

THEORIZING *Cultural* HERITAGE

A Fellowship Program at the
Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
funded by the Rockefeller Foundation

“The Challenges of Asserting, Promoting,
and Performing Cultural Heritage”

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*at the
Smithsonian Institution Center
for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
2004-2007*

Cultural heritage is today a rubric of ever-expanding scope. It is used globally as a basis for multinational, national, state, and local programs. Cultural heritage is also the focus of ideas and programs generated by hundreds of non-governmental organizations, community-based and advocacy groups, and businesses. Yet the *concept* of “cultural heritage” is vastly under-theorized. It has lacked an academic, disciplinary base; has generated only an attenuated theoretical literature; and has generally left the bearers of cultural heritage out of the discussion.

Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellows in residence at the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage are helping to expand and refine the theoretical framework for cultural heritage to include grassroots voices. Reflecting the perspectives of academic specialists, civil society groups, and public cultural organizations, fellows’ work informs dialogues and practice across social, political, and disciplinary boundaries, as well as indicate future directions for policy.

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*This program is funded by the
Rockefeller Foundation Program
in Creativity and Culture.*

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In October of 2003 in Bolivia, a popular movement succeeded in removing its beleaguered president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, from power. The Coordinator in Defense of Gas—the steering committee for this popular movement—brought together street vendors, farmers, miners, students, teachers, neighborhood committees, as well as workers’ unions through effective direct action protest primarily in the immigrant town of El Alto, dubbed the “Aymara capital of the world.” It forced the government to abandon its plan to pipe newly discovered Bolivian natural gas through Chile to the United States. Following October’s victory, indigenous leader Evo Morales proclaimed, “What has happened in recent days in Bolivia is a great revolt, after being humiliated for more than 500 years.” In the subsequent months, he has driven this point home: “After more than 500 years, we, the Quechuas and Aymaras, are still the rightful owners of this land.” Another prominent indigenous leader, Felipe Quispe, hailed the ouster of the president as one step nearer the goal of “self-determination” of Bolivia’s “indigenous nation.” Even if fought primarily in the cities, and mostly by urbanites, the so-called Gas War was definitively celebrated as a victory for indigenous Bolivia. And this victory was articulated in terms of the assertion of long-maintained indigenous claims to land and territory. But it is important to note that these claims are here extended to include an assertion of popular ownership of Bolivia’s natural resources (such as gas, water, and coca leaf). Indigenous peoples are making this assertion not as a nation apart but as national citizens. As I explore here, this represents a grassroots extension of a claim to collective cultural heritage directed toward the state.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

In 1993 the United Nation’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues offered a “Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” In part V article 21, this draft declaration asserts that “indigenous people have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems.” Further, article 32 concludes, “Indigenous peoples have the collective right to determine their own citizenship in accordance with their customs and traditions.” These principles of indigenous sovereignty and citizenship are one source of inspiration for the multicultural revisions of state models in Latin America during the 1990s. In 1994 the Bolivian government instituted a controversial Popular Participation Law (PPL), offering new possibilities for inclusion in the terms of a constitutional redefinition of Bolivia as both “multiethnic and pluricultural.” The PPL grants legal recognition both to traditional indigenous and popular forms of political organization according to a group’s “uses, customs, and statutory dispositions.” In short, international and national cultural rights legislation makes use of a strategy of indigenous “cultural citizenship” through the demonstration of “*usos y costumbres*” (customary law

or life ways). As I explore for the case of Bolivia, this strategy magnifies the relevance of “cultural heritage” in emerging anti-economic globalization activism. This has become increasingly apparent, as indigenous activists have begun to participate in “transnational advocacy networks” devoted to indigenous rights issues.

