for the construction of a new house (*ibid*). Couples may legalize their relationship through the civil registry during this period, but many do not.

The final stage, which may take place in a year or after many years, is the religious wedding ceremony. It begins with a mass in the Catholic Church and then continues with a (sometimes days-long) celebration and party in the community. There may be dancing, music, and processions, depending on the community and the customs (Pórcel Gira et al 2002a, b). In many communities, it is crucial to demonstrate one’s material success and prestige through extravagant provisioning of the party. Such shared consumption is auspicious of a productive and successful future life.¹³ A fundamental part of these ceremonies is the giving of advice (*consejos*) from the padrinos to the newly married couple, exhorting them to live well together, and to remember their obligations to their parents, padrinos, and neighbors (*ibid*). Finally, the new couple may move into a new house, after an important collective roof thatching ceremony (Arnold 1992).¹⁴ In the process of following these steps, the couple moves from adolescence to adulthood, acquiring

the status of *jaqe*, or person, which is only possible as a part of the social unit of marriage (Canessa 2005b).

So the collective Andean marriage in El Alto condensed what is often a long, socially involved process into a discrete, state-sponsored moment that narrowed the range of traditions that normally constitute Andean marriage practices. It was also a very strange event for most of the participating couples. The couples I spoke with (as well as several Aymara intellectuals in the city) said that Andean ritual specialists did not normally play a role in weddings, but were consulted for other things, like healing, divination, or potions for luck in love and business. This invented ceremony combined the Catholic weddings they were used to with a new sacred and familiar role for the amautas. This was intentional. The VMD overtly aimed to create a new role for amautas. But what is interesting is that the new role is actually that of the Catholic priest. Symbolically, the amautas had the aura and moral weight of religious experts and did what the Catholic priests the participants were familiar with had always done in the past: they burned incense, chanted, and performed weddings. Although they were supposedly the anti-Church element of this rite, the amautas and their words and practices were made to appear sacred to the participants by their ritual links to symbols of the Church. Borrowing the structural traits and symbols from Christianity lends a sense of permanence and timelessness to the amautas' roles, giving it a sacred feeling (Lane 1979).

This blurring between Catholic and Aymara idioms reprises—but inverts—centuries of borrowing since Christian missionaries came to the Americas intent on proselytizing local peoples. Scholars have described the ways in which local deities were overlain with Catholic saints, creating syncretic religions in which elements of both remained salient. Andrew Orta (2004) has traced how Catholic missionaries in Bolivia dealt with co-existing Aymara beliefs and practices. Earlier efforts to extirpate native deities gave way in the 1990s to an era of “inculturation,” in which missionaries sought to incorporate indigenous understandings and spirituality into a Christian identity. He shows how in this period catechists—local Aymaras acting as vernacular priests—understood themselves, not as caught between two different belief systems, but as situated actors in a coherent, lived social world. When the catechists burned candles or made offerings, they, like Aymara healers or *yatiris*, experienced themselves according to Aymara idioms of embodiment and notions of obligation to the community. Orta concludes that their interactive orientation to the *chuyma*, the Aymara notion of heart or center, is experienced within a “field of entangled revelations” (180). This insight helps us understand the entangled roles the amautas played in the collective marriages described here.

THE MASCULINE STATE

What about the goal of reinforcing chachawarmi and attacking machismo? Much of the symbolism of the event was, in fact, centered on complementary gender

relations. The amautas came in couples, linked together with braided ropes. Even the announcers were a pair, a woman and man, who took turns introducing people. Both announcers alternated between Spanish and Aymara, making sure all the events and guests were presented in both languages. The most important person in the auditorium was President Morales, who is single. To have him perform the role of padrino not only went against the goal of gender complementarity, it also violated Andean custom. In a scathing editorial, the Aymara Pukara collective said “[t]he pair of padrinos, in the Andean world, are the authority that as a model guides the formation of a new jaqe unit. One is jaqe, that is a human person, only through marriage, and whoever is not jaqe cannot attribute to themselves the ability of being a model or authority for the social edification of the family, that is, cannot be the padrino of a marriage” (Pukara 2011). To his credit, Morales did not attempt to give the couples advice; he left that up to the amautas.

Nevertheless, Morales is a particularly bad role model in terms of gender equality. He regularly makes embarrassingly sexist remarks and jokes. During the 2011 lowland indigenous march over the state’s proposed highway through the TIPNIS indigenous territory and national park, Morales suggested that his supporters the coca growers go out and seduce local indigenous women to garner their support (Erbol 2011). In 2012, he caused a scandal at carnival, when he sang several *coplas*, or rhyming couplets, in which he suggested he could sleep with female ministers or social movement leaders (Página Siete 2012). In 2012, while inspecting a petroleum well, Morales asked several women employees whether they were *perforadoras o perforadas* (drillers or drilled) (Eju TV 2012a).

