

## TO BE WELL SEEN: THE CULTURAL ECONOMY OF THE URBAN POOR IN BOLIVIA

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Following the UN Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction is the overall goal of development cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Yet very little is known about poor people's own strategies to mobilize economically, politically, and socially to overcome their own predicament. If we were to follow Amartya Sen's assertion that development is to "expand freedoms" and to give people the capacity to live the life they value, and have a reason to value (1999:18), then we need to explore what life poor people in different places value and what strategies they adopt in order to reach their life expectations (see McNeish, 2005:231).

This article looks at the moral and social dimensions of poverty among urban dwellers in La Paz, and how they manage or resist poverty by both exploiting and contributing to social networks of friends, kin, and ritual kin and/or through development projects aimed at people with scarce resources. In a focus on fiesta participation in Bolivia, I want to try out the thesis of Stephen Gudeman (2001) that economy is something more than market exchanges alone. It is rather about maintaining community, but not with the alleged effect of undermining the conditions for sound markets. Instead, prosperous economic activities are always generated through community. Gudeman's thoughts contrast with the individualist perspective of dominant neoclassical economics and the idea that the market is the prime regulator of the economy. Instead, economies revolve around *both* market and community. "Community," in Gudeman's terms, refers to "on-the-ground-associations and to imagined solidarities that people experience" (ibid.:1), whereas "market" refers to "anonymous short-term exchanges" (ibid.:1). The market and the community exist in a dialectical long-term relationship since market systems need the support of community, i.e., the shared languages, mutual understandings, and the culturally sanctioned ways of doing things (ibid.:11). I will argue that in the

case I am about to describe, what people do through fiestas (the way community is strengthened through material transactions and spending time together) is one of their ways of creating conditions for the economy to prosper. In order to try out whether it is reasonable to see fiesta making as economic activity it will be important to understand the economic dimensions of social life, to see what the practices are that legitimize authority in the social sphere and what it is that lends prestige and power to the different social agents of the fiesta.

Empirically I rely on the study of a grassroots organization in La Paz, Bolivia, which I have called Wawanakaxa (see Widmark, 2003).<sup>2</sup> This organization exemplifies “community” in Gudeman’s sense. It was a parents’ cooperative that consisted of approximately thirty families organized around a child and youth center. The center was located in a barrio on the fringes of La Paz that I have called Villa Alta, and it received approximately one hundred children between three months and eighteen years of age. The activities of the center were financed by a combination of fees, other income-generating activities, and donations from abroad. Wawanakaxa is an example of the now common networks and urban communities formed to handle and resist the vulnerability of poverty. It was founded in the 1980s, in part by external funding. Created, like many similar organizations, in an attempt to solve a practical problem such as the need for additional incomes, childcare, and education, the network soon began to serve multiple other functions, such as alleviating poverty and providing security, job opportunities, loans, contacts, and possibilities for enhancing social status. Most of the members of Wawanakaxa were bilingual Aymara-Spanish speakers who were first- or second-generation migrants from the rural areas. As such, most of them also had a sense of belonging to a larger Aymara community.

Almost every month there are fiestas to be celebrated in La Paz. The celebration of Carnival and fiestas makes people’s eyes sparkle, and poor people may be prepared to spend several months’ pay to participate in a dance troupe at one of the city’s festivals. When I worked in Bolivia in 1991, there was a bit of gossip around two of the women who had been working at Wawanakaxa. I call them Doña Graciela and Doña Amanda. They were in their thirties, both of them married with six and two children respectively. Several of the other members of Wawanakaxa had participated in the two women’s daily worries and problems with making ends meet with the low pay they got from the daycare center. This year, apparently, they had decided to participate in the yearly dance festival, *La Fiesta del Señor del Gran Poder*, in La Paz. On the day of the entry parade Graciela and Amanda were seen dancing, each in a dance troupe, wearing

very expensive outfits. It is well known that it is costly to participate in this festival. At that time it cost around US\$200, about two months' income for the women. Some of the women at Wawanakaxa were very critical, knowing that several of their children were walking around in ragged, worn-out shoes. Maybe they were jealous as well, because many of them would never have the possibility to participate even if they worked extremely hard. So why did Graciela and Amanda choose to participate and spend the little money they had on this event? Were they merely irresponsible parents who wanted to have a good time, or are there other explanations for their behavior? Could they even be seen as smart entrepreneurs? I will seek the answers in the market-community dialectic mentioned above.

In this article I will discuss social prestige and mutuality and how they relate to the economic activities of this group. The article will deal with distribution and consumption as means to both produce and express social relations, aspirations, and cultural ideals. Generosity, the sponsoring of fiestas, and maintaining egalitarian relations are important means for creating community among urban Aymara. Fiesta practices are increasing in Bolivia and enormous amounts of money are invested and circulated in relation to the larger fiestas such as *Gran Poder* in La Paz. I will discuss the cultural economics of fiestas and describe the importance of social relationships and reciprocity, as expressed through the fiestas, for the urban Aymara as part of a life strategy and a way to both strengthen community and "make a living." I also approach the ways the fiesta practices are contested, what leads people to look for other options or choices of strategies for social and economic security. Other strategies, in which fiesta participation is avoided, often require ideas of personhood that promote a sense of individual autonomy. These ideologies are more accentuated in the city.