Commentators, however, have expressed skepticism about the new PPL, noting that the “pluralism” of new multicultural states like Bolivia might provide political recognition to indigenous peoples as a means to convert and to assimilate them into the nation-state, as hierarchically subordinate “intercultural citizens” or “indigenous citizens.” Multicultural reforms, in this account, work as instruments of governmentality to serve a new round of neoliberal nation-building, articulated from above, and failing to address lingering issues of social justice, inequity, and exclusion from below. Multiculturalism is understood in this sense to be a way for governments to use new cultural rights instruments “to divide and domesticate Indian movements” (Hale 2004: 17) by a spatial incarceration based on a state policy of mapping national spaces. Conflicts like the Gas War, however, complicate this picture. They suggest how both popular and indigenous movements use such new international and state-based rights instruments to transform the meanings, and very ground, of citizen participation through heritage.

A key point of reference in the discourse of Bolivia’s indigenous movements has been “sovereignty,” as explicitly linked to a global rights debate and to evolving concepts of self-determination. The doctrine of “self-determination,” we know, has been a central tenet of indigenous rights movements in Latin America, and of international indigenous rights and cultural rights legislation. The promise of indigenous sovereignty, as “political autonomy,” has been resisted by nation-states as challenging their legitimacy by attacking the so-called sovereign nation-state model (Warren and Jackson 2002: 13). The primarily Aymara constituency of militant indigenous leader Felipe Quispe has given sovereignty its clearest shape for Bolivia’s indigenous movements in the politics of land, and as a call for the “territorial sovereignty” of communal Indian landholdings.

A new 1996 law (the INRA law) updated the as yet incomplete 1953 Agrarian Reform by shifting emphasis from family-level plots to communal landholdings and recognizing the preexistent claims of “*originarios*”

(highland Indians) and “*indigenas*” (lowland Indians). Despite this, the leadership of Quispe and the national agrarian union movement has been sharply critical of the new law. He insists it undermines the collective basis of Aymara land usage by not taking account of traditional ideas of the relationship between “people” and “land” (their “*usos y costumbres*”), including soil, water, subsoil (such as “gas”), and air resources (see Rivera 2004). For these reasons, Quispe and his allies have proposed a new “Indian Law” to govern land ownership and to supercede the 1996 law, but with the explicit goal of recomposing *ayllus* (traditional land and kinship-based ethnic federations) in order to assert greater indigenous control over the land reform process.

This assertion, furthermore, depends upon an understanding of “heritage” in the Latin American and Bolivian context as “*patrimonio*” (patrimony). “*Patrimonio*” is often on the lips of Bolivian indigenous activists. The restoration of local patrimonies is a basic component of the Bolivian state’s own multicultural and decentralizing measures over the past ten years. This includes granting greater municipal “control over the exploitation of their patrimony” (*patrimonio propio*), while also promoting “cultural development and the defense of autochthonous cultural values.” An etymological understanding of “*patrimonio*” derives it from medieval Spanish legal parlance stipulating property inherited from one’s father. Specifying rules of family or estate inheritance, in the modern Bolivian context patrimony refers to inherited legal jurisdictional rights over land (see Albro 1998: 147). Current indigenous movements in Bolivia seek to expand the state’s limiting concept of “land,” understood simply as a factor in agricultural production, to a broader conception of “territory” as a location for the social reproduction of collective cultural identity. Their claims to territory are commensurate with claims to cultural identity, as inherited from the “*patria*” (the nation as “fatherland”).

How are rights to land (or, cultural heritage as patrimony) viewed as claims to “cultural participation” by Bolivia’s indigenous movements? Such a strategy is most evident among Bolivia’s militant coca growers, given their experience in the U.S.-led War on Drugs. Coca grower unions have long protested that the War on Drugs—with the U.S. Embassy dictating terms to Bolivia’s government, U.S. personnel on Bolivian soil, and the U.S. certification process to guarantee compliance with U.S. policy demands—amounts to a