Given Morales’s reputation, one can read the tableaux at the wedding differently. What is striking is the single man, a powerful head of state, giving his sanction to the ceremony from above on the dais. The spatial arrangement makes clear that the male state is above all the people. Morales appears here not as the padrino, but as the father figure or priest, the force bringing the couples together. Right behind him stands a military official, making clear that this state has all the power of the military force behind him. He enacts the plurinational state, performing a particular form of nationalism through his own body. Like the amautas, through the ritualized event, his position is linked to the sacred, to the moral high ground, to collective legitimacy. He emerged from the highest place in the arena like a king and received all the pomp and ceremony such a role merited. His speech was the climax of the event: his “blessing” linked the plurinational state to the ancient powers of the king, of the Church, of the deities. Here, his singleness is no longer dangerous or out of place. King and priest embody safe, known forms of power.

These symbolic links can be seen especially clearly when we consider the fact that Evo was presiding over a mass wedding. Collective marriages, while rare, occur in many places across the globe. The Moonie mass weddings put on by South Korea’s Unification Church are probably the most famous—although these are not actually legal weddings, but simply the blessing of the couples. Elsewhere, such

events are sometimes organized to defray costs, but more commonly are intended to draw attention to a cause.¹⁵ In the Andes, however, collective weddings have a history. Reportedly, the Inca state mandated group marriage ceremonies in villages once a year: “men and women of marriageable age stood facing each other in two rows in front of a visiting government official,” Richard Price recounts. “Each man, beginning with local dignitaries, selected a girl and placed her behind him, with her hands on his shoulders. The couples then received together the official blessing of the Inca’s representative. Thus concluded, marriages were completely indissoluble, with the imposition of the death penalty even for adultery. The state provided a house, tools, and fields for the newlyweds, and the man immediately entered the ranks of taxpaying adults” (Price 1965: 312).

The other important echo is with the Catholic Church, which also performed mass weddings. Price describes how across the Andes during his fieldwork in the early 1960s, itinerant priests would travel to rural communities and bring together unmarried couples “living in sin” to marry in collective ceremonies during the Lenten season. Local leaders participated in these unannounced round-ups, capturing the couples known to be sleeping together to bring them to the priest. Like the spectacular wedding in 2011, these weddings had financial advantages: they cost only 10% as much as a large private wedding, because they involved only minimal celebrations and no dancing since they always occurred during Lent (318).¹⁶

In my reading of this performance, Morales’s presiding over this mass ceremony appears to reenact precisely the powerful patriarchal colonial institutions—Church and empire—that decolonization claims to dismantle. Feminists like Jenny Ybarnegaray Ortiz and Julieta Paredes argue that despite the effort to depatriarchalize marriage, nothing the VMD has done—including this event—has changed the basic patriarchal form of marriage in Bolivia. Women still take their husbands’ names and suffer from profound inequality. The collective wedding did nothing but institutionalize the same heterosexual models of the family that the Christian church imposed (Paredes 2011). *Amautas* were substituted for priests, but nothing else changed. If they wanted to do away with the colonializing power of the state and the Church, Paredes asks, why have the state involved at all in weddings? (personal communication, 2011).

This is the fundamental question here. Why promote marriages in the first place? I suggest that the family continues to be an amenable target for subject creation, just as it has been since colonial times. Here, from a wide variety of possibilities—the many forms of cultural difference, or “pluriverse” identified by indigenous activists—the state appears to be narrowing the options, “fixing” the acceptable ways of being indigenous (see Nelson 1999: 28). Through an emotional and meaning-filled ritual that enacts a new way to be indigenous—through embracing state-sponsored indigenous cultural forms—the state created new subjects who can embody and symbolize its unifying power. At the same time that the