The first part of the article is a general overview of cultural ideals and discusses, with the help of ethnographic examples, some practices that tie communities together, as well as the role of the fiestas and social prestige. The second part consists of a discussion about reciprocity, its role in economy, and why it is important to focus on the interplay between community and market in order to understand the social and economic activities of poor people in the Andean area. But in order to understand something about cultural categories, practices, and ideals of urban Aymara, I will start my discussion around the concepts of *wajch'äta* (to be poor), and *suma qamaña* (the good life).

## II. POVERTY AND WEALTH

It happened quite often that informants in the city said in Spanish, “*No tengo a nadie*” (I have nobody), “*Soy huérfano*” (I am an orphan), especially in moments of despair or drunkenness. It did not necessarily mean that they did not have any parent alive but referred more to a feeling that nobody cared about them. They lacked the support they would get from the local community and their close families, something taken for granted in the rural areas. In the Aymara language, “to be poor” is called *wajch’äta*, which also means “to be an orphan.” There is no other word for “poor.” From the Quechua area, which is culturally close, the concept of wealth is intimately linked to work, which is translated into the quantity of human resources that it is possible to mobilize in a particular situation (Núñez del Prado Béjar, 1975). In Quechua as well as Aymara, the definition of what it implies to be poor is the contrary: “to be without kin and social relations.” This state of being has several consequences, which also affect material circumstances. In the rural areas, human or social capital is important for the production process as well as for the ability to confront the vicissitudes that may appear in the course of a lifetime. While I am emphasizing the social aspect of poverty and wealth here, there are material dimensions as well; an abundance of potatoes, for example, is an important symbol of wealth. According to the Aymara sociologist Simón Yampara, poverty could also be seen as lack of access to a spiritual dimension.<sup>3</sup>

I use a multidimensional concept of poverty that includes social, economic, and political dimensions. It means that dispossession can come in different forms; social exclusion might be as important as lack of financial means. According to the multidimensional way of conceptualizing poverty, Aymara speakers were generally poor in the city. However, when details and specific contexts are discussed, it is obvious that representatives of this bilingual population did not see all of their number as poor. They have an internal differentiation, and there are people of Aymara origin who have a great deal of money and social and political influence within their own group. It has been difficult until recently for these groups to obtain political power on a national level.

Ultimately, all efforts are supposed to lead to *suma qamaña*<sup>4</sup> – to living well. From my informants’ point of view, this seems to relate primarily to social relations and the possibility of living in peace with enough resources to go around, but they were also referring to a spiritual dimension of being in harmony with the natural surroundings. The good life, on a more general level, is related to humanity and nature, to material and spiritual being in harmony with each other. The idea of harmony has

been emphasized as the central concept in the Andean worldview (Albó et al., 1989). The central idea is that balance and reciprocity should be maintained through the union of contraries. This applies to the natural environment; to social relations at the level of households, couples, family, and community; and ultimately, in a cosmological sense, in relation to other, supernatural, worlds. The ideal is to look for tolerance and the coexistence of opposing forces (Albó et al., 1989:139-41). The extent to which these ideas are reflected in practice and thought could be discussed, but these ideas are reflected in my informants' interpretation of *suma qamaña* as a state when the couple lives in harmony and peace with each other.

### III. TWO FIESTAS RELATED TO VILLA ALTA

People who have been my informants in Villa Alta pay a lot of attention to fiestas and spend a lot of money on fiestas either as guests, sponsors, or hosts. The main categories of fiestas refer to the life cycle or calendrical Catholic fiestas. Here, I will discuss two of the events I took part in, from the point of view of social prestige and mutuality.

#### **Julia's Wedding**

Julia and Pedro, a young couple in Villa Alta, started to plan for their wedding, which was going to take place in January 1999, well in advance. As they were the children of two of the more well-established couples around Wawanakaxa, it was an important event for many of the members, and they and their parents knew that the others would be observing them.

To be able to have a large wedding, it is absolutely necessary to have a lot of good social relations. One of the preparations is to find sponsors for different aspects of the fiesta. Apart from the more prestigious *padrinos de civil* and *religioso*, a couple needs sponsors for the rings, the music band, the hall, the cake, and the decorations. For the less prestigious sponsorships it is more a question of helping a friend, which means that the existence or absence of good relations is very important.

