Chapter 8
Fixing Identities

“What is now called for is anthropological theory that reflects the complexity and depth of contemporary patterns of difference and differentiation but that does so in ways that do not exoticise ‘others’ but instead depict the intimate ways in which ‘they’ and ‘we’ are imbricated in global contexts that determine all of our identities.”

-Michael Kearney (1996: 119)

“Ethnicity is a tricky thing because it is commonly understood as something fixed and essential rather than what is more likely is: an unarticulated negotiation between what you call yourself and what other people are willing to call you back.”

Jack Hitt (2005: 40)

So who are the Tacana?
It might seem ironic that a study so concerned with identity does not clearly delineate boundaries between Tacana and others, and does not leave one with a clear and precise sense of who “the Tacana” are. To do so, however, would be missing the point – such a clear-cut boundary does not exist. It would also be an error, however, to infer that the social identity Tacana is simply made up, arbitrary, or meaningless. Quite the contrary, Tacana has
multiple shared meanings, meanings shared by different people in different contexts. These meanings are contingent – they shift as circumstances shift, as do the psychological, social, and instrumental functions they serve. Further, these meanings are shaped by powerful processes that resemble those taking place all over the globe and which are simultaneously unique to the particular circumstances of northern Bolivia.

I began my research in Bolivia interested in identity as more complex than everyday deployments of the concept allow. Social constructivism was a useful starting point, as it draws attention to the constant creation of identities in processes that are social and that involve power. It is in the examination of the particulars of their situation that an understanding of the changing circumstances driving Tacana choices of identity began to emerge. This understanding is a partial truth (Rosaldo 1993), as one can only see so much, even during extended fieldwork, and can only see through one’s own eyes, no matter how empathetic or accessible one is or tries to be.

A revitalization of Tacana ethnic identity is currently under way, and the number of people who consider themselves Tacana is growing. This change, which works against the stigma of being indigenous that still exists, is due in part to an international climate that has begun to place ideological and economic value on being indigenous (at least for the moment). And while the amount of aid might be small when compared to other global monetary flows, one should not underestimate the importance of these resource inflows into areas that have primarily experienced, and continue to experience, the plundering of their resources and labor power since their first encounters with Europeans.
Increased attention to and money directed toward indigenous issues in the international arena is having an effect on Tacana identity. Indeed, what it means to be Tacana is being restructured as a result of the reactions of Tacana, and those with potential claims to being Tacana, to the particular way international aid is targeted towards indigenous populations in Bolivia. For example, those with Tacana ancestry in the city of Riberalta are not claiming to be Tacana, while those who live in or move back to or (minimally) retain strong ties to rural communities are. This is due to two factors. First, ideas of what it means to be indigenous held by functionaries of international agencies and the Bolivian government channel funds in ways which privilege rural indígenas over urban indígenas. Second, strategic decisions by indigenous organizations in the region serve to consolidate power in the hands of rural populations by keeping urban Indians out of their movement.

International monetary aid targeted at indigenous peoples push forward tendencies to fix identities in two ways which correspond to two meanings of the word “fix”. First, there is a common assumption underlying such aid that something of the lives of indígenas is broken, be it their ability to subsist, their integration into a national political life and economy, illiteracy, illness, or access to entitlements such as healthcare, education, and political representation. The second way international aid is implicated in fixing identities requires a shift to a second definition of fix – that of making static, of nailing down, of delimiting and thus prohibiting change. As Conklin noted, notions of what an Indian should look like and be like held by non-indigenous elites can have quite an impact on how indígenas perform their nativeness, and can act as a trap for these same natives when they desire to step outside of their “native slot” to exercise alternative forms of agency (Conklin 2002). International
aid targeted towards people labeled indígena is changing the meaning of indígena in a two-way process.

