From Pachamama and Kharisiri to Quechuas, Cambas and Collas: Hybrid Identities in Rural Lowland Bolivia

Pachamama, kharisiri, Quechuas, cambas y collas: Identidades híbridas en las tierras bajas rurales de Bolivia

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Abstract

This study is about cultural and linguistic change among western Bolivian highland and valley peasants who have been migrating to the country’s eastern lowlands in the recent years, a very widespread phenomenon in developing economies of the Andean neo-tropics today. I am particularly interested in how Quechua-speaking people from the highlands and valleys adapt to lowland culture; which ethnic traits and linguistic resources they keep, and which ones they abandon; and which strategies they utilize to ease the process of adaptation.

The results indicate that highland migrants who settled in the lowland community of Cuatro Cañadas (department of Santa Cruz) speak less Quechua among themselves, and especially with their children, although they assign great importance to the maintenance of this language. Four specific cultural practices that were selected as indicators of Quechua mode of life were measured and analyzed. The results indicate that there is a substantial reduction of these practices in the lowlands. Also, inter-ethnic marriage (highlanders seeking lowlanders), thought to be an important strategy of adaptation, was found to be a preference for a reduced proportion of both the single migrant population and the married population. Therefore, migrants in Cuatro Cañadas are reducing their traditional linguistic behavior and the practice of specific cultural traditions, but their alliance patterns are still somewhat conservative.

In spite of this process of acculturation, the theoretical framework used in this research argues that highland migrants do not fully own Cuatro Cañadas: they are trapped between traditional, modern and globalizing codes, and just embrace the hybrid nature of their identities, which makes them speak and behave in certain ways depending on which ethnic identity they want to activate.
Resumen

Durante las últimas décadas, el modelo de migración de tierras altas a tierras bajas se ha convertido en un fenómeno muy presente en las economías en desarrollo del neotrópico andino. El presente estudio analiza el cambio cultural y lingüístico que experimentan campesinos quechuas de los valles cuando migran a las áreas de expansión agro-industrial en el trópico boliviano. En particular, esta investigación indaga sobre los rasgos étnicos y lingüísticos que preservan o abandonan estos migrantes, y analiza qué estrategias y alianzas utilizan para facilitar el proceso de adaptación a un nuevo lugar y a una nueva cultura.

En términos lingüísticos, los resultados indican que los migrantes quechuas asentados en el municipio de Cuatro Cañadas (departamento de Santa Cruz) hablan menos quechua entre ellos y sobre todo con sus hijos, a pesar de que paradójicamente le asignan gran importancia al mantenimiento de esta lengua. En términos culturales, seleccioné cuatro prácticas específicas que fueron consideradas como indicadores del modo de vida quechua y todas ellas se vieron reducidas en el nuevo asentamiento, a comparación de una práctica mayor en las comunidades de origen. También analicé el matrimonio o la unión libre interétnica como estrategia de adaptación y encontré que sólo una reducida proporción de la población migrante (tanto soltera como casada) tiene preferencia por parejas que sean originarias de tierras bajas.

En conclusión, estos migrantes quechuas en Cuatro Cañadas están reduciendo su conducta lingüística tradicional y la práctica de determinadas tradiciones culturales, pero sus patrones de alianza son todavía un tanto endogámicos. A pesar de este claro proceso de aculturación, estos migrantes quechuas no se han apropiado del todo de Cuatro Cañadas: están atrapados entre la tradición y la modernidad y más bien abrazan la naturaleza híbrida de su identidad, lo que les hace hablar y comportarse de ciertas maneras dependiendo de la identidad étnica que deseen activar.
Introduction
This study looks at how internal migration in Bolivia modifies the cultural and linguistic universe—as well as marriage patterns—of Quechua speaking peasants who settle down in areas of agricultural expansion in the country’s lowlands. The first waves of contemporary highland-to-lowland migration in Bolivia started in the 1950s and since then growing numbers of highlanders have continued to populate this region that today houses double the Bolivian population that it did fifty years ago (Albó 1999; Urquiola 1999). Although lowland urban centers are rapidly filling up, rural-to-rural migration is an emerging paradigm that deserves much attention, as global forces are pushing for new capitalist developments in many rural areas (Kearney 2004). In Bolivia, this is such a steady phenomenon that today almost one fourth of the department of Santa Cruz is of highland origin, with 17 percent of its population specifically having Quechua background (Mendoza 2005). The high scale agro-industrial development, which has been taking place in the region for many years now, is the most important magnet that attracts thousands of migrants every year.