The possibility of realizing the fiesta is totally dependent on support and mutuality from community members, relatives, and people from other groups. The marrying couple and their parents need to activate their networks to find sponsors for the above-mentioned aspects; they will need women who can cook or organize the cooking (these are usually recruited among *comadres* (kinswomen) or *ahijados* (godchildren), who are expected to help out at any event), and friends and relatives who bring gifts in the form of beer. Crates of beer are common gifts and close friends are expected to bring just that (at least two crates per couple).

The other part relates to social sensitivity and social prestige. To be able to gain social prestige you must fulfill your responsibilities with diligence and generosity. People talk a lot about events that have taken place and judge them. My informants seemed to feel that it was important not to leave room for people to gossip negatively about them. Small talk would concern whether or not the hosts had been generous enough with food and drink, whether the event had been well organized, and so on. One expression that I heard many times was “Why invite if you do not have enough to serve?” Julia’s parents were very careful to plan everything well in advance and to make sure that it would not seem overdone but sufficiently generous. There is also the possibility of gaining social prestige if the event you have organized is considered to have been done well. For Julia’s parents, the wedding was an occasion to establish themselves within their group of friends and within the group around Wawanakaxa. They already had a certain degree of prestige and were considered well off. People had complained, however, about their not redistributing their assets sufficiently. This was an occasion to change those rumors. Julia and Pedro’s wedding went really well. There was a great deal of food, drinking, and dancing, and there were no serious fights.

The wedding lasted for two days. The first day was the wedding ceremony and the fiesta. The newly wedded bride and groom and their two couples of *padrinos*, in total six persons, had to receive each group of guests. The guests would normally hand over the gifts and then greet and bless the receiving couples, throwing confetti on top of their heads. The guests who entered with gifts of beer would also light some firecrackers to announce their arrival. Some gifts were in the form of money that was attached to the clothes of the newly wed couple. After the gifts had been handed over and the blessing given to the bride, groom, and *padrinos*, the guests received a couple of drinks that had to be consumed on the spot. The guests are supposed to offer a few drops to *Pachamama* (*ch’alla*) and then drink it all. During the receiving ceremony, one of Julia’s brothers was in charge of taking notes on who gave what. All of the gifts and some of the beer were locked up in a special room. This receiving ceremony was quite long, as around 250 people had been invited. The newly wed couple and their *padrinos* did not have the opportunity to associate very much with their guests during the first day. From two in the afternoon until midnight, new companies of guests kept arriving.

The second day was the “*recuento de regalos*” (the count-up of the gifts). The newly wed couple and their *padrinos* arrived at around two o’clock, prepared to continue the festivities. This second day the hosts were freer to party. When it was time to count up the gifts, Julia and Pedro had

to take turns running to fetch and open the gifts. Every time a gift was opened, the invited guests applauded. This part of the ceremony could be interpreted as a ritualized competition between Julia's and Pedro's families, in the sense that both sides were contributing to the newly formed couple. When all of the gifts were there, they were counted by the *madrina de recuentos*, a responsibility that had been given to one of Julia's aunts. She was also supposed to even up the amount of gifts. There were 117 gifts, so the *madrina* went out and bought three more to make an even 120 and added some money. Finally, all of the gifts were blessed with beer, coca leaves, and sugar.

Julia and Pedro were content with the generosity of the guests. When I talked to Julia a couple of days later, she told me that she had received twenty-seven blankets, about twenty boxes of glasses, pots and pans, plates, and cutlery. She was quite overwhelmed with the fact that her *padrinos de civil* had given them a refrigerator, and it was almost a problem, even though she told me about it with pride, that one of her paternal uncles had come with twenty crates of beer. She was afraid that they would never be able to pay him back. In total they received 120 crates of beer, of which 104 were consumed during the party. There were other alcoholic beverages in addition to the abundance of beer at this wedding.

As mentioned, the wedding preparations and realization were watched and discussed thoroughly among the people surrounding the couple. Most of their friends and acquaintances discussed it with curiosity and in a supportive way. Julia, Pedro, and their parents were busy trying to work everything out in the best way possible so as to avoid any criticism that might arise. Criticism was heard from a few of the members of Wawanakaxa who for one reason or another did not get along well with Julia's parents because they found them to have too much influence and social prestige within the groups. The harsher criticism came from another angle, from seventeen-year-old Carlos, one of Pedro's younger brothers. Representing youth, in a sense, he was critical of his brother's and parents' commitment to organizing the fiesta in a traditional manner. He found the music of his parents (which his brother also obviously embraced) conventional and completely outdated and hated their excessive drinking. On other occasions, he had expressed concern about the prevalent communication problems between parents and youth. He demonstrated his criticism by getting to the church ceremony late and showing up only for a short time during the party. Carlos' point of view could be seen as a youth reaction, but feelings of reluctance toward fiestas as an ideal and an expression of social prestige can be found among adults as well.

