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Homage to *Kollasuyu*: Looking for Revolution in Evo Morales's Bolivia

Michael Agresta

La Paz, Bolivia, is built along the walls of a canyon on the Andean high plain. When rains come, as they do almost every day in January, a cold, dirty water full of laundry soap rushes down from the poorest neighborhoods around the rim of the canyon to the richest neighborhoods in the low-lying suburbs.

I flew into La Paz on a drizzly night in mid-January. From my window on the plane, I could see the row of snow-capped peaks above the city illuminated with each flash of lightning. As I rode down into the canyon, my taxi driver asked me if I'd heard that Bolivia had elected a new president, Evo Morales. "A few years ago, no one would have ever imagined it!" he exclaimed, visibly excited. When I asked him if he liked Evo, he assumed a cautious tone, as if trying to dissociate himself from his initial enthusiasm. "There's a lot of hope," he told me, waving his arm at the city below us.

From any vantage point in La Paz, one can see endless adobe houses climbing up the walls of the canyon. At night, the lights of these outer *barrios* scatter randomly like stars along the dark geological formations through which the highway is carved. I saw signs of change, literally, along the side of the road as we descended—giant billboards advertising a new "City of Dignity." In my hotel restaurant, the woman who served me coca tea was reading a pamphlet-style biography of Evo Morales with the subtitle "A Story of Dignity." I'd see that biography a lot over the next few weeks, hawked in every plaza and at every political event I attended. I'd also continue to hear the word "dignity" as a one-word explanation for the change that Evo Morales represented.

When I visited Bolivia three years ago as a student, the word "dignity" was most closely associated with *Plan Dignidad*, the hard-line government policy for coca eradication, and Evo Morales seemed a more likely candidate for assassination than for president of the republic. Evo was the leader of the *cocalero* movement in the tropical Chapare region. Like most *cocaleros*, he was born poor in a small village in the Andes and had migrated to the jungle when the Bolivian economy fell apart and the mines shut down in the mid 1980s. The coca leaf, used for centuries as a medicine, ceremonial offering, or mild stimulant, had recently become

a cash crop in the booming cocaine trade. A series of corrupt Bolivian governments either actively collaborated with international cocaine traffickers or did little to hinder them. One notorious right-wing dictator, Luis Garcia Meza Tejada (1980-81), even employed a cabinet-level minister to help the government distribute cocaine internationally. Eventually, Ronald Reagan declared war on drugs, so nations like Bolivia were required to destroy a certain acreage of coca crop and make a certain number of arrests to continue to receive aid. Over the past two decades, dozens of poor coca-growing peasants have been killed while protesting the burning of their fields. The *cocaleros* eventually founded a political party, MAS, and put Evo in charge of it. In 2002 he placed a surprise second in the national elections against a slate of candidates who generally supported US-backed policies on free trade and coca eradication. At the time of my first visit, I saw pro-Evo graffiti on walls all over the major cities: EVO=MAS. Independent *grafiteros* had added additional words at the end of the slogan, so that now the walls formulated the plurality of public opinion: Evo equals more democracy, Evo equals more conflict, Evo equals more dignity, Evo equals more dead.

During that first visit to Bolivia, I sympathized with the *cocaleros* as people, but I had a hard time supporting their political struggle. I didn't like the idea of people who grew raw material for drugs having an equal say in government policy. It seems like a fair attitude to take, unless you're a *cocalero*.

I sympathized more naturally with the rural, indigenous communities in the highlands, those who had stayed on ancestral land and maintained a traditional, communal culture when Evo and others had migrated to the tropics. By 2003, those communities were in the midst of a full-blown cultural renaissance and a renewed struggle to change the racist and colonialist national culture. State-sponsored rural education had not begun until the 1950s—before that, as Evo says in his speeches, Aymara-speaking natives who learned to write Spanish might have had their hands cut off. Only in recent decades had a vigorous crop of Aymara-speaking intellectuals and political leaders emerged to draw attention to the struggle of indigenous peoples in Bolivia. Their rhetoric was often radical, invoking the spirit of past rebels and referring to Bolivian territory by its old Inca name, *Kollasuyu*. The moral clarity of their message attracted mestizo Bolivian intellectuals such as Alvaro Garcia Linera and Silvia Rodriguez Cusicanqui. It also attracted me. I did some academic field work on the movement to reconstitute *ayllus*—attempts by leaders of surviving traditional communities to repair and remake the traditional elements of rural communities that had been dismantled by *haciendas* or by the agricultural worker's union after the national revolution in 1952.