state is celebrating gender complementarity, however, it also appears to be giving the stamp of approval to liberal state-sanctioned marriages. Delinked from the community obligations understood as central to traditional Andean marriages, these weddings tie the couples and the family directly to the state. This was accomplished not by doing away with the colonial symbols of the Church or empire, but instead, by using their symbolic power to legitimize a particular new vision of indigenous family relations. By merging Catholic symbols and ritual practices with opposing symbols of indigenous practices, the ritual exposes the fundamental racial conflicts underlying Bolivian society. Like the cultural performances during the *indigenismo* period, this fearful tension is ultimately mediated by a conservative Christian resolution: a heterosexual wedding overseen by a strong masculine state. The “scary” side of indigeneity is domesticated, and no mention is made of kidnapping or years of living together before marriage. The result is a performed indigeneity that avoids the dangers of the dirty, resistant, or savage Indian—or any disagreements they might provoke. Instead, the indigeneity promoted by this paternal state is orderly, beautiful, and legitimized by its obvious links to the sacred. And what it most clearly performed is that the wedding is “ours,” that is, under the control of the beneficent state. Charles Hale argues that neoliberal multiculturalism produced an *indio permitido*, a permissible Indian whose cultural difference was recognized so long as it did not interfere with the state or with capitalism (Hale 2004). I suggest that this ritualized decolonization attempts to create a similar subject: the *descolonizado permitido*, the authorized decolonized subject supporting the MAS state.

The vice president’s dramatized dual weddings—one in the Catholic Church and the other in a staged “indigenous” space—can be seen to produce the same thing. Once again, a mixture of Catholic and indigenous symbols at Tiwanaku blended to acknowledge, but at the same time minimize and erase, the extreme race and class differences made obvious by the extravagant wedding in the Cathedral. The feminist Maria Galindo captured this perfectly, saying the wedding was “Catholic to make the Church and the middle class content,” but also employing “a rural and indigenous scene to continue the fetishistic use of the indigenous as a sexual and political toy. It shows us that one is not opposed to the other, but that they can be perversely complementary and simultaneously useful” (Galindo 2012).

MULTIPLE READINGS?

Like all performances, these spectacles had multiple audiences and could be read in many ways. For those self-identified as indigenous Andeans, and especially those invested in the state process of decolonization, this ritual performance was a chance to reverse the colonial forms of knowledge that continue to erase indigenous values and practices. Attending a follow-up with the wedding participants a

few months later, I observed the reverence with which VMD personnel and many of the participants treated the amautas who inaugurated the meeting. The disjuncture between the crowded city streets of El Alto, where the meeting occurred, and the earthy smells of burning wood and incense as the amautas chanted and prayed, called attention to the radical transformation such efforts involve. As Anders Burman (2011b) makes clear, introducing “spiritual” matters into what is normally considered “politics” makes visible the effects of colonialism and modernity, and the losses they have caused. In his analysis of contemporary Andean curing rituals, he suggests that Aymaras see colonialism as an illness that can be cured by cleansing the “strange element” that has been imposed when the *ajayu* (spirit) is lost. That strange element is the “Spaniard within” who must be exorcised to allow the spirit to recover (2011b: 465). In this view, decolonization is an ongoing process to “transform the state into something less ‘strange’” (469), and ritual practices such as the collective wedding and the marriage of the vice president at Tiwanaku are essential. For them, these are direct attacks on the coloniality of power, and a rethinking of the relation between nature, culture, and politics. In this sense, we can see the use of these cultural forms as means to construct a new political reality, a horizon or utopia towards which these activists want Bolivian society to move. Joanne Rappaport explains that the indigenous cultural activists she works with in the Cauca region of Colombia see culture, not as a concrete or preexisting thing, but as a tool for delineating a political project: “Essentializing constructs are more usefully understood as guides for disseminating cultural policy and engaging in political action than as totalizing truths; they are something to be continually questioned, redefined, and redeployed” (Rappaport 2005: 38–39). Clearly, the indigenous VMD activists are engaged in this form of cultural political action.

How about the participants? A year after the weddings, I asked participants what they thought of the whole thing. Had it changed things for them? I met with several couples in the city and traveled to a small community outside Tiwanaku to meet more.¹⁷ All of the couples I spoke with said they were glad they had gotten married in El Alto event and they were happy to have supported the president in his *proceso de cambio* (process of change). They had enjoyed the spectacle and the excitement of the event, but it was strange, and somewhat disappointing. I met one couple, Natalia and Crispín, in the main plaza of Tiwanaku late one afternoon. They had walked the long way into town on foot and brought me some cheese made from their sheep’s milk. They had enjoyed wearing their ancestral clothes, they said, but they had missed having their family with them. I spoke with another couple, Gregorio and Amalia, at their adobe house looking over the long valley back into the town of Tiwanaku. Sitting against a wall, we warmed ourselves in the afternoon sun. Gregorio said he hadn’t understood exactly what he was getting into, and honestly wished the ceremony had allowed him to be married and blessed by a Catholic priest. In his community, he said, weddings produce

a marriage certificate signed by the priest, and he regretted that theirs did not. I asked if they felt the meetings they had attended focusing on gender and equal family relations had been of much importance to them. No, they both said, they hadn't really learned anything new there. "We are already living that life," said Amalia. "Nosotros andamos bien [literally, we are walking well]. It is part of our Catholic faith, to walk well in life. It shows, if you are happy. If not, people in the community will intervene."