## The Fiesta of Santiago

Another important recurrent event in the lives of the members of Wawanakaxa is the Fiesta of Santiago. Each *barrio* or *zona* has its saint, whom they commemorate once a year through a religious fiesta in the name of the saint, and every year a *preste*, the head sponsor in the fiesta system, is nominated. During that day the image of the saint is taken to the church followed by a procession of ten to fifteen dance troupes that dance in its honor, like a small pilgrimage. Each troupe performs a certain dance which the members of the troupe will have been preparing several months in advance. Normally, a dancer will have to dance three years in a row to fulfill a promise of devotion to the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, or some patron saint.

Villa Alta has its annual fiesta in July in the name of Saint James (Santiago), and there are several dance troupes that take part on the day of the celebration. The process starts with *La Recepción*, when the current year's sponsors receive the image of the saint. After a mass in the church, the sponsors carry the image in procession to a hall where the social gathering takes place. The people who support the sponsors accompany them in the procession. The social gathering and the fiesta then go on the whole day and the whole night. In this first event the sponsors give a fiesta and their kin and friends help them carry out their responsibilities. As already indicated, a sponsoring couple receives gifts of money, food, assistance, or large quantities of beer from other participants. If the sponsors themselves have previously brought gifts to a number of other fiestas, they can count on something in return, and in some groups or families the return gifts are expected to be somewhat larger than the initial ones.

The sponsors must also, long before the fiesta, arrange the *ensayos* (rehearsals) with the people who will take part in the dance troupe. They have to organize the rehearsals, hire a band, and see to it that there are refreshments when needed. The participants are also expected to pay a fee for participating that includes the cost of the band and the costumes. The groups around the childcare center usually participated in a dance troupe originally organized by a youth club that worked with culture and consciousness-raising activities.<sup>5</sup> They had been performing the *moseñada* dance for the last couple of years, a dance accompanied by a wind instrument called the *moseñada*. Dances may be performed with autochthonous music bands or brass bands. The autochthonous music is associated with the countryside and is therefore used more by cultural groups that work with some kind of revitalization, as in the case of the organizing youth group. The *pasantes* (sponsors) may choose to change the

dance type if the members wish to, but normally they continue with the same dance for several years.

One week before the actual celebration days there is a *convite* (invitation). On this occasion, all of the dance troupes of the barrio perform the procession as a dress rehearsal (without full costumes), which ends with a smaller fiesta. The second weekend in July is the time of the actual *entrada* (the entry parade). On Saturday morning the main procession takes place, and all of the dance troupes from the *zona* enter the street dressed up in elaborate costumes according to the dance they are performing. The day ends with a large fiesta where the sponsors have to offer food and drink. Finally on Sunday the procession takes place again for the last time. The final step is to decide who is going to be appointed sponsor for next year. Next year's sponsors will be chosen from among the couples who have not already fulfilled this responsibility. In many cases, the participating couples have been listed in advance.

Social sensitivity, mutuality, and prestige play an important role in relation to this sponsorship. In 1999, when I was in Villa Alta for the preparations, two members of Wawanakaxa had been appointed as sponsors. They were Doña Tomasa and her husband and the widowed Don Cirilo, both families with children at the childcare center. Before the appointment there was a lot of talk going on among people around the center. People talked about whether the sponsors would accept and whether they had the resources to go forward with the fiesta. People were worried because the invitation came so late and they wondered whether there was going to be any dance troupe this year. People said that Don Cirilo did not want to take on the sponsorship because he had neither time nor money. Several of the women at Wawanakaxa talked about whether it was possible to refuse to take on the sponsorship if one really did not have the means or did not want to spend the little money one had on this event. Behind these thoughts one could find an implicit criticism of the social pressure and unspoken obligation to take on the sponsorship of a fiesta. Many women felt that they did not have the means to take their turn. The more severe critics were often separated women who had been having problems making ends meet, often completely without the support of the ex-husband. The ideal sponsoring couple is one in which husband and wife work together to fulfill their obligations to the group and thereby expand their respective social networks and positions in the community. The husband will get a position within the male sphere and the woman within the female equivalent. In reality, husband and wife do not always agree on the terms of participation. In many cases with the sponsorship of dance troupes and participation in feast giving, the women experience a serious conflict

between household needs and social activities in the public sphere. Many women like the feast giving but feel that the drinking gets out of hand. In the case of sponsoring the dance troupe for Santiago, eventually the invitation was distributed, and Don Cirilo had obviously decided that he had more to gain than to lose by carrying on the process.

After the reception that Doña Tomasa and Don Cirilo had organized, people talked about it and how it had turned out for them. The main concern was whether they had social networks large enough to support them in order to put on a good fiesta. The possibility of realizing the event (without going bankrupt) and gaining prestige depends on the sponsors' social networks. They need people to collect beer for the different festive events in the fiesta cycle, and they need people who are willing to dance for them, participating in the dance troupe and paying participant fees. People said it had gone well for Doña Tomasa. She obviously had a lot of good social relations. Many people around Wawanakaxa had been willing to help her out and had come to the reception with beer. It had been more difficult for Don Cirilo. He did not have so many kin in the city (they were living predominantly in the rural areas), and maybe the fact that he was a widower had weakened his network. A person with a weaker social network will have to take more money from his own pocket to balance the costs.