I liked the courage of leaders who would sacrifice llamas and pour offerings to *Pachamama* (an earth deity) in the town plaza after rewriting

the constitution of their municipality. Since the age of mass conversions to Christianity, those rituals had been performed in secret, after dark, or in a private space, so that the priests and the *corregidores* wouldn't hear about it. I watched a llama sacrifice once, on the morning of Andean New Year, June 22, 2003. Throughout the long preceding night, a crowd of pilgrims, tourists, and urban kids looking for a party had slowly congregated at the Inca ruins on a hilltop outside town. Just before dawn, some *mallkus* cut two llamas' throats and spilled the blood on the ground. The large crowd pushed and strained to see. I remember thinking, this is what a sacrifice feels like, not pure or solemn, just something you can't take your eyes off of, something that pulls at you in a basic way that cannot be resisted, live death. I was instructed to raise my hands, palms forward, to the eastern horizon. I took off my gloves. As the sun rose, I felt its heat bring my hands back to life.

Three years later, I had returned to Bolivia to witness a different set of ceremonies—the official and unofficial inaugurations of Evo Morales. The official inauguration would take place before Congress, and as an undistinguished visitor I would have to watch it on television. I could, however, attend the ceremony in the ruins at Tiwanaku where Evo would be recognized as Bolivia's first indigenous president, as well as the ceremony in the main plaza of La Paz where various social movements would gather to celebrate Evo's ascension.

Before all these events, I visited the family with whom I'd lived three years before. I ate with them in their small house with a *tienda* built into the front of it, where the mother, grandmother, and three children take turns tending shop and watching television. At lunch, as he poured me a drink, the father of the family would joke, "Evo Morales says no one can drink Coca-cola anymore. From now on, everyone has to drink coca tea! What a loony!" We watched on TV as Michele Bachelet became the first female president of Chile. The mother of the family sarcastically suggested that Bachelet marry Evo because they were both single. That way the two countries could join, and Bolivia would again have access to the sea.

They never told me who they voted for, so I never asked. I did remember having asked the father three years before if he thought Evo Morales would be a good president. "Of course he'd be a good president, but they'd kill him," he had told me in a suddenly lowered tone. "Anyone who wants to help people here, they kill. That's why I'm not political. I like peace." Now he took every opportunity to mock Evo with jokes rehearsed among his taxi driver friends. Political analysts have marveled at how dramatically Evo's unprecedented 54% support exceeded pre-election polls, as if Bolivians were reluctant to admit in phone interviews that they intended to vote for Evo. I, too, was surprised by the skepticism of most Bolivians when I asked them about Evo. But it was a strained,

nervous skepticism, as if it could barely contain both hope and fear at once.

Tiwanaku, the center of a great pre-Inca empire and the first major city in the history of what is now Bolivia, was converted into an enormous 1500-year-old stage for the first festivities of Evo's inauguration. We arrived just before dawn. For hours we waited with other spectators and supporters on the grassy plain while Aymara community authorities in ceremonial red ponchos lined up around the temple. Other men with dark skin and red ponchos stood on either side of the picturesque Kallasaya gate, holding flags of various Latin American countries. After hours of swaying precariously with the increasingly packed, over-eager crowd, I finally saw Evo emerge at the top of the grass-covered ruins of the temple. The crowd cheered wildly and surged forward against the barricades. I dug in my heels, leveraging my entire weight against the crowd to help prevent a collapse. I'd never been in a crowd so excited or so unconcerned by the prospect of trampling, and it scared me. The foreign press had started calling Evo a "populist," and I wondered if this was what they meant—a politician whose message and symbolism so energize people that they will risk violence to get a glimpse at the hope he represents.