The case of the Tacana is a challenge to facile notions of what ethnic identity is based on, and there are aspects of the situation of the Tacana that weaken claims to being indigenous. These are being overcome in order to create a revised version of Tacananess. They are (1) the rapid replacement of the Tacana language by Spanish with few Tacana speakers in the present generation of children; (2) a high rate of intermarriage with non-Tacana or more diluted Tacana by purer Tacana; (3) few traits easily identifiable as uniquely Tacana; and (4) the de-linking of Tacana to the “traditional” Tacana communities in the north of the Department of La Paz because of migration during the rubber boom, although current, official recognition of Tacana communities in the region is re-linking them to places, which has the intriguing effect of simplifying identity claims again.

The “invisible Tacana.”

Both insiders and outsiders have played important roles in defining who the Tacana are for themselves and for others and continue to do so. Among those claiming Tacana identity, it is linked intermittently to place, descent, community membership, language, and (imagined or not) shared cultural traits. Which of these are highlighted is situational; in some cases the same person will vary his or her definition depending on context. Tacana descent, however, appears to be attaining dominance, especially in official situations. NGO workers and state officials also have various and varying definitions of Tacananess and indigenousness. Tacana and indigenous identity among functionaries of NGO’s and the Bolivian government is linked to place, language, descent, and community membership. It is also linked more
superficially with poverty. These differing ways of understanding what it is to be indigenous has implications for how energies and funds are spent by those working to aid indígenas, as well as for how a place for indígenas is being carved out in the Bolivian state, in material, legal, and symbolic terms.

As the preceding chapters have shown, the referent of the term “Tacana” is hard to pin down. This nebulousness exists because there are multiple active and potential definitions of Tacana. Not only is this multiplicity generally ignored, but it also aids in the rendering of the Tacana as “invisible Indians,” a phenomenon first discussed by Wentzel (1987) referring to the Tacana of the Iturralde region north of La Paz.

The dispersed Tacana are rendered invisible by scholars and by the Bolivian state even more often than those of the Iturralde. This is not only due to a dearth of academic research about the Tacana of the Beni and Pando departments of Bolivia, but also to regular neglect by official internet sites which appear to offer comprehensive lists of the types, numbers, and locations of Bolivian indígenas. Indeed, scholarly and political exclusions feed off of and reinforce each other. In a chapter of his anthropology master’s thesis entitled “Who are the Indigenous Tacana,” Poul Lauridsen, for example, speculates as to the origin of “…a group of Tacana living on the Madre de Dios river detached from the main Tacana population settled in the area around Tumupasa (2002:28). “The Tacana,” for Lauridsen, “…occupy an area of approximately 7,200 square kilometers on the flat plains of the Bolivian lowland east of the Andean foothills in the provinces of Franz de Tamayo and Itturalde (sic) in the La Paz department…” (2002:24). These others are an anomaly. It is ironic that a chapter exploring “how ascription to the indigenous category ‘Tacana’ takes
place” (2002:24) as well as practices by Tacana to counter their invisibility as indígenas itself participates in rendering such a large number of indigenous Tacana invisible to readers.

Lauridsen’s ignorance of the many Tacana who live along the Beni and Madre de Dios rivers is not particularly surprising. Recently, while browsing information provided by (or at least in the name of) the Bolivian government on the internet, I saw that an official Viceministry of Indigenous Affairs and Original Peoples web page located the Tacana solely in the La Paz Department. Whatever the reasons behind such exclusions, one of their effects is to help fix “the Tacana” in a particular location and with a particular membership. Further, this is done by presenting what is contested and multiple as objective and unitary.

Some scholars are more attentive to this pitfall. Anthropologist Sondra Wentzel, in her doctoral thesis about theTacana of La Paz Department, was sensitive to the potential existence of Tacana spread throughout northern Bolivia (1989). According to Wentzel, “Many more people of Tacana descent were said to be virtually assimilated in the rubber camps all over northern Bolivia” (1989:4-5). In a footnote, Wentzel continues: “Due to problems of definition and access, it is difficult to give a total population figure for ‘the Tacana’” (1989:5). Wenzel was not interested in exploring these definitions in more detail, but she did demonstrate knowledge of the dispersed Tacana with whom I lived, as well as the definitional problems in counting them.