As part of this process, migrants develop adaptive strategies that in some cases indicate certain levels of acculturation whereas in others have to do with the retention of certain ethnic or traditional traits. Language is given special attention, as in Andean countries it is a strong cultural determinant that sometimes defines ethnic belonging more than other indicators like race, belief systems, or political organization (Skar 1993; Albó 1999). The location where these changes and adaptations were observed and analyzed was the municipality of Cuatro Cañadas, an industrial agricultural settlement 50 miles east of the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, whose population is 90 percent composed by highlanders or collas, as they are commonly known. The local lowlanders or cambas compose the remaining 10 percent of the population. This study answers the following questions:

a) In spite of having settled in the lowlands, do highland migrants continue to communicate in Quechua among themselves and with their children?

b) In spite of having settled in the lowlands, do highland migrants continue to practice a set of traditions that are distinctive of Quechua culture?

c) Do highland migrants in the lowlands seek inter-ethnic marriages with lowlanders as a means of easing the process of adaptation to the new place?
All these questions will help us reach the main goal of this study: to understand the process of ethnic identity formation in areas subjected to heavy migration and demographic growth in emerging economies of the neo-tropics.

Adaptive Strategies, Emerging Identities

Some researchers say that in order to better adapt to a new place, permanent migrants go through a process of acculturation and assimilation, which allows them to function according to cultural codes of the host place—acculturation—and also be socially accepted by the locals—assimilation (Benmayor and Skotnes 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Alba and Nee 1997; Zhou 1997). However, some others say that migrants retain a good amount of their ethnic traits—a process known as ethnic retention—with which they can even make an impact on the local culture (Albó 1997; Gans 1997; Brettell 2003). My study contests the rigid grounds confronted by these two arguments. Rather than adjusting to either of these models, I propose that migrants develop a variety of adaptive strategies and negotiating mechanisms through which they either preserve or abandon specific ethnic traits such as language, marriage patterns, religious beliefs, and certain cultural practices. This research also argues that the influences of globalization are also felt by internal migrants, as they also go through similar ambiguities and hybridity experienced by transnational migrants, with only different intensities.

The Impact of Migration on Language Use, Cultural Practices and Marriage Patterns

Many aspects of the construction of ethnic identity in Cuatro Cañadas are mediated by linguistic choice. Most of these children do not speak Quechua among themselves and only a few do it at home with their parents; and in those cases most of them reply in Spanish. A *camba* style, a *camba* accent and a *camba* worldview are entrenched in the life of these children in Cuatro Cañadas. They do not struggle as much as their parents in the construction of their ethnicity. In opposition to what happens in San Lucas, school instruction and curricula in Cuatro Cañadas is entirely in Spanish, from first grade to twelfth grade. It is very infrequent that newly arrived children experience difficulties in speaking Spanish, as most of them were born in this municipality and their exposure to Spanish occurred very early. Also, the pressure these children feel from peers at school is such that their parents’ native language fades away in favor of
Spanish fairly quickly. Therefore, children and adolescents in Cuatro Cañadas make a conscious effort to be *cambas*, to act like *cambas*, and to talk like *cambas*.

Regarding intergenerational communication, 42 percent of parents interviewed said they talk to their children in Quechua, either occasionally or frequently. However, none of them reported being talked back to in Quechua by their children. Also, 83 percent of individuals interviewed believe their children should grow up speak Quechua, a high number that contradicts with the 42 percent of parents who actually talk to their children in Quechua. On one hand, this means that parents are not aware of the power they have in promoting a healthy bilingual environment for their children; and on the other hand, it also shows the struggles that parents go through in their own process of adaptation to lowland culture. If they felt linguistically discriminated against for being Quechua-speakers, it is understandable that they do not encourage their children to speak Quechua, so they do not have to go through the same situation.