They also pointed out that this wedding did not bring the sorts of social interconnections from which they would have benefitted in a normal wedding. President Morales was their padrino, but this was in name only. Gregorio had just emerged from a three-week stay in a hospital in La Paz to heal a broken leg. "If I had a real padrino, he would have come to help me in the hospital," he lamented. Amalia said the wedding was sad for her, because instead of having a long community party, after the ceremony in El Alto, they were alone in the city. Fortunately, they had a relative who made them dinner. Other people had more humorous takes on this. Virgilio, Gregorio's neighbor, took time away from a neighborhood soccer game to describe his experiences to me. He said that in their community they have the custom of going to the padrino's house once a year at carnival time, to check in, take them gifts, and account for their behavior over the previous year. "Should I call on Evo this *carnaval*?" he asked playfully. More important to them was the fact that the VMD had not fulfilled its promise to build them houses. Natalia and Crispín, mentioned above, described this as a great disappointment. They couldn't believe Don Evo would let that happen. They are part of the committee the couples in the Tiwanaku area have formed to push their demands that the promise be kept. The VMD told me that this lapse was the result of a reorganization of the Vice Ministry of Housing, and they expected the program would soon get back on its feet. Whether this is true or whether this is another example of government corruption (see *Opinión* 2012), the newly married couples are hoping the government will come through. When I checked in with the VMD in 2015 about this, they fumbled around and said they would get back to me, but they never did.

The responses from these couples demonstrate the layered and contradictory effects such state efforts at cultural hegemony can have. The participants are not passive recipients of state-imposed policies, but agents with their own understandings and agendas. They understood this event was a show, and they played a part in it for diverse reasons—from getting a house to feeling pride in their civic role to perhaps having fun playing with the tropes of indigeneity. But many also made clear that the various meanings they attached to their participation were understood within the context of social and political relationships of clientelism, party political militancy, and the MAS's wider agenda. That is, they saw the wedding as an effort by the MAS government to gain support and legitimacy. This

was even truer of the wedding of Vice President García Linera, which was to take place in the ceremonial complex in nearby Tiwanaku in the next few weeks after my visit. The wedding plans had gotten a lot of publicity. The well-known Aymara leader Felipe Quispe said the wedding would bring the sacred place bad luck, dirtying it. “No Aymaras marry there,” he said. “García is just pretending [*aparentar*]. If he wanted to indianize himself, he should have married an indigenous woman and not an elite aristocrat of his own caste” (Eju TV 2012b). The couples I spoke with were not so dismissive. They were, once again, excited to have such a spotlight on their community and wondered if it would help bring in money to local businesses. And the vice president’s wedding itself? “Fine [*Bien, no más*],” said Gregorio. “But it’s odd. They’re not even from here. Another show [*Otro show*]. . . . But it makes sense. This is where Evo started his government.” He rightly recalled another moment of spectacle in which Morales linked his legitimacy to his indigenous heritage.

This draws our attention to the question of who the audience for this spectacle was intended to be. The public spectacle nature of the event suggests that it was not just intended for the participants. Instead, it was more likely intended for the MAS’s electoral constituency, especially the large population of people who have indigenous roots, but no longer “identify closely with the lifeways and cultural values of their communities of origin” (Canessa 2014: 20). Andrew Canessa argues that a large number of people in Bolivia fit into this category, including coca growers in the Chapare, and the large group of landless peasants, urban merchants, and highland colonists in the lowlands. El Alto, where the collective wedding ceremony was staged, is the country’s largest concentration of urbanized indigenous people, many of whom who make their livings in the commerce, transportation, and service sectors. While a large number of *Alteños* keep close connections to the rural communities and bring communal practices into their city lives, as Sian Lazar (2007) has shown, others have gradually left these behind as they enter the middle class. I take up this new identity in further detail in chapter 6. What does the invented and generic version of indigeneity presented in the weddings spectacle offer them?

