Chapter 6

Indigenous Organizing in the International Arena: 1980s-2000s

From my field notes: July 2001.

It's 4:30 on a hot, sleepy afternoon in Riberalta. A youngish, twenty-something man with typical lowland Bolivia features attends to the reception desk at the Indigenous Center of the Amazonian Region of Bolivia (CIRABO). Behind him is a white Philips refrigerator, a table with a dusty Samsung computer and dot-matrix printer, and a smaller table holding a fax and telephone. To the left of the desk, between him and those entering the front office of CIRABO, a TV shows the news and then a child's puppet show that reminds me of Trolley's Land-of-Make-Believe in the Mr. Roger's Neighborhood of my childhood. The desk is scattered with assorted boxes and papers, a box of black tea, a backpack, clear packing tape, a clipboard, a fan, and a towel.

Along with the ubiquitous symbols of the Bolivian state with their accompanying Spanish-looking men, the wall is papered with old posters from UNICEF, VAIPO, and other agencies advocating for children's, human, and indigenous rights. One trumpets the importance of the birth registry. Others plug sustainable forest use and environmental protection. Photocopies of articles about the lucha (fight) for indigenous rights in Bolivia also hang on walls and on a bookshelf. Shelves, mostly empty, a large closed cupboard, another table holding some sort of covered machine,
and five wooden chairs on the dirty red cement floor almost manage to give the medium-sized room a cluttered look.

Occasionally a child peaks from behind the door leading back to CIRABO’s president's office. “He went to get something and should be back in a half-hour or so,”¹ I'm told, so I sit down to wait patiently for his return. I’m not entirely convinced he will come back, but I have learned that acting less then patient will do nothing to speed Riberalta's tranquil manner of doing things. "Where are you from?" the man at the desk asks me. "Now? Or from what country?" "What country?" he answers, and I tell him that I'm from the United States. He asks if I work with indígenas and I tell him I'm living in the community of the Tacana capitán (chief). We both fall silent.

Later, he asks me how long I've been here. I answer “since March,” and we lapse, again, into a long silence common in the conversations of the people with whom I live and work. In my experience, this is not a land of bright and easy chatter with strangers, although it does happen on occasion. People generally keep their business more or less to themselves, revealing tidbits reluctantly to anyone who lacks a direct interest in the affair or the power to help resolve it. Even then, some details will likely be held back, intentionally or otherwise.

At 5 o'clock a woman comes and replaces the man behind the desk. He moves to one of the chairs. Sitting. Waiting.

¹ All conversations referenced in this chapter took place in Spanish except where specifically noted. Translations are the author’s.
At 5:05, the man walks outside and then returns to another chair. The rumble of the TV and the mumble of voices in the back rooms combine with the heat to leave me drowsy. I’m so used to the ubiquitous biting insects in the forest that I hardly notice and certainly don’t bother to wave away the three or four buzzing around me now. The sun isn’t yet setting, so malaria-bearing mosquitoes are not a danger. Occasionally, I exchange a tentative smile with someone passing in or out of the office or by on the red dirt road outside.

At 5:15 the president of CIRABO arrives. A short, fit, middle-aged man, he hardly spares me a glance as he walks to the woman minding the desk to collect 20 Bolivianos (about US$3) for his taxi driver. He sits down in one of the chairs and shakes my hand. The handshake of this region is not the up-down-up-down “Yankee” shake, rather it is one downward motion ending in a solid grasp at waist level. He asks me what he can do for me.

I remind him that I am living in Santa Rosa and explain that I have some resources from my project, not a lot, but some, to colaborar (collaborate) with the community of Santa Rosa. I have come to see if it is possible for CIRABO to colaborar as well, so that together we could purchase a short-wave communication radio for the community. He tells me that the community had a radio, but that they argued with each other and broke it. He and the woman try to remember where Santa Rosa's radio is now. They discuss how much the radio system would cost, listing the components on a piece of paper and deciding that a complete system would cost US$2000, of which the radio would be US$1000. I ask if CIRABO could supply the
radio if my project resources supply the rest of the system. "Where is there a radio?"
he asks the woman. The names of two communities, one of which is apparently the
location of Santa Rosa's old radio, get thrown around. A phone call interrupts us,
and the president disappears into the back office.