Evo received a purification rite, then walked barefoot down the side of the temple to the Kallasaya gate, where he began his speech by declaring a "new millenium" for indigenous peoples of the world, starting that day. At a more humble moment, he asked indigenous leaders to "control him." He said, "We will make mistakes, I will make mistakes, but I will not betray you." Indigenous politicians in Latin America have not always been vigilant protectors of indigenous interests.

The crowd calmed and thinned a bit as the ceremony went on. After the speech, representatives of various indigenous communities from around the Western Hemisphere were invited onstage—or onto the ruins, rather—to present gifts to Evo. Most memorably, a representative of the United States was announced, and the whole crowd booed. Most of them could not see that she was a Native American, and few heard her express her wishes for a symbolic union of the eagle and the condor.

I learned later that many important figures in the indigenous movement had not been present at the Tiwanaku ceremony. Ramon Conde, who was instrumental in creating the first public Aymara New Year ceremonies at Tiwanku in the 1990s, told me he had not been involved in the planning and was not even sure what some elements of the ceremony were supposed to mean. Silvia Rivera, a well-known historian of the indigenous movement, told me she hadn't even watched the ceremony on TV. She said it had been put on for the *k'aras*—whites, outsiders, or the culturally alienated.

Talking to Conde, Rivera, and others, I was surprised to learn that many of the most politically active Bolivians had lost their enthusiasm for Evo even before he received his mandate. Lee Cridland, American-born coordinator of a volunteer agency and a former member of a human rights group in the Chapare, agreed with me. "Evo is in style," she said. "The more Bolivians I talk to, the less convinced I get that Evo represents a revolutionary change."

Ramiro Saravia, an activist leader from Cochabamba who traveled to Tiwanaku with me, even admitted, "It seems like the foreigners have the most hope about Evo."

I had been excited by the sudden enthusiasm I saw in ordinary Bolivians, their newfound curiosity about indigenous heritage and their refusal to accept further promises from the neoliberal politicians who had dominated the democracy over the past twenty years. Politically active Bolivians, however, saw things differently, and after the ostentatious Tiwanaku ceremony I could appreciate their perspective. Evo might have offered "dignity," whatever that was, but he did not seem to be offering a revolutionary departure from the status quo. In fact, his promises might have misled voters as much as the promises of any of his opponents.

Saravia doubted that Evo would nationalize Bolivia's gas, a major demand of the urban social movements. Conde told me that, so far as the future of the Aymara people was concerned, Evo's election was far less significant than the coming-of-age of El Alto, the sprawling, poor, almost entirely Aymara city along the rim of the La Paz canyon. As Bolivia's first truly indigenous city, El Alto offered the same opportunity for cultural unity as any great capitol. In its present state, however, it was far from a beacon of hope, despite the *alteños'* considerable role in the protests which helped bring Evo to power. Conde told me that there would be no revolution or *pachakuti* (time of changes), "so long as there are communities without roads, without drinkable water."

I rode through El Alto on my way back to La Paz from Tiwanaku. It was and remains the poorest city I've ever seen. Every other building is unfinished, and the filthy streets choke with warring minibuses, each one with a child in the backseat calling out the route. If Evo was serious about starting a new millenium for those children, he had his work cut out for him.

On the morning of Evo's official inauguration, I woke up and tried to find my traveling companions. La Paz was a ghost town—the main road was closed, and I could not enter the area around the government buildings where distinguished visitors like Hugo Chavez, Nelson Mandela, and Diego Maradona were arriving. I walked groggily down the center of an empty six-lane street, past the university with its eight-story-high banner of Che Guevara, past the row of Spanish and American bank offices, past at least four movie theaters showing *The Chronicles of Narnia*,

past a giant ice cream shop where people in Disney character suits usually danced and took pictures with small children, but not today.