There is no simple answer. On the one hand, as Canessa makes clear, this group has a historical consciousness of racism and injustice. Morales’s election has meant that they are now identifying less as *mestizos* and more as *cholos*, or indigenous, even though they are living urban middle-class lifestyles (Canessa 2014: 20). Morales’s example and the form of idealized indigeneity he offers allow these “indigenous cosmopolitans” (Goodale 2006) a way to deepen this identity without returning to the rural community, or to engage in the sort of collective or community relationships and obligations Gregorio and Virgilio from Tiwanaku describe. Like the growing celebrations of Andean New Year, which enable urban residents and foreign tourists alike to enjoy Andean spirituality (Sammels 2012),

the wedding spectacle presented a form of indigeneity easily incorporated into urban lives. In 2012, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui told me that this was one of the primary appeals of the MAS discourse of ethnicity: “we no longer feel shame about our identity.” More important, “Evo gives us an ‘umbrella’ under which we can be different. He permits us in some ways to resist the subtle scripts of transnational consumer capitalism” (personal communication 2012).¹⁸

But accepting this idealized and homogenized version of indigeneity has its costs: obscuring the complex reality of indigenous life. The Aymara activist Pedro Portugal argues that the focus on a supposed ancient millennial Andean culture and rituals is a dangerous mystification of real contemporary Aymaras. He observed that, although Aymaras are a dynamic force for capitalism, industry, and progress in Bolivia, *pachamamismo* — the discourse valorizing Andean *cosmovisiones*, especially those relating to the Pachamama, Mother Earth—makes them seem exotic and backward. Not only is this folklorization degrading, it is dangerous, because it awakens latent fears among mestizos, who worry that the Indians are trying to “flip the tortilla” and return to some irrational past (personal communication, 2012). Similarly, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui objects to the “purist” nature of this folklorization because it depreciates the existing forms of indigenous religiosity. “The majority of indigenous people who practice religion do so with crosses, virgins, saints, and chapels; taking that away is taking away their foundation” (personal communication, 2012). In essence, they are arguing that the Morales administration is doing what the indigenismo project of the early twentieth century did: resorting to a distorted, static, and homogenizing vision of the “authentic” Indian.

CONCLUSION

These cultural performances act as vehicles for the representation and re-representation of Bolivian society’s most enduring tensions. As a result, they sparked numerous and contesting interpretations. For some, using these highly charged symbolic cultural performances and rituals to make coloniality visible and celebrate alternative forms of domestic relationships is a prime example of how the state can move Bolivian society forward on a path to social justice, countering the racism that has relegated indigenous peoples to what Rancière would call “non-existence.” In this view, these symbolic acts were not frivolous shows, but acts of emancipatory politics attempting to radically alter the distribution of the sensible.

For others, however, the weddings called into question the credibility of the state’s commitment to decolonization. Instead of promoting a different form of knowledge or epistemology—a recognition of different ways of thinking and being in the world, which would require a radically different form of indigenous self-government—these weddings instead acted as further mechanism to cement the MAS project of state-making. In this view, the weddings evacuated indigeneity of

its complexity and its emancipatory potential, instead reworking it into a folkloric national subject position subsumed under the state's beneficent control. Instead of expressing the "disagreement" that characterized indigeneity at the beginning of the Morales era, when indigenous actors offered radical challenges to the neoliberal system, these performances used the discourse of decolonization to form a consensus about what indigeneity means and who speaks for it. Such efforts to form consensus is a classic nation-building strategy, inasmuch as nation-states are justified by representations—nearly always fictional—of a coherent national subject. We might also characterize it as a form of "post-politics," what political theorists call the emerging practices of governance that operate through a prefigured consensus surrounding the seemingly politically neutral fields of technical intervention (Swyngedouw 2009, 2010; see also Postero and Elinoff, forthcoming). Rancière warns that such practices have the effect of foreclosing the possibility of essential disagreements over the existing order (Rancière 2006: 81). Is the Morales government engaging in this sort of post-politics by owning decolonization and indigeneity? Obviously, this is not the same sort of technical intervention we see in other forms of post-politics, like development NGOs or climate change scientists. Yet the same result can be seen: the state apparatus produces a seemingly uncontested consensus about indigeneity, which serves to delegitimize disagreement. This illuminates how easily politics can be turned into policing, as the state takes up the category of indigeneity to justify its own existence. It also raises important questions about the possibility of the liberal state's ability to foster revolutionary politics. Can the state ever be the site of politics in Rancière's sense of the term, or is the state always structurally bound to reinforcing the police order? What if the police order is already based on an emancipatory recount, as was the MAS's plurinational project? This is the paradox of the MAS state: it is at once an indigenous state and a liberal state. Yet, as this chapter has shown, the multiple interpretations of the weddings demonstrate not only the blurry boundary between politics and policing but the continuing promise of decolonization.