#### **IV. SOCIAL PRACTICES THAT TIE COMMUNITIES TOGETHER**

As these two examples have shown, different forms of mutuality and redistribution (which is perceived as generosity), together with consumption, play an important role in the economy and in the strengthening of social relations. Relationships are established around a cause through manifestations of working, redistributing, drinking, and dancing together, relationships and practices that in turn define what material objects and ways of doing things are valued in this specific context. Before I can link these practices that tie communities together to the market realm I want to devote some more attention to the importance of the fiestas on a more general level and how they are connected to what confers social prestige.

#### **Fiestas**

Many researchers have written about the importance of the fiesta system in the life of the Aymara (see, e.g., Buechler, 1970, 1980; Albó, 1985; Johnsson, 1986). The role of fiestas in the Andean area has been discussed from different points of view. It has been seen as an economic leveling mechanism for redistribution of wealth (Wolf, 1966), and the

integrating function of the fiestas in order to preserve communal solidarity has been stressed (Mangin, 1970). Hans Buechler suggests that the fiesta system helps to maintain ties between migrants to the city and their remaining rural kin and functions as a ritual dimension of their rural-urban network (Buechler, 1970). In a later analysis, however, he views fiestas first and foremost as media of communication and expression rather than mechanisms of overt or latent social and economic control (Buechler, 1980:5).

Organizing fiestas has an important role in the life of urban Aymara. Fiestas are institutions based on mutual sharing and reciprocity. Fiestas may refer to key events in the life cycle or the calendrical fiesta system, which traditionally connects to decision making, power distribution, and the celebration of religious and secular holidays. Aymara activists often underline the role of the fiestas in the urban environment as a repository of cultural identity. It is interesting to note, however, that the fiesta-cargo system is not a legacy of the pre-Columbian past but a rather recent historical creation, established within the Spanish colony. In spite of this fact, it is now generally interpreted as “Indian” (Abercrombie 1991, 1998).

The Bolivian fiesta system is undergoing changes in both rural and urban areas. The principles underlying the Bolivian fiesta systems were, according to Buechler (1980), a hierarchy of ceremonial positions, or *cargos*, the most important of which were the *prestes*<sup>6</sup> and various kinds of dance-group sponsors. The task of the *prestes* was to provide alcohol, food, coca leaves, and other ritual ingredients for a retinue, which varied in size and composition. They often had to provide for a number of dance groups as well. Dance-group sponsors organized and financed dance groups. In all fiestas the sponsors worked to establish a network of reciprocal obligations whereby the sponsor received money, beer, and produce from relatives and friends, and from persons who wished to sponsor a fiesta at some later date. These networks formed the sponsors’ retinue or *aynis*.<sup>7</sup> As Buechler indicates, these *ayni* obligations were fiesta-specific in the sense that gifts could be returned only in a ritual context.

Each locality developed its own repertory on the basis of this fundamental set of rules. The feast giving was often talked about in terms of the “fiesta system,” but the degree of integration of a set of fiestas held in a given locality or cluster of localities varied. In Buechler’s example from a community on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the four major fiestas formed a unitary system in which the sponsorships were hierarchically ordered according to the duration of the fiesta, its size, and the expense the sponsorships entailed. Every member couple of the community was expected to fulfill a number of progressively more prestigious sponsorships

during their lifetime (Buechler, 1980:5-6). The fiesta-cargo system is important in all rural communities today, but the integration of the “system” varies.

Ideally, every male family head was expected to move through the fiesta system with the shared efforts of his wife, in his years between marriage and death. This system marked their individual, social, and political career. Ideally, this career pertained to his wife as well, but more emphasis has always been placed on the male’s career, both in literature and real life. In reality, not everyone managed to move through the whole system, due to the considerable expenses connected to it (Johnsson 1986:34).

These fiesta sponsorships were connected to the rotating communal leadership offices. An individual’s status in the community depended to a large extent on fulfillment of civil offices and the number and kinds of sponsorships he had completed. According to Dominique Temple (1989:83-84), in the communitarian system of the Andes it is not the one who accumulates, or inverts in order to accumulate more, who becomes the most powerful or worthy of political power. On the contrary, this power falls to the one who redistributes the most. There is a strict relation between redistribution, prestige, and power. The production is not organized on the basis of private inversion but is organized for social redistribution.