clear violation of Bolivian national sovereignty by a foreign power. Evo Morales, leader of Bolivia's coca growers, has turned the coca leaf into a symbol of this violation. Coca growers have argued that "protecting coca protects Bolivian culture." As an expression of "Bolivian culture," Evo Morales raises the issue of coca leaf at every opportunity as one of national "dignity." The coca growers, he stresses, are the "sovereign guardians" of the coca leaf, as a "millenarian leaf and national banner in the defense of our dignity and of our sovereignty." The effort to eradicate coca leaf amounts to an attack on Bolivia's national cultural heritage. Morales, the MAS, and allied movements equate a "defense of coca" with a "defense of all natural resources," including water and natural gas. "Dignity," as the right to a unique national heritage, can be added to "territory" and to "patrimony" in the articulation of conceptions of cultural heritage used in popular protest efforts.

At the same time, the Gas War of October 2003 in Bolivia was a response to the perceived violation of Bolivian "national sovereignty" by both transnational corporations and by a so-called political elite, or "mafia," accused of failing to protect the country's national interests in the face of a rapacious economic globalization. This explains protest slogans like "The Gas Is Not for Sale!" This also explains a key demand of the protesters' position: that ordinary Bolivians "recuperate control of this resource." As a poor Aymara resident of the city of El Alto—center of protest—said, "The gas is ours, and we want it for our children and grandchildren." The Coalition in Defense of Gas took the stance that the government was trying to disinherit the Bolivian people of their lawful patrimony, as "Bolivian citizens," and without prior consultation. Indigenous "territorial sovereignty," historically narrowly defined, has come to articulate a broader claim of cultural heritage as shared "national patrimony."

Such culturally informed inheritance rights help to define what I am calling "cultural citizenship." They have also become a precedent for the direct participation of popular or indigenous groups in the decision-making of the nation-state, and as a way to renegotiate their position within it in the era of expanding economic globalization. As international agencies recognize and conserve the "world's heritage," this effort must first come

to terms with the variable meanings of "heritage" itself, as it figures in diverse local, national, and regional political struggles. This includes attention to the distinct international arenas in which promoters of Bolivian cultural heritage operate, and which can produce potentially contradictory heritage claims, a problem I now turn to.

UNESCO AND PROMOTING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Though a small, impoverished, and landlocked country of fewer than ten million people, Bolivia has been disproportionately active in the arena of international cultural heritage policy. In 1968, when heritage protection was as yet largely ill defined in international terms, Bolivia passed a precedent-setting Supreme Decree (No. 08396) establishing a "sole copyright approach" to its national folklore, "whereby ownership and control of certain works became vested in the state" (Sherkin 2001: 43). In response both to the 1972 UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (which made no provisions for so-called intangible cultural heritage), and to the appropriation of the song "*El Condor Pasa*" in the early 1970s by Western musicians like Simon and Garfunkel, in 1973 the Bolivian government requested that a protocol be added to the Universal Copyright Convention to "protect the popular arts and cultural patrimony of all nations" (Sherkin 2001: 44). The Bolivian action set in motion a UNESCO process, still underway, to develop a more suitable instrument for international legislation of cultural heritage. This has most recently culminated in UNESCO's adoption of a new International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003.

One guidepost for this process is UNESCO's current list of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," inaugurated in 2001. Among the 19 masterpieces originally proclaimed was the Oruro Carnival of Bolivia. Oruro's Carnival is a yearly large-scale pre-Lenten festival celebrated in this highland Andean mining city. Mixing, as it does, Andean and non-Andean cultural expressions, Carnival is a classic example of what anthropologists used to call religious syncretism. As the proclamation for inclusion of Oruro's Carnival as a world heritage masterpiece put it, this festival originated via a pre-Columbian ceremony associated

with the Uru people, transformed by “Christian elements and borrowings from the medieval mystery plays,” which in the process turned “Andean divinities” into “saints” (UNESCO 2001: 10/11). In addition to the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s director Richard Kurin, UNESCO’s international jury included a Bolivian, folkloric singer Zulma Yugar. Folkloric musicians have been prominent participants in national Bolivian politics in recent years. Zulma Yugar is a well-known folkloric musician, in particular identified with what in Bolivia is called “creole music” (*música criolla*), a style first achieving significant popularity in the 1950s and 1960s.