While I wait, I chat with the woman. In order for CIRABO to buy something, she
says, it has to be purchased in a commercial center. One must get three quotes first.
She and a man standing at the door discuss a bit and decide that a radio "sin factura"
(without a receipt, or better, in English, “under the table”) costs about $700, while
"con fractura" (with a receipt), it would cost $1000. The woman tells me that since
about 1 1/2 to 2 years ago, there isn't money for things like this, not even for paying
salaries or running the office or paying the electricity. She said that the Dutch
Agency SNV funded CIRABO before. I ask what other agencies fund things like
this and she has no answer, but says the Swiss Mission funds health by letting people
work off health bills in the Mission.

When the president doesn't return to finish our conversation, she tells me that he is
going ready to leave in the morning. I ask if he'll be back on Monday, and she says
yes, that I should come back in the afternoon, perhaps about 3 p.m. I shake hands
with everyone in the front office and head outside.

Indigenous organizations in Bolivia.

In the field note above, I am describing one of many interactions I had with CIRABO, the
regional indigenous organization of the northeast that mediates interventions of outsiders
into the lives of the region’s rural indigenous populations. After arriving in Riberalta and before starting my field research, I secured the organization’s endorsement of my research, and received, on request, a letter to that effect. Without this endorsement, I would not have been allowed to conduct my research in Santa Rosa or any other indigenous community. There is a significant amount of hostility directed at foreigners who have come and taken the intellectual and material property of indígenas without giving anything back. My own status as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Oklahoma, and thus a fellow indígena, facilitated my entry into what could sometimes be hostile territory because of this history.

CIRABO and the rest of the indigenous organizations in Bolivia are more than local phenomena. Indeed, their birth and survival are linked to the growth of an international human rights movement that specifically targets indigenous peoples, both symbolically and economically. In the last several decades, pressure from the grassroots organizing of indígenas who formed these indigenous organizations combined with pressure from international organizations to effect dramatic reforms within the Bolivian state. These reforms recognize indigenous peoples as special citizens with specific rights, and these changes have contributed to the restructuring of Tacana identity described in this dissertation.

Contemporary indigenous organizing in Bolivia can be understood as having three stages corresponding to the decades of the 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000s. Real life, of course, is not so neat, and characteristics of each stage bleed into former and latter stages; however, each decade is sufficiently different to warrant this division, a convenient one to facilitate understanding. The following chart sketches the changing nature of indigenous organizing
in Bolivia and the roles of both indígenas and international organizations. In brief, the 1980s can be seen as a time when indígenas in Bolivia, with the economic and technical support of international organizations, concentrated on building an organized base. In the 1990s, legal reforms to the Bolivian state were achieved. Finally, at the time of my research, the early 2000s, indígenas were allocating and managing the resources they had gained, as well as continuing to fight to secure additional rights and resources and to protect those already gained. These tasks were proving to be as daunting as those of the previous decades.

The success of indigenous organizing in Bolivia can be attributed to the confluence of bottom-up and top-down processes. Mobilization of indígenas themselves combined with the support of influential portions of the international community to bring about the dramatic reforms in Bolivia. Each influenced and responded to the actions of the other. In the next three sections, I explore each of these stages in more detail, attending to the roles of both indígenas at the grass roots level as well as those of international actors.

The 1980s: Organizing to fight for indigenous rights.