Sponsorships could be a requisite for reaching eldership status or for being able to take on the post of *jilaqata* (headman). As Buechler indicates, a number of anthropologists have commented on the close ties between the fiesta-sponsorship system and political power. In some cases, the religious and political ladders were combined into a single politico-religious system. Though the religious and the political systems were not always tightly integrated, political authorities played an important role in all feasts, both those that are cyclical and those connected with life stages. They were expected to be more generous, to treat people to more alcohol at fiestas than other community members, and to help finance fiestas and other events. Thus political authority and ritual leadership were often intimately connected even where there was no integrated civil-religious hierarchy (Buechler, 1980:47-49).

In La Paz it is difficult to talk about a fiesta system since there is usually only one major fiesta in each of the *barrios* and *zonas* where fiestas are held. Yet as Buechler (1980) indicates, it was possible for an individual to participate in more than one fiesta a year, since few neighborhoods celebrate their main fiestas on the same date, which means that the fiestas in La Paz also form a kind of cycle. In Buechler’s account it was not, however, perceived as such by the participants, who rather viewed the

fiesta cycle as different for each individual. It could have consisted of two to four fiestas in the neighborhoods in which he lived and in which he had friends and relatives. Consequently, sponsorships could not be consistently ranked in La Paz; their importance also depended on individual perceptions and experiences (Buechler, 1980:5-6). My informants mainly participated in the fiesta of the patron saint of their barrio. I did not hear them refer to a system or cycle of fiestas. According to more recent observations, established dance troupes in La Paz move from one fiesta to another in different localities (not only in La Paz but on a national level) throughout the year, so perhaps we can talk about cycles of fiestas also for urban dwellers.

### **To Drink and Dance Together**

Drinking and dancing together are means to establish community as well as to reciprocate with each other, the natural environment, and the spiritual world. The people I met through Wawanakaxa often used “dancing” (*bailar*) as a metaphor for participating in fiestas or other festive occasions with a great deal of drinking, dancing, and socializing. The occasions they referred to often lasted for several days, implying a great deal of eating, drinking, dancing, and socializing indeed, with consequences for family and work. Most rituals contained an element of drinking and dancing together.

The drinking is connected to the *ch'alla*, which is a ritual libation with offerings of alcohol, coca leaves, and confetti to *Pachamama* or the mountain deities. In both rural and urban contexts, *ch'alla* is, in principal, part of all life-crisis rituals,<sup>8</sup> fiestas for Catholic patron saints, official inaugurations, at *la posesión* (when responsibility is handed over to a new board), on the occasion of inaugurating a new project or establishment (a carpenter's workshop, for instance), or when a large investment has been made (in a new computer, for example). Whenever something important is to be put into effect, this ritual offering precedes it. A *ch'alla* can function as an incantation, a thanksgiving, and/or a blessing. My informants always engaged seriously in the *ch'alla*. Within the grassroots organizations, if a project went wrong, insufficient *ch'alla* could even be given as a reason.

The understanding of the *ch'alla* from the cosmological point of view is complex, and I am here only sketching its importance. In the rural areas, it is considered important to perform before cultivating the earth, fishing, hunting, constructing a house, or making large investments. *Ch'alla* has been seen as the expression of reciprocity with the natural environment, that is, the earth, the mountains, the lakes and rivers. Through the *aini* people express that they are interdependent, and through the *ch'alla* that

they are in a relationship of interdependence with the natural environment and the spirits that live there. *Pachamama* is one of the most important spirits and is perceived as a kind of Mother Earth. She is perceived as capable of being both good and evil depending on how she is treated. The peasants feed her and the earth in the ritual so that the earth will reciprocate and feed the peasants through good harvests. The natural environment is seen as animated by spiritual beings. Certain places are believed to be more important than others and are frequently visited by the urban dwellers for ritual offerings (see Bastien 1985, (1978); Albó et al., 1989).

Alcohol and beer are the most important libations used in the *ch'alla*, beverages that are also consumed excessively on those occasions. Both women and men drink alcohol at fiestas, but men are generally more excessive in their drinking. To drink together is an important way of establishing friendship. To refuse a drink, in any context, is mostly interpreted as a rejection of further relationship, a rule from which possibly medical prescriptions, seriously confessed Protestantism, or pregnancy might serve as an exemption. Drinking is always present in relation to fiestas and is seldom openly questioned, in spite of the social and economic costs implied. For many, drinking has a spiritual dimension. As noted by Olivia Harris, who studied the Aymara Laymi, opponents to drinking prefer to phrase their protests in terms of money being squandered, "since drunkenness is a virtually obligatory state in order to worship the divine beings of the Andean cosmos" (Harris, 1989:233).