Wentzel argues that the Tacana continue to exist as such. She writes: “Although the Tacana were at first glance ‘invisible’ to outsiders as lowland Indians, distinctive beliefs and practices remained that influenced land use, health care and other important areas of everyday life”
She does not claim that to be Tacana was contingent on any sort of purity, however. She writes: “Tacana culture was an inextricable mixture of prehispanic, Franciscan, and more recent elements” (Wentzel 1989:97). However, she does this while placing them on what seems to be a scale of traditional to acculturated. Forty-six households, she explains are “traditional Tacana,” “…since they actively participated in the Tacana shamanistic ceremonies and/or in the old system of political authorities” (Wentzel 1989:95-96). Thirty households are “…ethnically mixed and/or acculturated, more involved with the market than the traditional Tacana but politically not as active as the ‘elite’” (Wentzel 1989:96-97). One is left to wonder if these are analytic or folk categories, and if Wentzel is seeing market integration and mapping this backward to ethnicity and/or “traditionalness.”

I chose to focus on the Tacana of the Beni and Pando precisely because, of the indigenous groups in the region, the Tacana were considered the most assimilated, the most peasant – they were (and remain) the most invisible. Anthropologist Arienne Henkemans (2001) carefully describes the identity and social life of cambas1 who “lack an articulated ethnic identity.” These lowland Bolivian forest-dwellers are presented as mestizos, as the results of the mixing, biologically and culturally, of indígenas and non-indígenas. Many of the cultural practices Henkemans describes, however, also accurately describe those of the Tacana with whom I lived. The critical error made by those who read and use the work of scholars such as Henkemans, however, is to mistake an articulated lack for an essential one. Others commonly take Henkemans’ study and others like it as evidence that the majority of the region’s inhabitants lack a substantial claim to indigeneity in fact and in feeling. This

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1 “Camba” is a common term used in Bolivia to contrast highlanders (kollas) from lowlanders (cambas). More particularly, it can also be used to differentiate rural dwellers.
conclusion, however, renders a complex situation overly cut and dried. Culture is not only material and tangible, but can be invisible, even (and especially) to those who possess it. Individuals often lack knowledge of the origin of their beliefs. They simply have them. Cambas in the region might be “more Tacana then they think.” That is, they may share similar beliefs about how to behave and organize the world with other Tacana descendents that are quite different from those without their history. If such is the case, their lack of Tacananess is based in their lack of awareness or articulation of it. While the data is suggestive, it is beyond the scope of the current study to make such a definite assertion.

Not all Tacana in the region, however, are in any doubt about their Tacananess. While a common assertion is that Tacana descendents in the region are assimilated, this assertion neglects (and actively invalidates) the existence of the dispersed Tacana as such. Denying that large numbers of them are indigenous (or potentially indigenous) is a political act, even if unintentional, which delegitimizes indigenous claims. These writings, such as Henkemans 2001 discussed above, are then picked up by NGOs and government agencies and become part of official discourses that affect the regional policies. This tendency to write and think against arguably legitimate claims to Tacana-ness and indigenousness is not universal in the region. Indeed, it was the head of a local institution who alerted me to the potential Tacana-ness of the vast majority of Riberalteños. It was true, however, that at the time of my research such beliefs were the norm.

The idea that ethnic identity is something that can be lost, not gained, ignores the phenomenon of what could be called adoption, where someone not of an ethnic group becomes part of it, as well as the possibility of activation, whereby someone with latent
identity comes to acknowledge it. With several exceptions, those writing about the Tacana have tended to define who the Tacana are today based on who they were in the past, making the same mistake of which anthropologists writing synchronic ethnographies are often accused – of taking a slice of culture, a moment, and acting as if this is what will always be. However the Tacana are defined, however, whether past-oriented or contingent and constantly reconfigured, these definitions are double-edged, with political implications.

Post-development identities and anthropology.