The fact that the 1980s was a pivotal moment for indigenous mobilization is not unique to Bolivia. Throughout South America, indigenous peoples successfully created ethnic federations to an extent not previously seen. While groups have united to fight colonialism and oppression since at least the time of first contact with Europeans, and the earliest Amazonian ethnic federation formed in 1961 (Macdonald 2002:177), it was not until the 1980s that ethnic organizing in South America boomed. This boom in indigenous organizing throughout South America occurred concurrently with a dramatic rise in attention to the human rights of indigenous peoples in the international arena, and this was
### Indigenous Organizing in Bolivia: Power Flows Both Ways

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#### 1980s Organizing to Fight for Resources:
- **Indigenous March of 1990**
- **Organizations:**
  - International Funding and pressuring state reforms.
  - Organizations at grassroots levels.
  - Organizations at the root.
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#### 1990s Achieving Resources:
- **Beginnings of ethnic organizations as pressure groups.**
  - Establishment of eastern Bolivian indigenous organization CIDOB.
  - Establishment of northeast Bolivian indigenous organization CRENOB (later becomes CIRABO).
  - Ratification of International Labor Organization Convention #169 recognizing indigenous rights.
  - Constitutional reform proclaims Bolivia pluriethnic.
  - INRA land reform provides for the creation of collectively owned indigenous territories.

#### 2000s Adjusting Resources:
- **Exercising rights as “special citizens” in Bolivia.**
  - Development of “parallel” subordinate governments.
  - Establishment of increasing number of indigenous organizations in competition with one another.
  - Who is and isn’t indigenous becomes important.
  - **Figure 8**

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**Legend**
- **Organizations:**
  - International Funding and assisting indigenous organizations at grassroots levels.
  - Organizations at grassroots levels.
  - Organizations at the root.
  - **Figure 7**

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**Figure 7**
- Establishment of eastern Bolivian indigenous organization CIDOB.
- Establishment of northeast Bolivian indigenous organization CRENOB (later becomes CIRABO).
- Ratification of International Labor Organization Convention #169 recognizing indigenous rights.
- Constitutional reform proclaims Bolivia pluriethnic.
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**Figure 8**
- Development of “parallel” subordinate governments.
- Establishment of increasing number of indigenous organizations in competition with one another.
- Who is and isn’t indigenous becomes important.
not a coincidence. In fact, the activities of actors on the local and the global scenes lent support to each other and contributed to the increased strength of each.

On the international scene, a landmark in the creation of a global indigenous rights movement occurred in 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by United Nations General Assembly. This declaration was the first major human rights instrument and set general anti-discriminatory priorities in the international community. As an international human rights movement grew in size and systematization, indigenous peoples became one of the categories accorded special attention. The next milestone in the birth of an international indigenous rights movement was the International Labor Organization’s Convention 107. The convention, which passed in 1957, specifically targeted indigenous and tribal peoples as vulnerable populations. However, this international treaty had the conflicting aims of protecting indigenous people while also integrating them into the dominant nation states within which they lived, and it was drafted without the input of indigenous peoples themselves.

In 1982, the UN’s International Working Group on Indigenous Populations (IWGIP) was established. This working group provided an opportunity for indigenous peoples to voice their own needs, desires, and concerns, and to dialogue with governments about these. In 1985, a UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations was created to ease the financial burden of travel by indigenous representatives to the IWGIP, further underscoring the increased importance accorded to indigenous perspectives in the international arena. The decade culminated in 1989 with the passage of International Labor Organization’s Convention 169. The importance of ILO Convention #169 is attested to by the frequency
with which it was cited by indigenous Tacana during my fieldwork. This international treaty, ratified by 17 countries, including Bolivia, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to their own cultures, languages, and traditional lands. Throughout this document, the importance of consultation with indigenous peoples themselves is stated repeatedly – a requirement that began to be integrated into the policy documents of more and more international organizations into and throughout the 1990s.