Creole music traces its origins prior to Bolivia’s 1952 Revolution in provincial towns. It was particularly popular among merchants, artisans, factory workers, transporters, and free small holders, people neither “Indians” (*indios*) nor “elites,” but instead “*mestizos*” (people of mixed racial and cultural backgrounds). Bolivians distinguish between “creole music” and “autochthonous music,” associated with rural, Andean, life ways and rarely if ever heard in provincial towns. In fact, the creole music of *huayños* and *cuecas* was performed using pianos, concertinas, guitars, or harmonicas, as a self-conscious effort by townspeople to publicly distinguish themselves from their indigenous counterparts. As the head of the Department of Culture in Quillacollo (where I lived for several years) put it, townspeople “did not want to emphasize their Indian roots. They were embarrassed about their own reality.” However, one outcome of the 1952 Revolution, particularly apparent by the late 1960s, was the emergent popularity of new “national folkloric groups,” which combined the *charango* and guitar with the *zampoña* and *qaena*. Now “creole music” was played with “autochthonous instruments,” rather than with the violin or the piano. At the same time, relatively unknown practitioners were transformed into “native impresarios.” New radio programming, which was just coming into its own, featured these performers in regular broadcasts such as the “*Fiesta en el Corazón del Valle*,” an early 1960s program fondly remembered by people living in Quillacollo. If prior to 1952 the *qaena* or *charango* were stigmatized as “of the Indian,” after 1952 this new type of creole music was characteristic of regional fiestas, revalorized as a part of peoples’ “own social origins,” as my friend put it, “moving the intimate fever of the race” (see Albro 1999: 253-64).

Since the 1950s, and along with folkloric parades called *entradas*, characteristic dances, and foods, creole music has now come to be an organic part of regional

Bolivian fiestas like Oruro’s Carnival, the festival of Gran Poder in La Paz, as well as the Fiesta of Urkupiña in Quillacollo. In 1970 the Bolivian government declared Oruro the “Folklore Capital of Bolivia.” In 1986, in a friendly rivalry, it declared the Fiesta of Urkupiña to be the “Festival of National Integration.” As these efforts suggest, in the words of colleague Daniel Goldstein (2004: 135), Oruro’s Carnival and comparable regional festivals serve an important identity-building function “for the formation of a Bolivian national identity predicated on folklorized images of indigenosity.”

Sixty-two percent of Bolivian adults declared themselves to be indigenous in the most recent census of 2001. But the proportion of people of indigenous descent in Bolivia is greater than census indicators. Urbanites certainly have not been in the habit of declaring their indigenous heritage. The Bolivian national project launched by the 1952 Revolution relegated the future of indigenous identity to assimilation into a desired culturally and ethnically mixed middle class (see Larson 1998; Rivera 1993), referred to as the process of *mestizaje*. “Indians” (*indios*) were renamed “peasants” (*campesinos*). With this project, citizenship rights could only be enjoyed by “conforming to a homogeneous mestizo ideal” (Hale 2004: 16). “*Bruto indio*” remained everywhere a predominantly backward, rural, and insulting term of reference when in the present tense, even while the arts and letters of *indigenismo* celebrated in print the past greatness of the Inca or Tiwanaku civilizations as the direct ancestors of the modern Bolivian state (see Salmón 1997). Oruro’s Carnival was very much a part of this post-1952 nation-building project of *mestizaje* as a public and multiethnic, as well as multiclass, expression of an “enlarging repertoire of ‘national folkloric’ traditions” (Lagos 1993: 58).