Unable to locate my friends, I found a bus headed for the Plaza San Francisco, where the third and final Evo-related ceremony would begin in the evening. The central roads were still closed, so the bus instead carried me high up along the western wall of the canyon. I got off when I was sure it would not take me anywhere near my destination. I was lost. I wandered downhill through zigzagging streets and came to the vast outdoor market, which stretches out for tens of blocks in each direction. I found myself in the fruit and vegetable district, surrounded by radishes and onions and peppers and watermelons. The market's stillness jarred me—in a Bolivian market, one's ears are normally assailed by competing hawkers, a hundred different radio stations, and noisy toys and CDs for sale. That day the only sound came from countless televisions and radios playing in unison the same speech. I heard it grow louder and softer and interfere with itself as I walked past open doorways. The new vice-president, Alvaro Garcia, was speaking about the injustices of history, the tributes of labor exacted from the native communities, the thefts of land, the squandered natural wealth, the massacres. Garcia himself had been tortured in a prison in El Alto in the mid-90s, where he was held without trial for five years. He was accused of terrorism because of his relationship with an indigenous "army" which had defaced some rural electrical towers. I wanted to watch but didn't want to disturb a family in their store.

I finally found a crowd I could blend into gathered in front of a Pil dairy store alongside a lettuce-strewn market street. Two traditional skirt-wearing *cholitas*, a well-dressed middle class couple, a dark-skinned young man with rough hands, and a policeman silently watched the television while the store owner and her sister commented excitedly on the inaugural proceedings. The crowd continued to grow as curious shoppers stopped and watched. Soon after I arrived, Evo officially became president. "*Viva Bolivia!*" yelled the shopkeeper. "*Viva la democracia!*" When the TV choir began to sing the national anthem, she joined in, and soon everyone around me was singing as well. I did not know the words. The crowd sang two whole verses, then mostly hummed the third.

I had never seen people spontaneously sing their own national anthem before. I may not ever see it again. I'm not a big fan of patriotism, and I wouldn't say the world needs more of that sort of thing. It twisted up my stomach to see it, though. The armor was down just for a moment on the well-guarded optimism I'd sensed since the day I arrived in Bolivia. The policeman's eyes did not tear, but probably everyone else's did.

Evo began his speech by requesting a moment of silence for a list of martyrs ranging from the last Inca emperor to Che Guevara to the *cocaleros* killed defending their fields in the Chapare. On the market street, we stood silently together. Then Evo spoke. His words were forceful and righteous,

but on the television screen he looked humbled, even overwhelmed by the position in which he found himself.

Later that night, Evo greeted his supporters in the plaza, and the *MASistas* and political tourists danced together all night in the misty rain. The city seemed full of foreigners, Argentines and Brazilians who had crossed mountain and jungle to witness this important moment in their continent's leftward shift. After the solemnity of Tiwanaku and the official ceremony before Congress, everyone was ready to celebrate.

I tried to digest what I'd witnessed over the past few days. Evo was president, and no American-sponsored tanks had rolled into the presidential palace. Neither had any foreign-owned businesses been seized by angry mobs. The next day, La Paz returned to normal—sort of. The day after the inauguration marked the beginning of the Alasitas festival, wherein residents of La Paz buy and sell miniature cars, miniature houses, miniature college degrees, and miniature dollar bills to ensure good luck for the future. The same streets through which miners had paraded after Evo's inauguration were now packed with vendors selling tiny, fetishized commodities.

No trace of "Evomania" remained on the streets except a few miniature newspapers lampooning Evo's lack of formal wear and his vice-president's effeminacy. I wondered at how easily the revolutionary mood of the weekend had segued into a market festival. At Alasitas I spoke to a middle-class Bolivian who had supported Evo's opponent. "He's not so bad though," he said, speaking of Evo. "He brought a lot of tourism."