The rising importance granted to indigenous issues on the international scene in the 1980s contributed to a growing indigenous movement within Bolivia during that decade. In the eastern lowlands of Bolivia, 1982 provided a marked entry point for indígenas as organized actors on the scene. Sixty-five indígenas of the Chiquitano, Ayoreo, Guarayo, Izoceno, and Ava-Guarani groups met in Santa Cruz in the “Primer Encuentro de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano” (First Meeting of the Eastern Bolivian Indigenous Peoples) (Healy 2001: 6). The Bolivian NGO APCOB, Ayuda Para el Campesino Indígena del Oriente Boliviano (Help for the Indigenous Peasant of Eastern Bolivia), headed by the German anthropologist Juergen Riester, had been working to bring this meeting since the late 1970s (Healy 2001: 7), and it proved a turning point in lowland organizing efforts. The participants left determined to organize on the grassroots level and to build a regional, multiethnic indigenous organization to be called Central del Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano (Center of the Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia), CIDOB. This organization eventually became the national organization for lowland indígenas and was thus renamed Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia (Confederacy of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia) while retaining CIDOB as its acronym.
Throughout the 1980s, regional ethnic federations were formed throughout the lowlands. CIDOB continued to be supported economically, logistically, and strategically by ABCOB, which acted as an important link between indigenous organizations and foreign researchers, advocates, and donors. Initial indigenous organizing culminated in 1990 with a national indigenous march to La Paz, a turning point for the political recognition of indigenous issues in Bolivia, and one that received national and international attention.

**The 1990s: Gaining legal rights.**

On the international and national scene, the 1990s were a period where the organizing activities of the 1980s achieved increased attention and numerous concrete legal reforms. The UN dedicated a day (August 9, 1995), a year (1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas) and a decade (1995-2004) to the world’s indigenous peoples. In 1993, a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was completed by the IWGIP, the result of a process including representatives of indigenous peoples from around the world.

In Bolivia, international aid continued to play a key role in funding indigenous organizations and in pressuring for state reforms. The International Labor Organization’s Convention #169, granting rights of indigenous peoples to culture, language, and land, was ratified by Bolivia and thus became national law. The Bolivian constitution was amended to officially recognize that Bolivia was a multicultural, pluriethnic state. Along with other changes, such as the election of Bolivia’s first indigenous Vice President and the creation of a Viceministry which focused on indigenous affairs, the third key legal change in Bolivia was the passage of
the INRA law which provided for the creation of indigenous reserves, a process funded by the World Bank.

CIRABO, formed in 1991 to replace CRENOB, the Comité Regional Étnico del Noroeste Boliviano (Regional Ethnic Committee of Northeast Bolivia), is affiliated with the national lowland indigenous organization, CIDOB, located in Santa Cruz. Since its founding, CIRABO has become an important organizer and mediator of indigenous affairs in the region. “La organización” (The Organization) as it is called by indígenas in the region, is the gatekeeper of projects and research targeted at rural indígenas affiliated with the organization, as well as the meeting point to organize demands for territory and other issues.

**The early 2000s: allocating and managing resources.**

At the turn of the millennium, indigenous affairs were becoming further incorporated into the establishment of the United Nations and the international community in general. A Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2000, and in 2001, a Special Rapporteur on the situation of the human rights of indigenous peoples was appointed by the UN Commission on Human Rights. In the last month of the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People, a second such decade was proclaimed, to run from 2005-2014, a testament to awareness in the international arena of the remaining work to be done.

It is worth noting the interchange of personnel between governmental and nongovernmental organizations working on issues of development and human rights in Bolivia (Lauridsen 2002: 53). For example, in September of 2000, three former Ibis workers had become
employees of the Danish Embassy in La Paz, one of whom was the First Secretary (2002: 53). This is not just a Danish phenomenon, but is common among other international actors on the Bolivian scene, as well as among Bolivian nationals. As Lauridsen points out,

Hense a sharp distinction between the development apparatus (to use Escobar’s terminology [1995]) on one side, and advocacy groups supporting indigenous peoples on the other side, here seems too simplistic as there is a flow of personnel across this boundary. (2002: 53)