## V. SOCIAL PRESTIGE

As I interpreted it, to be rich and wealthy indicated for the urban Aymara that you have a large network of kin and social relations that can be activated at different times, but to have social prestige, to be "well seen," you also have to be generous and have *good* relations with many people. As already mentioned, power is ascribed to the one who redistributes the most. There is a strict relation between redistribution, prestige, and power. Social prestige is rendered to the person who has fulfilled his obligations to the community with responsibility, diligence, and generosity. To be capable of fulfilling his obligations a person had to have a large network of kin and friends. Fulfilling a *cargo* involved a lot of payments and investments (*gastos*), but it also generated income (from a short-term perspective, in the form of crates of beer that could be sold, and from a long-term perspective, through the gifts and material support that would be received on other occasions). Mutuality was central in the ways in which relations were created. If a person arranged a large fiesta or sponsored an important event, he was expected to be generous, especially

with food and drink. He could count on the fact that his guests, especially his *aynis*, who were often kin and ritual kin, would bring gifts (in the form of beer, for example) to reciprocate or repay old debts (depending on the perspective). The alliances created through gift giving often crossed generations, and a son might be obliged to return a gift received by his father. Gifts of beer were common at fiestas, and there might be so much beer that the party turned out to be economically profitable in the end. In fact, there were several examples of people having been able to open a beer shop with all the beer left over from the fiesta.

Being generous, and redistributing your means, was what yielded a maximum of social prestige. Among the urban Aymara I found that the expectations and the way generosity was seen were somewhat different from what I was used to. It was seldom interpreted as negative to be generous. If a person gave away money, it was not interpreted as a matter of showing off if the person had an important position. By contrast, if I, perceived as a rich westerner, were to frequently give away money and goods to people in my research field, I would feel awkward and wonder whether they would see it as if I were taking advantage of the situation. Maybe they would think I was trying to create bonds to them that were not based on “true” friendship, which I could subsequently use or abuse. As indicated by Bloch and Parry (1989), there is an idea in western cultures which implies that the impersonality of money calls into question its appropriateness as a gift. The problem relates to the association of money with a sphere of economic relationships that are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral, and calculating. Consequently, it is awkward to offer money as a gift, which is supposed to express a personal, enduring, moral, and altruistic relationship. This pertains to a situation where “the economy” is seen as a separate and amoral domain, but in societies where the economy is more “embedded” and subject to their moral laws, there is nothing inappropriate about gifts of money to cement bonds of kinship and friendship (Bloch and Parry, 1989:8-9). Thus, when money is given away within the realm of community it is not interpreted in the same way as when it is circulated in the market realm.

The wealthier couples were expected to redistribute their means. The leveling mechanisms also have a role to play in the urban barrio. The story of Doña Cristina and Don Esteban illustrates this. They were originally as economically poor as the others in the groups around Wawanakaxa, but due to some lucky circumstances they managed to accumulate money. He got a permanent job as a driver for a large firm of haulage contractors. She found a private person in Germany who imported large numbers of her hand-knitted sweaters. Eventually they managed to build themselves a house and

get a car. When they were on their way up economically, Doña Cristina experienced it as if the other members were talking about them. She heard accusations in the form of other women saying that they should not receive the same benefits as the others since they had so much more money, or that they were not entitled to membership in the group since the childcare center was primarily created for the poor. There were discussions of whether they should be kicked out, but this was never put into effect. The way their relative wealth was handled by the community was that the other members began to demand more contributions and sponsoring from Doña Cristina and Don Esteban, forcing them to redistribute their assets in order to equalize themselves with the rest of the group. When I interviewed this couple they said that had it not been for lots of “dancing” they would have been even better off. Doña Cristina said that people were “pulling them” because they believed that they had the means to participate and contribute. Several informants talked about Doña Maruja and Don César, another couple in the group, because they thought they should contribute more to the collective. Usually they referred to being generous in relation to fiestas.

In my informants’ discussions, the reason given for lack of social mobility (their own or others’) was usually that the people who were not getting ahead were dedicating themselves too much to fiestas. The leveling mechanisms seem to function, but the reality is that poor people are extremely vulnerable. In fact, Doña Maruja (whom the members of Wawanakaxa accused of not contributing enough) lost her money to a swindler, which meant that she was not as well off as the other members thought. Others may have had their lives turned upside down because of illness, family members getting into trouble, or any number of other reasons.

If social prestige is to be well seen, the other side of the coin is social control and social sensitivity. It seemed to be important for the women in Villa Alta to watch their backs. They wanted to look good in front of the others, and nobody wanted the others to gossip about them. There were a lot of references to other people’s talking or to the possibility that they would talk.

Being talked about negatively would have repercussions on the possibility of being well seen within one’s own group. In the cases of people I talked with, the person who was talking might not want to be the one who talks about someone else in strong terms without actually being sure, and in that way putting the person talked about in a difficult position. If someone felt accused by the community or had some doubts about their own responsibility in relation to some negative event, he or she, as a survival tactic, would be very quick to throw the blame on someone else.

## VI. RECIPROCITY, COMMUNITY AND MARKET

Having seen what the practices are that legitimize authority in the social sphere and what it is that lends social prestige to the participants, it may still be relevant to ask how it is possible to see what goes on in relation to the fiestas as economic activities. In the following section I will show how the practices that tie communities together are linked to the market realm.