In *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* (1996), Michael Kearney links anthropological theories of identity of peasant-like peoples to social and political processes of colonialism and neocolonialism (i.e. development). He shows how both formation and theorization of such identities have changed as global conditions have changed. In particular, he is interested in recent shifts due to the effects of “…deepening transnationalization and globalization of communities, economies, and identities” (1996: 115). According to Kearney, the development of anthropology as an institutionalized social science within modern nation-states left it a particular role in relation to these nation-states; it is the science of external difference, of the Other (1996: 25). Sociology, with respect to nation-states, is the science of internal difference, of the Self; anthropology (as Self studying Other) became a site where the relationship between Self and Other is defined (1996: 25).

Early on, in what Kearney calls the formative and classical periods, anthropology was concerned with a Primitive Other. He points out that while anthropologists in the classical period would write about “primitive” cultures for “civilized” audiences, something was missing (1996: 27). However, he writes, “writing so structured had in effect an excluded
middle, that middle being the intervening social, political, and economic links between Self and Other otherwise known as colonialism” (1996: 27). As opposed to the formative period of arm-chair evolutionists with its primitives placed far back along the evolutionary time-line, classical anthropology’s primitives were “contemporary ancestors”, “…drawn to the edges of history, even if they are not yet admitted into it” (1996: 29). Synchronic accounts humanized these Others, but left them isolated from global history (1996: 29). Mid 20th century, however, in the modern period of anthropology, development emerged as a primary criteria in the defining of difference (1996: 34). An evolutionist paradigm, academic theories and government policies were designed based upon this view of the world to help traditional and underdeveloped Others modernize and become developed.

Currently, however, due in part to the failure of liberal-reformist policies oriented towards modernization, as well as to increased transnationalizing and globalizing processes, anthropological theorizing of identities is having to shift from modern to very nonmodern models (1996: 115). New conceptualizations recognize that “…history does not necessarily mean progress” and that whether urban, rural, or in-between, all are manifestations of a contemporary postdevelopmental reality, a nonteleological approach (1996: 116). Along with this reorientation comes the death of a number of dual-type models: traditional-modern, peasant-proletarian, rural-urban, center-periphery. These types do not do justice to contemporary conditions where there are no distinct centers (1996: 117) and where interconnections are everywhere. Kearney writes,

What we do have is a system of production, distribution, and consumption in which a number of internally differentiated persons, corporations, and agencies come
together and articulate facets of their identities to produce and reproduce in a
transnational hyperspace. (1996: 118)

And thus identities change.

Not only has our understanding of Others changed, but how the Self is understood has
changed as well. Anthropologists are discarding notions of a Modern, unitary self;
contemporary Selves are internally differentiated, a distinctly non-modernist view (Kearney
1996: 119). Increasingly, condensed flows of people, ideas, and things facilitated by new
technologies mean that our identities, and those of the Others of whom we write, are
interpenetrated by global contexts (Kearney 1996: 119). Whether or not selves (our own or
those of Others) have always been internally differentiated or have become so due to the
technological and social changes remains an open question. However, discarding notions of
unitary, internally integrated selves is a necessity in order to understand the importance and
functions of identities in the personal and social, including the political, realms.

Globalization has had an impact on the people we study (including their identities) and the
theories we make (including those about identities). The slippery buzzword of the moment,
globalization can be most simply described as a dramatic, quantitative increase in the speed
and ease with which people, things, and ideas flow through space – a quantitative change
with a magnitude so great that it is, in reality, a qualitative change. Borders and boundaries
have become contingent and contextual to a degree it was most likely hard to even imagine
even a century ago.
In this changed milieu, identities have become a primary social mechanism for accessing resources. This is not their only, or even most important, function. Identities serve psychological functions, such as creating a feeling of belonging; they aid humans in categorizing a complex world and thus in knowing how to behave, and so on. However, the increasing importance of identities (in the plural) in structuring access to resources contributes to micro-realignments (by individuals, by communities, by organizations) with macro results (changing forms of governance, for example). These micro-realignments, it is important to remember, are taking place within larger systems of relationships and ideas, of soft power and hard power (Nye 2002), which contribute to their form.