In Bolivia, the relationship between indigenous organizations and international funders changed in the decade. An “indigenous expert” employed by a consulate based in La Paz explained some of the changes in aid allocation that indigenous organizations experience as the withdrawal of aid. The old style of aid, he explained, was “projects.” Because organizations were remaining dependent upon this aid, the structure of aid has changed. Now aid is going to the Bolivian government (i.e. ministries) instead of to organizations such as CIRABO and CIDOB. Some funds have been allocated for civil society organizations, as well; however, organizations that are closer to the population base are privileged over umbrella organizations like CIRABO and CIDOB. The middle level is getting less aid as funding is directed primarily to the top (the Bolivian state) and secondarily to the civil society organizations at the bottom.

Meanwhile, CIRABO has taken on some quasi-governmental functions as they learn to manage the land reserves created through INRA. Indeed, for someone who is a member of a community that has declared itself indigenous and affiliated with CIRABO, the dirigentes (directors or officers) of CIRABO are a resource for information, conflict resolution, and
leverage in the city of Riberalta. More precisely, CIRABO functions as such in cases concerning a community as a whole. For these purposes, CIRABO has largely replaced patrónes and religious leaders. Individuals tend to resolve their conflicts through other channels, utilizing gossip as social control or directly confronting the individual involved. However, once something becomes a community affair, if it cannot be resolved in the community, CIRABO will most likely become involved. Only those who are at least part-time residents of one of the rural, affiliated communities are the concern of CIRABO officials.² It is perhaps more accurate to say that CIRABO is concerned with indigenous groups as a whole (e.g. the Tacana) and with indigenous communities as such (e.g. Santa Rosa) than with individual indígenas. One important function provided by CIRABO is to provide affirmation as to the validity of claims put forward by affiliated communities. The existence of Santa Rosa as a community, for example, once it moved to the new site, was confirmed by CIRABO officials as community members worked to secure a functioning school.

As indígenas work to hold on to and manage these newly (re)gained resources, defining who is and is not indigenous has become important, and new dynamics are driving Tacana choices of identity. Nationally, indigenous people are being recognized as special citizens within the Bolivian state, with special rights. This is also being driven by changes in what is valued symbolically and economically in the international community, for example, the World Bank funding of the INRA land reserve creation. While identities are not driven solely by instrumental factors, these do play a role, and strategic best interests are served differently on the micro and macro levels for different people at different times.

² The indígenas of this region are not “suburban Indians” like the Guaraní of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, documented by Postero (2001).
The Tacana are having to start to define for outsiders who is and who isn’t Tacana to gain the resources they fought for. Both the state and international organizations are asking for a concrete, clearly delineated definition in order to allocate resources, and there is evidence of the beginning of attempts to circle the wagons, to join together to exclude outsiders. Catalyzed from inside, the need to define is imposed from the outside and defined by power, and by money and resources. The need to eliminate fluid conceptions of Tacana identity is created by the world system within which the Tacana reside. Identities have become the justifications for entitlements, such as rights to “traditional” territories and funding for bilingual education, administered by the Bolivian government. Further, pressure from international funders to ensure government transparency that demonstrates effective and accurate accounting of the activities has risen. The World Bank, for example, has become conscious of its negative public image surrounding indigenous issues, has increased its attention to “indigenous friendly” projects, and is requiring the same of the governments with which it works. Pressure trickles up and trickles down.

The Tacana themselves were becoming aware of the importance of their status as indígenas in accessing national and international aid, and politicization of Tacana identity was occurring slowly at the time of my field research. Key sites for the occurrence of this process were the seminars and workshops of the indigenous organizations of CIDOB and CIRABO as well as at meetings held by government and NGO meetings. At the former, indigenous elites educated locals about the meanings and importance of indigenous identity. At the latter, the claims of indígenas were often granted more legitimacy than the claims of forest dwellers calling themselves peasants. From the perspective of the bottom, “Tacana” and “indígena” could be a way to access resources, from land, to school materials and
teachers, to a Bolivian flag for community, with minimal boundary patrol on the part of the Tacana themselves. The benefits of this politicization have been grasped by key local intellectuals, who would often express their frustrations at working with other rural dwellers who “no entienden” (don't understand).