All in all, Quechua-Spanish bilingualism is more stable in adults than in children, as 76 percent of respondents said to have a good-to-excellent level of speaking and understanding Quechua in Cuatro Cañadas. However, my observations of linguistic behavior in adult population indicated that in spite of having more linguistic resources than children, adults in Cuatro Cañadas exhibit a marked preference for Spanish in daily interaction. They, however, show dialectical differences: out of all the highland migrants that I interviewed, about half of them spoke with *camba* Spanish accent and using several *camba* slang words; but the other half maintained a *colla* Spanish linguistic repertoire at both the lexical and phonological level.

**Maintenance of Ethnic Traits**

Four concrete beliefs and practices characteristic of Andean communities were selected as indicators of Quechua mode of life: *kharisiri, mink’a, Pachamama,* and *utacht’api*. Measuring and analyzing the continuity or abandonment of such practices and beliefs was a crucial component of this research.

**Kharisiri**

This is some type of bogeyman, known in Aymara as the *kharisiri*, in Quechua as the ſakaq, and in Spanish as the *pishtaco*. It is believed to be a creature that attacks Indians “…and then drags them off unconscious to secret caves, where he hangs them upside down and extracts their body
fat.” (Weismantel 2001: 6). Many believe that it is a white man; and this is the reason why foreign priests in rural towns, state officers, and anthropologists are often feared. It is one of the most widely held myths in the Andes. Many people in the rural highlands assure having seen one (including those who did not die after being attacked), but most importantly, even those who have not experienced the kharisiri first hand, at least believe in his existence. In my own previous field experiences in the Altiplano I heard many stories of people who knew individuals who were attacked by this supra-natural being. Therefore, many people believe in the kharisiri.

**Mink’a**

Also known as ayni, or faena, mink’a is a rural form of communal cooperation that is very common in the Andes. It is a reciprocal form of collaboration; therefore an individual or household who receives it is expected to return it at a later time. It is usually practiced during planting or harvesting seasons, when heavy labor is required. At the individual’s request, neighbors gather to help the person in need, who in exchange for this service provides helpers with food and alcohol. In some cases, it is the community that regulates it; therefore, membership and participation in mink’a is sometimes not voluntary, but rather enforced by community leaders (Paerregaard 1997). However, as mink’a can be entirely voluntary, in some cases the host’s ability to pay for food and alcohol determines its fulfillment.

**Pachamama**

Also known as Madre Tierra, “Mother Earth,” Pachamama is the most important Andean divine entity. It is primarily associated with the land and the corresponding agricultural production derived from it, but it also recalls the place where one belongs, the place where one lives, and where the individual creates community. People in the rural Andes mainly use to ch’allar “offer libations” to Pachamama to thank her for a good harvest or to pray for good fortune in all areas of life. Para que la Pachamama produzca bien, “so that Pachamama yields a good production” or para que la Pachamama nos protega, “so that Pachamama protects us” are typical ch’alla prayings. Pachamama libations are very common even in urban areas, and even practiced by mestizos with no links to the rural areas.
**Utacht’api**

This is a ceremony that takes place when the roof is installed in a new house, usually where a newlywed couple will live. Due to economic constrains, it is very common that the new house still needs some work to be done (especially the outside painting of all walls), but even under those circumstances, installing the roof and throwing an *utacht’api* ceremony represents the consummation of the building project, at least at a symbolic level. The hosts have to pay for all expenses (food and beverages); therefore—like *Mink’a*—just the lack of funds sometimes is enough reason for not doing it.

Compared to their behavior back in their highland communities, migrants reported to practice 68 percent less of the selected ethnic traits in Cuatro Cañadas. In a scale of 4.0, migrants scored an average of 0.78 practices per individual in the lowlands, compared to an average score of 2.47 practices per individual in their home communities. Migrants are substantially reducing these practices after having settled in the lowlands.\(^1\) The least compromised practice.belief is offerings to *Pachamama*. Practically half the inhabitants of Cuatro Cañadas (47 percent) still hold this practice. However, I expected a higher number of people making offers to *Pachamama*, which is a widely spread belief in the Andean world that has even penetrated urban areas and different socio-economic levels. A good example of this is that even some cambas in Cuatro Cañadas responded to have adopted this practice. The religious conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism is partially responsible for this shift, as only 18 percent of the population is Protestant in Cuatro Cañadas. It is well known that Protestantism bans the worship of deities other than God and Jesus Christ.