I imagined a hypothetical, completely cynical political circus, wherein a new president tries to boost his own support and help the local economy by inviting leftists, human rights advocates, and dreamers from across the country and the world to help him convince his own supporters that he is a revolutionary when he isn't. Had I taken part in something like that? I tried, but I could not align that image with my experience of the people singing the national anthem in the market. Their enthusiasm was real, deeply felt, and so guarded that no political impostor could ever trick it out of them. Still, how could Evo claim to represent a revolution when all the authorities I spoke to agreed that he was not a revolutionary?

Silvia Rivera, among others, helped me make sense of that apparent contradiction. "The change is more in the people than in the government," she told me. She was referring to a recent tradition of marches, road blocks, and city-wide or nation-wide strikes that had changed the nature of Bolivian politics in the five years leading up to Evo's election. If there was a revolution or a *pachakuti*, it had already happened, she said, or it was still happening, regardless of Evo.

Rivera preferred not to use the word "revolution," instead favoring *pachakuti*, an Aymara word which can mean the close of one era and start of a new one, a time of conflicts, or the world turned upside down.

Indeed, what I saw in Bolivia had little in common with revolution as I'd normally conceive of it. Over the past year or two, Rivera pointed out, the dismal economy had actually improved despite the increasing unrest. "The economy started working when the people recovered their dignity," she said.

When I spoke to her, Rivera was working with the *cocaleros* on cultural promotion of the coca leaf. She told me that the only trust she had for Evo was because he had his base in this marginalized, oppressed group. I had not originally intended to visit the Chapare, but after my experience in La Paz I wanted to see how the *cocaleros* were responding to Evo's victory. If I had been looking for the wrong revolution in Tiwanaku and La Paz, maybe I could witness a more genuine *pachakuti* in the jungle.

Three years earlier, I had been warned that an American man should not travel alone in the Chapare, that I might be mistaken for a DEA agent. I hoped that times had changed since Evo's electoral victory. I rode in on a crowded bus on the morning of Evo's first presidential visit to his old home. Over the course of the bus ride, I watched hillsides slowly change from dull green to verdant to mist-shrouded jungle slopes. I climbed off the bus in the town of Shinaota, greeted by the stifling heat of the tropics at the height of summer. Across town, Evo was already giving his speech. Someone told me that he'd had to rush his schedule because of flooding in a neighboring region.

My traveling companions and I tried to get close to the speech but could not bear the direct sunlight. We eventually found a restaurant in which to pass the worst part of the afternoon. One of my companions, a heavy-set Bolivian who had promised to help me find lodging in the public school, dripped sweat from his nose and chin. We drank warm lemonade from the restaurant's overstretched stockroom. Shinaota rarely saw so many visitors, they told me, and only when Evo was in town.

We caught a glimpse of Evo and Garcia Linera going by in a motorcade, then both disappeared into a closed restaurant to speak to loyal party members. Not long after, we heard the presidential plane boom in the sky overhead. We wandered down to the restaurant where Evo had stopped before he left, and we eventually talked our way in. Inside, two groups of revelers had gathered, one group dancing in a circle, singing and playing native melodies on traditional instruments, and the other group playing guitars in a more *mestizo* style, mostly love songs with a few political ballads thrown in. I remember thinking how that party, the two dancing groups, summed up the ambiguous place of the *cocaleros* in Bolivian society—indigenous but not native to the land they work, anti-globalization, but desiring a good market for their products, excluded and oppressed at every turn but somehow now a symbol, a central point in the national consciousness. We joined the guitarists and danced a few numbers with them.

My Bolivian traveling companion could not find his contact with the public school. Finally a woman came forward and offered her floor to any and all travelers in town. It turned out there were quite a few of us. One of them, a young bearded man named Vladimir who had worked security for MAS in Cochabamba, showed me his photo book two or three times. In it I saw snapshots of the campaign, girls wearing dresses with the checkered pattern of the *wiphala* flag, Garcia Linera with his politician brother, roadside propaganda being painted, Evo pausing to eat a slice of watermelon.