In addition to being a well-known folkloric musician, Zulma Yugar is a former Director for the Promotion of Culture within Bolivia’s Ministry of Culture. She also has served as president of Bolivia’s Association of Artists and Musicians. Yugar, then, was integral to the professionalization of her own “creole music,” as well as its central position within the post-1952 canon of Bolivian folklore. In fact Zulma Yugar actively lobbied behind the scenes to insure that Oruro’s Carnival be among the original 19 UNESCO masterpieces. She was on hand for the 1999 conference in Washington, D.C., hosted by the Smithsonian, which convened to consider best practices for “the safeguarding of traditional culture and folklore” (Seitel 2001: iii). The

1999 Smithsonian meeting was one stop on the road to helping UNESCO define its approach to cultural heritage, in the lead-up to the 2003 convention.

Zulma Yugar was one of only two Latin American representatives among the 35 meeting participants to contribute a written report on the 1999 meeting. With reference to the “historical context shaped by evolving UNESCO policies on intangible cultural heritage,” Yugar emphasizes the need for an expanded role for cultural policy in “the national projects of countries in the region,” in the “recovery and salvage of traditions,” in combating the “indifference of the mass media to traditional culture,” and in guaranteeing the necessary conditions for adequate “maintenance of sites for expression of traditional culture, especially traditional fiestas in danger of extinction” (Yugar 2001: 232-33). Today Oruro’s Carnival involves hundreds of thousands of people, and is not in danger of extinction. However, what is in danger is its uniqueness as a signature cultural event representative of Bolivian national culture. Many aspects of the festival can be found in similar cultural performances in Argentina, Chile, and even the United States. Bolivia’s Ministry of Culture has routinely decried these developments as a case of the “robbing of Bolivian culture.”

I have illustrated how Zulma Yugar is a particular kind of transnational actor, who moves in different circles from those of Bolivia’s indigenous activists—though both lobby for recognition of cultural heritage claims. Her role combines folkloric performance with international cultural policymaking. At the same time and as an organic cultural worker, Yugar is an active promoter of Bolivian cultural interests internationally. And her role in UNESCO as a representative *folklorista* and as a Bolivian reinforces UNESCO’s own approach to “culture.” The new 2003 convention on intangible cultural heritage assumes the nation-state to be the unproblematic subject of traditional cultural expression. As with comparable UN initiatives, “heritage” corresponds to “State Parties” as the co-signatories of UNESCO’s convention. And heritage protection treats culture as a rivalrous resource that nation-states defend from competing interests, where heritage is a form of property to be restored to its place of origin (see Brown 2003).

As Bolivia’s indigenous activism suggests, “culture” cannot be directly equated with “State Parties.” Nevertheless, UNESCO has turned the continued existence of cultural performances like Oruro’s Carnival into a process of collaborations between national and international agencies. If UNESCO’s culture concept recognizes a universal right to the participation in culture, and if culture is something “held in common,” it sidesteps the fact of cultural diversity within states (Eriksen 2001; Nas 2002). As noted (Omland 1997: 4), any “discussions concerning local people and minority groups seemed to have had a minor role” in UNESCO’s own development of the concept of a “common heritage.” In practice, cultural diversity is not recognized by UNESCO as a human right. Thus “culture” is present, but “identity politics” are absent. UNESCO has not yet faced up to the political complications of reconciling cultural difference with its own “global ethic” of cultural participation. In the process it selectively promotes nation-building projects that rely upon the assumption of “national culture” at the expense of alternative, more grassroots conceptions of cultural heritage that might challenge or even supersede national claims.

PERFORMING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Nation-building organic culture workers promote intangible claims of “folklore” modeled on established precedents of tangible culture in order to promote the “thingness” of the nation, as a sovereign cultural resource. Meanwhile, indigenous activists assert tangible claims of territory, gas, water, or coca leaf as the source for their own intangible politics of identity. But if the UNESCO approach to culture disconnects “heritage” from “human rights,” the “dramas of citizenship” composing transnational advocacy campaigns try to convincingly connect cultural heritage with collective cultural rights claims. Such claims partake of the “political theater” of transnational indigenous activism, in the urgent need “to display the existence of living communities” (Brysk 2000: 61) imagined to inhabit specific cultural spaces (that is, “territories”). I refer to these dramas as the strategy of cultural citizenship.