The other three practices are severely compromised: 89 percent of respondents do not believe in *kharisiri*, 87 percent do not practice *utacht’api*, and 70 percent do not practice *mink’a* in the lowlands. It certainly looks like people do not believe in the *kharisiri* in Cuatro Cañadas.

For rural dwellers, living in the Andes entails a constant negotiation with this “institution of fear,” as the presence or at least the notion of the white or mestizo is a constant reminder of oppression and inequality (Oliver-Smith 1969). In the lowlands this fear is somehow diluted and

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\(^1\) Note that the index of their practices back in the highlands is not very high either (2.47). This means that even before migrating, some had already stopped some of these practices.
stories of *kharisiri* simply fade away, as they are now replaced by stories of *maleantes*, or common criminals who rob and attack people. Thus, migrants in Cuatro Cañadas go from a symbolic to a practical level with regards to the existence of the *kharisiri*.

The last two practices (*utacht’api* and *mink’a*) are also significantly reduced, and rather than for purely cultural reasons, there are also some fundamentally economic factors igniting this change. Both activities are important custodians of the reciprocity levels of any given Andean rural community. Most of the time participation in these practices is voluntary, but sometimes the community can regulate it. In those cases, particularly doing *mink’a* can be a burden on the household. Many respondents told me only the rich ones did *mink’a* and *utacht’api* back in their communities and excused themselves from not doing it in Cuatro Cañadas, precisely because of the same reason: lack of money to pay for the food and alcohol needed for the celebration. Once in Cuatro Cañadas, many migrants might feel free from somewhat rigid Andean community regulations, like these practices, and they might also feel free from the mandatory rotation of authority posts or *cargos*. The abandonment of such practices might be a surviving strategy to adapt to an agro-industrial capitalistic system, where an individualistic behavior is more beneficial than a communitarian one. However, in order to affirm such a thing, further exploration and analysis are needed. The following table summarizes these findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Quechua ethnic traits NOT practiced in Cuatro Cañadas</th>
<th>Percentage of answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Kharisiri</em></td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>utacht’api</em></td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>mink’a</em></td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pachamama</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interethnic Marriages

Andean kinship systems are basically endogamous, but exogamous and intra-community marriage alliances are not rare as they provide individuals access to diverse ecological niches (Mamani and Albó 1976). When migrant *collas* marry *cambas* in the lowlands, they might gain access to other resources, not necessarily ecological but resources such as the expansion of human capital networks and social acceptance by the local group (Bolton and Mayer 1975; Stearman 1985; Mayer 2002). Based on these postulates, I expected a higher number of inter-
ethnic marriages in Cuatro Cañadas, but the primary and secondary data I gathered showed rather a low proportion. Of a total of 58 couples in my sample, only 8 couples (14 percent) corresponded to camba/colla, colla/camba marriages.\(^2\) This percentage is almost exactly the same as the 14.5 average percent of interethnic civil marriage records that I collected at the Civil Registry Office of Cuatro Cañadas. With 76 percent of colla/colla marriages, these results show that highland migrants do not exhibit a marked preference to marry lowlanders. As seen throughout this research, collas in Cuatro Cañadas are substantially modifying some areas of cultural domain: they are reducing their traditional linguistic behavior and the practice of specific cultural traditions, but their alliance patterns are still somewhat conservative.

A relevant finding that emerges from these data is that the pattern colla man/camba woman prevails among inter-ethnic marriages. Of all the camba/colla marriages in my sample, 62 percent corresponded to the colla man/camba woman category. By the same token, of all the camba/colla marriages observed at the Civil Registry, 85.5 percent corresponded to the same category. These results corroborate with a basic characteristic of highland-to-lowland migration: It is men who migrate more than women. In order to arrive at this conclusion, we depart from a basic assumption: colla spouses in inter-ethnic marriages were single when they arrived in Cuatro Cañadas. It is simply not common for single highland women to venture and find a life of their own in agricultural settlements, as it is to move to urban centers where they work as maids and where they can settle down and marry (Albó 1999; Brettell 1986; Golte 2001; Skar 1993). Something that supports this known migratory behavior is that six out of the seven single female collas that I interviewed were 18 to 26 years old, and all of them arrived in Cuatro Cañadas with their parents.