Before we could sleep, we had to follow our hostess to another party, a few blocks off the highway down an unlit street. We found our way by following the music. Under a wide, corrugated tin roof, hundreds of young residents of the Chapare were dancing to a live five-piece band. Along the sides of the dance floor, Bolivians of all ages and types, from children to old men to *pollera* skirt-wearing women, laughed and drank beer or chewed coca leaves. I watched the crowd closely to see if I could glimpse cocaine being snorted, but in the end my suspicions were confirmed: ordinary *cocaleros* do not use cocaine. It is too expensive, not a part of their culture, and the penalties for being caught with it are too high.

I chewed a few leaves to help rejuvenate myself after the long afternoon of sun. I thought again of how cocaine indicts Western culture in the Andes, how we look at a natural product as medicinally and nutritionally useful as the coca leaf and see only that tiny part of it that helps us get hard. When our addictions get out of hand, we ask Aymara and Quechua who have been using the leaf for centuries to participate in an eradication of the crop, which to them sounds like an eradication of their own culture.

That night in Shinaota there was no question of any eradications. No one feared the possibility of a police raid or that their crops might be burned in the morning. The crowd danced joyfully, exchanging partners and calling out for songs late into the night. More than any other group, the *cocaleros* could claim victory in this transformation of Bolivian society. They had made their country into one in which they had a place. That required all sorts of adjustments—winning a basic respect for indigenous culture, questioning American foreign policy and the War on Drugs, getting national economic policy out of the hands of the World Bank and back in the hands of Bolivians. But now it had been done, and people in the new government were talking about selling coca tea in China and investigating the coca leaf's medical properties with scientifically rigorous tests. All this was achieved without money, without initial popular sympathy, by one of the most oppressed and marginalized groups in the world. Now, as I'm sure Evo pointed out to them during his private speech, the *cocaleros* were president.

I slept well on a tarp on the floor that night, drifting off as Vladimir

explained to my friends what the checkered colors of the ancient *wiphala* flag mean and why one must never let it touch the ground. In the morning our hostess served us bread and coffee in her small courtyard, a few feet from the trash-covered plaza where Evo had spoken the day before. One of her dogs vomited, and a chicken rooted around in his mess. Shinaota that morning exuded a friendly air which might be merely tropical but I think was more specific and more extraordinary than that. The shabby jungle town had dignity. Its citizens had demanded respect, and they had found it.

On my way out of Bolivia, I passed through La Paz again. It was colder than I remembered it and rainy again. In the Chapare, rain had come on my second night, hard and brutal, singing like a storm of crickets. In La Paz, it mostly just drizzled. My altitude sickness was worse because I'd come all the way from sea level.

I went to El Alto one morning and walked through the rain along the chaotic main thoroughfare. The city had not changed much in three years, just expanded. The faces looked the same as those in Shinaota, all Aymara, but, except for poverty, the lifestyles couldn't have been more different. The cold, flat earth of the altiplano stretched out lonesome in three directions, interrupted by increasingly spare blocks of tin roofs and brick courtyards. Then dry grassland, even in the rainy season, over-grazed by sheep and the odd herd of llama. Beyond that were a hundred other Bolivias as distinct from Shinaota and El Alto as the two are from each other—temperate valley cities full of fruit and dust, warm plains where cattle are raised, old mining towns that have been busting for three hundred years, car-dominated lowland cities that could have grown out of the ground this morning.

That was Bolivia as I left it. Evo was on TV trying not to involve himself in the strike at the national airline. Donald Rumsfeld was comparing Evo to Hitler because Hitler, too, had been elected democratically. The rainy season was coming to an end, and Carnival was not so far away. Kids were starting to throw water balloons, especially at *gringos*. It was like any other year. I crossed into Peru on a cheap bus. The first words I heard on the Peruvian side of the border were "Evo Morales." Someone was trying to sell his biographical pamphlet to people crossing in or out, the one subtitled "A Story of Dignity." A crowd had gathered around him.