**Challenges indigenous organizations face.**

On June 1, 2002, at the 4th Amazonian Indigenous Council held on the grounds of the Swiss Evangelical Mission in Riberalta, outgoing CIRABO President Mario Moreno spoke about the history of CIRABO and the issues faced by the organization. His remarks offer a rich source for understanding ideas that unite and divide the indígenas who fight for indigenous-based rights in the region. Below, selected portions of Don Mario’s words provide insight into locally salient issues. I’ve provided loose translations into English, choosing translation of the feeling and meaning over literal fidelity.

In his remarks at the Council, Don Mario told those in attendance, “I have been able to devote at least a fourth of my life to the indigenous movement. I believe that the peoples and communities know me well from close contact, know that I’ve had no interest in the will of outsiders, without consultation with you.” Later in his speech, he turned to the organization as a whole, “CIRABO works as a non-profit, without [financial] interests, is not dependent upon particular interests as political life and others are said to be.” These comments highlight one of the key tensions in the work of indigenous activists in the region — the danger of selling out, of caving to outside influence, cutting back room deals, and expropriating collective resources such as land, forest products, or project funds for oneself while acting in the name of indigenous groups. It took less to satisfy one person then many,
and local elites, threatened by the assault on their regional control, could pay one indigenous leader off for much cheaper than they could surrender land to many. In addition, owners of businesses that dealt in forest products, especially timber, could turn a tidy profit if they could arrange an alliance with an indigenous leader. There were fairly continuous rumors and suspicions about these types of payoffs, and indigenous politicians, especially, were commonly thought to have succumbed to such pressures. Indeed, one of the reasons Don Mario was able to serve in CIRABO’s leadership for so long was the general consensus that he was honest and dedicated to the collective interests of regional indígenas.

Indígenas were generally suspicious of those who rose to powerful positions. Among the Tacana, at least, this is not surprising given their assertively egalitarian practices. There was further reason for this suspicion, however. Regional indígenas, like social scientists in the tradition of Marcel Mauss (1967), understand that friendly relations involve the giving of gifts that result in indebtedness of the receiver to the giver. There were strategies for circumventing the obligation to give back created by the gift, primary ones were pleading inability to pay and “escapando” (leaving), but these were short term fixes and had to be used in moderation if continuing relations were desired. Thus, if indigenous leaders and elite representatives of NGOs and governments (both foreign and domestic) became too friendly, this was understood to indicate potentially shifted alliances.

Local people understandably fear such shifts. Thus, relations between indigenous organizers and NGO and governmental representatives cannot seem too friendly without alienating the people whom indigenous organizers are supposed to be serving. There is a strong tradition in the region of communal, forceful removal of leaders who are thought to have shifted their
loyalties from their base. This set of beliefs and practices makes easy relations between indigenous leaders and other elites harder to attain while simultaneously reinforcing the accountability of indigenous leaders to their people. This is not simply about social relations, however. At stake are material resources – indigenous reserves, timber and Brazil nut concessions, and development projects including health posts, microfinancing, and schools.

There are additional reasons for indígena suspicion of elites. Santa Rosans and other rural indígenas live in a primarily face-to-face society. This can be seen in numerous aspects of their lives. For example, documents, especially contracts, land titles, and identity cards, carry much less importance in their lives than in the lives of someone from one of the urban centers, largely due to low literacy rates and ineffective fraud-control mechanisms. Trade is carried out primarily through trading partners or with immediate compensation. Loans are informal and from personal acquaintances, since institutional loans are all but impossible to secure with no collateral to offer in case of default. Unlike myself, they are not constantly dealing with faceless entities like Wells Fargo, Pacific Bell, my landlord, and the University of California, Berkeley. While the Bolivian state is such a faceless entity and impacts their lives, it is the primary one. Indigenous organizations have representatives that have faces, and which are held accountable for actions, and ousted from office if collective sentiment rises against them. NGOs that intervene in their lives conduct the intervention through people that form relationships with community members, not through impersonal documents and policies.