**Concluding comments.**

In his recent master’s thesis about the Tacana living just north of La Paz, Lauridsen (2002) stresses the liberating aspects of globalization. He argues that international discourses, in particular that of the “ecological Indian”, “…make available new means of indigenous people to exercise power and resist former levels of marginalisation” (2002: 9). He emphasizes the empowerment made possible by development intervention, as victims are transformed into victors (2002: 96). While I believe he is correct to highlight the “new room for manoeuvre” which exists due to these international currents (2002: 21), he is too dismissive of Peter Wade’s (1999) cautionary tale of the limits of this room. The implementation of projects based on certain ideas of what it means to be an indígena sets limits on the acceptable behaviors of real indígenas.

Further, as Laura Nader writes,
…ideological control…is the most indirect and pervasive in modern society. Ideologies appear to have superseded traditional forms of succession as the mechanisms used to maintain power structures, because they are less vulnerable to abrupt change and are not dependent on particular people or family dynasties. In other words, ideologies are efficient mechanisms of control. (1984: 2)

The ideology of globalization as necessarily liberating, including the mobilization of identities that have accompanied it, masks its controlling elements, such as difficulties in holding individuals accountable for actions.

There are three areas of change on the structural level during the last quarter century in Bolivia that affect the way people think and act indigeneity. International accords, such as the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169, ratified by the Bolivian government and internal (Bolivian) legal reforms have granted rights to indigenous citizens of Bolivia, specifically. International aid to indigenous peoples has gone from primarily originating from religious groups to being a focus of secular aid organizations as well, becoming a priority within the discourse of international aid and development organizations. Finally, regional organizing of indigenous peoples themselves has become more political in nature, in part because of the changes just discussed. Indeed, one could argue that regional indigenous organizations sometimes act as quasi-governments.

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 things 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.

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, that is, to come up with clear criteria that will exclude many from obtaining these highly desirable resources. 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. The outcome remains to be seen.

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I left the field at the end of 2002 and have yet to return. Since then, Bolivia has undergone a great deal of political upheaval. As noted, President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, who was elected while I was in Bolivia, was forced out of office in October of 2003 after a police response to protests in La Paz of his neoliberal policies, including the proposed building of a natural gas pipeline that would have supplied the US with massive amounts of natural gas while returning virtually no benefits to the Bolivian people, resulted in more than 80 deaths. Carlos Mesa, his vice president, replaced him, but then resigned in June of 2005. Eduardo Rodriguez, the former head of the Supreme Court, assumed office in June of 2005, pledging to convene early elections. Juan Forero writes for the New York Times that the upcoming
elections could result in “the first government of indigenous peoples in Latin America in centuries” (2005b).

The US press talks about the turmoil as arising from “anti-globalization” sentiment. Simultaneously, the protesters’ demand of their presidents’ resignations are touted as “anti-democratic.” It seems a more accurate portrayal, however, to suggest that protesters are against globalization but are rather for accountable globalization. Further, as Chapter 5 suggests, democracy does not have to imitate the United States to be democratic.

My field experiences taught me to recognize the chasm that exists between the information reported and accessible to outsiders about Bolivia and the experience of the people on the ground there. Because the community members in Santa Rosa have no phones or e-mail, and my closest contacts in urban areas are no longer in Bolivia, I am left lacking a privileged, insider view of these events. However, it is noteworthy that the invisible Tacana and their fellow lowland Indians are absent from the media coverage of these events. Indeed, articles in the press present the conflicts as the result of a clash between “...Indians in the western highlands who want more say on economic policy and a ruling elite in the eastern lowlands” (Forero 2005a). The perspectives of indigenous lowlanders are ignored, and their existence erased. In spite of decades of organizing to gain recognition, rights, and resources, and in spite of gains in all three of these areas, indigenous lowlanders in Bolivia are neither the eastern ruling elite (cambas) nor the western highland Indian (kollas) of which newspaper articles speak.

Lowland indígenas remain invisible inhabitants of Bolivia.