Finally, the expectations that single migrants have regarding their future partners do not correspond with the actual marriage pattern practiced by migrants. Fifty percent of the single respondents in my questionnaire said that they would rather marry a colla (much less than the existing rate of 76 percent of same-ethnicity marriage), and a solid 38 percent of them said they were open to marry anybody. These results indicate that future generations might not be too attached to cultural norms about kinship alliances, but also show that a process of acculturation in this region will increase in various aspects as new generations come into play. Stearman

\(^2\) 76 percent are colla-colla marriages, and 10 percent are camba-camba marriages.
(1985) found that second generation migrants in lowland colonies engaged in interethnic marriages with cambas as a way to ease their process of adaptation. After 30 years, I found that 76 percent of married collas are in same-ethnicity marriages, and that 50 percent of single collas would like to marry a colla. Migrants to Cuatro Cañadas seem to be rather traditional regarding alliance patterns and the reason for this remains unknown to me. I suggest that maybe after many years of accumulating a vast migratory experience as a group, today they do not need to rely on inter-ethnic marriage as a means of easing their adaptation to the lowlands.

**Redefining Ethnic Identity in Areas of Rapid Growth and Cultural Contact**

Based on the data I gathered and on the observations I made, I conclude that migrants in Cuatro Cañadas are reducing their traditional linguistic behavior and the practice of specific cultural traditions, but their alliance patterns are still somewhat conservative. In general terms, highland migrants in Cuatro Cañadas have a lesser degree of “Quechuaness” compared to the lives they had when they lived in the highlands. Also, most of them feel more colla (regional indicator) than Quechua (ethnic indicator), something that was corroborated by the weak practice of ethnic traits. Therefore, there is a noticeable process of acculturation going on… but, to what extent can we affirm that their identity has totally changed from one stage to another? And to what extent do we know that those who keep certain practices alive in the new places are maybe constructing “imagined homelands” (Appadurai 2003), inventing or readapting what they think represents best their original culture?

Given that identity is so malleable, it is impossible to say that it is rooted only in one community, or in one exclusive place. “Identity is not owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead, a mobile, often unstable relation of difference” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:13). Identity is also “activated” and “negotiated” and presented in different formats. A good example of this is when migrants in Cuatro Cañadas decide to speak and behave in certain ways depending on which ethnic identity they want to activate. The same individual that says he/she is *colla* to a certain audience can say he/she is *camba* to another group of people. When that happens, it is also part of a negotiation but most importantly it reflects the existence of hybridity and border crossings. In addition to hybridity, individuals also reflect an ambiguous identity, and finding it is at the very core of anthropological research: at a conscious level, people can be very vocal and talk about the things they do, but at a subconscious level people reveal a
hidden behavior, which reflects what they really do. This situation is visible, for example, when individuals report the importance of their children growing up as Quechua-Spanish bilinguals, but at the same time do not play a more active role towards that end, as they do not speak Quechua to their children in more consistent ways. At a symbolic level, thus, migrants become hidden people who cross borders with hidden and ambiguous identities.

Frederick Barth strongly states that the manifestations and the corresponding boundaries of an ethnic group “persist despite a flow of personnel across them” (1969). However, 30 years after Barth’s classic model of ethnic boundaries new approaches have arisen where fuzzy and complex forms are emerging demanding a constant reassessing and restructuring of personal, political, social, cultural, and economic identification (Kershen 1998). The encounters between cambas and collas constitute a perfect example of this, something that has also been observed by local scholars (Chávez et al. 1995; Albó 1999; Urquiola 1999; Albó 2004). At a transnational level, these fuzzy forms are expressed by an emerging postcolonial culture of hybridity characterized by people living in cultural and national borders, refugees and displaced peoples, migrants, and workers who define their identity in a hybrid and syncretic way (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). At a local level in Bolivia, I predict that cambas and collas will continue delineating innovative scenarios of cultural and linguistic encounters that will be characterized by higher levels of hybridity.
References


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