As elaborated through this discussion, “cultural citizenship” refers at once to several interrelated

issues among which indigenous advocacy “navigates.” It first refers to collective rights-bearing cultural subjects based on “customary law,” in efforts by Latin American nation-states both to recognize and to legislate their own “pluricultural and multiethnic” realities. It also refers to a right to cultural “participation,” as primarily defined through international human rights instruments and in the terms of “cultural heritage.” Cultural citizenship is, furthermore, a challenge to prevailing assumptions about citizenship as a unitary set of rational principles that specify individual rights and duties with respect to state membership. Finally, cultural citizenship prioritizes an ethical requirement of the active practice of citizenship as an often controversial and necessarily performative assertion over more narrowly legalistic approaches that stop at the formal recognition of established rights.

The political theater of indigenous activists stresses an indigenous “community of history, language, culture, and territory” (Brysk 2000: 56). As I have developed the case, Bolivian indigenous activists use appeals to heritage as a future-looking way to advance controversial claims of political autonomy as well as cultural participation in the nation. They collaborate with “transnational advocacy networks” in order both to circumvent a history of marginalization often imposed by the state itself, and to create a “boomerang” effect of international pressure directed to changing State practices (see Keck and Sikkink 1998). Just as with the arena of international cultural policy, however, the transnational arena of indigenous advocacy has its own framing logic. Activists are both implicitly and explicitly required to transform their message so as to best meet the expectations of their primarily non-indigenous and “cosmopolitan” collaborators and audiences of students, academics, activists, and policymakers. In transnational contexts, activists’ performances are not necessarily driven primarily by their local predicaments but by the expectations of a global audience and its own conception of “heritage” as the relationship of indigenous peoples to their lived-in cultural spaces. The message of indigenous activism in the global context has become one based upon self-determination, cultural survival, and land rights. How, we might ask, does this state of affairs limit the political effectiveness of future claims to cultural heritage?

“Heritage” has become the basis for international efforts to protect cultural rights. In the Bolivian national arena,

the concept has acquired political value as a way to exploit the potential of its new multicultural legislation. While in the global arena, indigenous activists have been obliged to collaborate with global civil society through alliances with environmental advocacy groups. For environmentalists, territorial claims of indigenous peoples are couched in terms of the “sacred” character of the earth. This expansive notion of cultural heritage has been an effective strategy for reaching eco-conscious Western audiences, for whom the role of indigenous peoples as environmental “stewards” remains a compelling image. Environmental movements have mined the “symbolic” appeals of indigenous activists—with spokespeople donning traditional garb, using a testimonial voice, prayer, or song, and usually in an indigenous language. These self-conscious performances of ethnicity authenticate the experience of indigenous peoples as from “somewhere” else. What has been called the image of the “noble eco-savage” (Conklin and Graham 1995), however, insistently draws the equation of a local people with a defined place, and shared identity. As should be clear, such an image is ill suited to describe the case of Bolivia’s Gas War and its multiple claims on the state.

Have we come full circle? Both “national folklore” and an indigenous cultural heritage as “sacred territory” mobilize different cultural essentializations that tend to efface often divisive political differences within states. The assumption of “performance” as an intrinsic expressive dimension of “heritage” contributes to this. Zulma Yugar is at once folkloric performer and cultural worker, promoting culture as a state commodity. Felipe Quispe, in turn, is expected to perform his heritage directly, as lived experience. Such a framing of global heritage debates makes it hard to reconcile often deeply antagonistic political commitments. Heritage debates neglect to distinguish, or actively misrecognize, often conflicting roles played by diverse cultural performers and promoters participating in such debates. Despite efforts to the contrary, the power-laden cartographies of the “common heritage” approach might not serve the cause of enfranchisement for people struggling against cultural marginalization.

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