Unlike many citizens of the United States who are overwhelmed and disempowered by the size and power of depersonalized public and private institutions, Santa Rosans and others in
the region inhabit a world where things are accomplished primarily through face-to-face interaction. Where a powerful official acts in ways they consider immoral, a Santa Rosan would not claim that this person is trapped by the system. Rather, they would call him or her corrupt and attempt a community intervention. This is not particular to the rural areas, as can be seen by the frequency with which the mayor of Riberalta was removed from office by mass mobilization. In fact, I lost track of how many times this occurred. This attention to personal accountability is arguably a pan-Bolivian characteristic of campesinos and indígenas; one only has to look as far as the political disorder before and after the forced resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October of 2003, precipitated by his government’s free market reforms, including a proposed natural gas pipeline, that were widely seen as giving away Bolivian resources to foreigners for free.

The beliefs and behaviors described above are a major factor behind the frequent comments by government and NGO representatives about how “difficult” it was to work with indígenas. While there are multiple causes behind this common view, working with indígenas can certainly be more challenging for elites when the indígenas insist on being democratic and refuse to pander to plutocracy. Some representatives cited the “difficultness” of indígenas as the reason their organization did little or no work with indigenous populations. Increasingly, NGOs and governmental agencies are attentive to the importance of “cooperation” with indigenous peoples. However, the friendly relations between governmental or NGO representatives and indigenous leaders that could facilitate it is impeded in practice by local expectations of appropriate behaviors by indigenous authorities. Indeed, what some elites see as indígenas being difficult or troublesome can also
be understood as behavior stemming from astute understandings of the workings of loyalty and accountability.

This is not to say that relations to all non-indígenas must be arms length. Rather, this strategy serves for dealing with those who are higher on the food chain, those who possess more economic and symbolic capital, i.e. social, economic, and political elites. Relations with non-indígenas who are employees of the indigenous organization itself or who have devoted long careers to serving indigenous interests in various capacities are framed differently. In fact, these people are normally said to be compañeros or compañeras (comrades or companions), hermanos or hermanas (brothers or sisters), and amigos or amigas (friends). To return to Don Mario, “In these four years of work, we also feel proud of the companions that have accompanied me until this moment, of the technical experts, who can be seen to sacrifice as much as the indigenous peoples.” Simply placing their expertise in finance, computers, mapping, legal affairs, or documenting cultural practices at the service of indígenas is seen as a sacrifice on the part of these experts, who could, most likely, earn better wages in more comfort at a different job.

One of the challenges for Bolivian indígenas and their organizations has been a dependence on technical specialists (legal experts, secretaries, cartographers, accountants, anthropologists) who have no particular reason to put the interests of indígenas first. These elite, non-indigenous specialists often work simultaneously for NGOs, international funding agencies, the Bolivian government, or research institutes to document, develop, aid, or pacify indígenas, and their goals may or may not overlap with those of the indígenas themselves. Class and ethnic differences complicate relationships as well. The national and regional
indigenous organizations are working to remedy this situation in two ways: 1) by hiring specialists themselves who must answer to the indigenous organizations, and 2) by training indígenas to be specialists. Reasons why these solutions are harder than they sound include funding problems, resource capture, and the structure of training.

Fear of resource capture is one reason for the widespread suspicion of people who rise to power positions. It is not uncommon for such folk to succumb to the temptations of making off with the relatively large amounts of money that come under their control in such positions. “Traditional” enforcement mechanisms are most effective where social interactions occurred face-to-face with frequency. Increased geographical distance increases the ease of escaping sanction for inappropriate behaviors, and indigenous leaders spend large periods of time in the city of Riberalta and are more likely to travel to other urban centers in Bolivia or internationally as part of their service. The contacts they make and the lessened oversight that these activities generate make it easier for them to pocket cash intended for collective purposes such as building community infrastructure, especially health posts and schools, or purchasing radios for communication between communities. There were, in fact, numerous cases of people in leadership positions making off with communal resources, escapando (escaping) and leaving those remaining behind with little recourse.

Another type of resource capture was common in the area of training of indígenas. While one of the articulated goals of the training of indígenas in areas such as health, law, education, and technology is to decrease the dependence of indígenas on non-indigenous experts, it didn’t always work out that way. People, once trained, do not always work on behalf of their fellow indígenas when there are more personally lucrative places to put their
new skills and knowledge to use. A type of brain-drain often occurred, where such training was used to climb the socio-economic ladder and not so often put to the service of rural indígenas. If the goal of the training is the formation of indígenas with the knowledge and skills to replace the foreign and national elites working (supposedly) on behalf of them, then this type of resource capture seriously hampers the success of this strategy.

This brain drain is not the only problem indigenous organizations face as they attempt to educate their constituency, however. Another is logistical. Training for adult indígenas, especially in the areas of health, economic development, and regarding Bolivian government reforms, usually takes place in the city of Riberalta or in one of the forest communities that are within relatively easy reach of it by boat or car. Usually conducted in the form of a taller (workshop), a call is issued by the regional radio station Radio San Miguel announcing the details, including the topic and sponsoring organization. However, adult Tacana are not easily spared from their homes, where a household functions best with both female and male members to farm, forage, fish or hunt, cook, and care for children on a daily basis. Indeed, the sacrifices entailed by attendance at these workshops and training sessions intended to improve their health and economic well-being, increase their literacy, and to increase their effective participation as citizens in the Bolivian state, was made especially clear to me when I returned to Santa Rosa with fellow attendees to find an infant near death, a situation which would most likely have been avoided if his grandmother, his primary caregiver, had not left to attend to official business in Riberalta. Fortunately, the child survived, but the experience drove home the point that the intellectual and material resources gained by mobilized indígenas were hard earned.
Mobile identities.

For just plain folk like the inhabitants of the community of Santa Rosa, the mediation of CIRABO described above can be of critical importance. In a portion of the world not yet flooded with the fast, easy, cheap, and reliable communication forms of e-mail, fax, mobile telephones, and not highly literate, information is gained slowly and in fragments, and advocacy is a fragmented process as well.

Tacana identity is undergoing a revitalization and revaluation in the region, a trend explored in more detail in Chapter 7. As part of this change, ethnic identity is increasingly put forth as justification for access to land and services. However, Tacana ethnic identity is fluid, with blurry boundaries, and can be contextual, as well as reinforcing or undermining of other identities that make up Tacana selves, such as gender, social class, interest group member, occupation, or kin group. When Tacana interact with institutions in the urban centers which form the base for governmental and private organizations that impact their lives, Tacana identity is invoked and evoked at particular moments and in particular ways. When negotiating for a community school, Tacananess can be invoked as a justification for what is increasingly seen as a specifically indigenous entitlement to education. When attending an educational workshop conducted by an indigenous organization, Tacananness can be evoked as a shared history of oppression and a better future based on indigenous solidarity. When joking with Caviñena, Chacobo, or Esse Ejja indigenous “sisters” and “brothers,” Tacananess can be invoked and evoked as a way to understand different behaviors and attitudes originating in cultural differences. And what it means personally and effectively to be Tacana is different in each situation.
Identities are mobile; they respond to power; and they change. My research captures one stage in this process of change, and there are multiple possible outcomes. New circumstances were driving Tacana choices of identity during my field research. In this chapter I explored what these new circumstances are and how they came to be. In the next, I turn to the choices themselves – to multiple and changing notions of what it means to be Tacana.