### **The Economy of the Fiestas**

In Gudeman's (2001) model the economy consists of both community and market, two realms that are divided into four value domains. The value domains of "the base" and "relationships" constitute the community realm, while "goods and services" and "appropriation and accumulation of wealth" constitute the market. "The base" consists of a community's shared interests, which include lasting resources, produced things, and ideational constructs. Thus, contributions and sponsorships taken on in relation to a fiesta, along with ways of organizing the association, practices concerning equality and justice, and ideas of values that bestow social prestige, would be seen as "the base" in the case of Wawanakaxa. "The base comprises cultural agreements and beliefs that provide a structure for all the domains. These locally defined values – embodied in goods, services, and ideologies – express identity in community" (ibid.:8). Communities are tied together through the base. In Gudeman's view fiestas might be seen first as social relationships within and between associations that are fostered for their own sake, since the second domain, relationships, consists of valued communal connections maintained as ends in themselves. Urban clubs and associations, as in the case of Wawanakaxa, could exemplify these commitments, kept for their own sake. But they are also occasions to establish and share "the base" with other people, and create reciprocal relationships with other communities. "The social relationships mediate the transfer of materials and services, and the material transfers express relationships" (ibid.:8).

The base and social relationships, intimately linked together, fall within the community realm of economy. In Bourdieu's sense, they are very important for the accumulation of social capital, which refers to assets in the form of kinship relations, alliances, or personal contacts that are recognized within a certain field (Broady, 1991:74). Bourdieu sees the effect of social capital mainly at an individual level; this differs from Putnam's use of the concept, which refers to it as an attribute of collectives, focusing on norms and trust as producers of social capital (Bourdieu, 1999; see Putnam, 2000). Gudeman, however, does not equate the base with

“cultural” and “social capital,” which in Bourdieu’s sense can be converted into economic capital. “The base differs from cultural and social capital...in that it consists of incommensurate things that cannot be valued according to one measuring rod” (Löfving, 2005:15). In Gudeman’s view the concept of social capital yields a simplified perspective, since what is shared and redistributed in the fiestas is based on incommensurable values. Yet it is obvious that fiestas have implications for all four value domains.

The base and relationships are strengthened through the sharing of food and drink and material transactions between community members. Shared values are expressed and negotiated in relation to practices concerning, for example, equality and justice. But the relationships established may also become important in relation to other concerns, such as finding a job, building up a clientele, or getting access to a market share for one’s business.

The dialectical relationship between community and market is well illustrated in the case of the Aymara speakers. They are very active in the market and their aim is to establish permanent relationships that can be maintained over time. One such institutionalized market relationship is the *casera*<sup>9</sup> system, which involves ties between the producer, the middleman, the vendor, and the consumer. Through the *casera* system, a market woman maintains a stable circle of customers by giving them products and service of a better quality. Her strategic manipulation of mutual relations may extend her network substantially (Johnsson, 1986:128-29). Some of these relationships may have been initiated or strengthened through the market woman’s participation in the fiesta system. In these cases the relationships are not anonymous and short-term, but they are still guided mainly by market principles.

In Gudeman’s model the aim of the market trade is to exchange value or increase monetary capital. This should be contrasted to the communal trade that aims to sustain the base. It also involves already existing relationships that are maintained for their own sake and do not come into being due to the trade. As already mentioned, market systems need the support of the communal realm in order for exchanges to make sense. Through the process of the fiesta a lot of goods and services are exchanged within the market realm. New preferences and demands develop through these practices and in La Paz there are market sectors entirely focused on clothes, accessories, and decorations produced for fiestas. Artisans such as dressmakers and bakers specialize in fiesta products. Musicians make a living through the provision of dance music for parties or dance parades (and their relationships within community may be the decisive point in whether or not they will get a contract). Gudeman argues that profit starts

with innovation, which is something that takes place just as much in the realm of community as in the market realm. Goods and services produced are dependent on values that have developed in relationships between people.

Organizing a fiesta involves a lot of costs, but due to the system of mutuality what is received during the fiesta can be the starting point for an accumulation of wealth that will eventually lead to the establishment of an enterprise. Even though mutual relationships are maintained within the community for their own sake, important sponsors will gain social prestige that may be important not only in the community realm but in the market realm as well.

### **Reciprocity**

Many anthropologists have analyzed the importance of reciprocity. Before going into a discussion of its role in this specific context, I would note that economists and anthropologists use the term “reciprocity” differently. Economists use the term for all exchanges that go back and forth, and they may or may not involve money. For anthropologists the term refers to mutual exchanges or obligations that are carried out without monetary payments in contexts other than the market. Reciprocity has often been discussed in relation to the practices associated with the gift. A receiver of a gift is obliged to repay it in an appropriate way (Mauss, 1990 (1924); Gudeman, 2001:80).

Traditional systems often serve as models for social relationships between urban dwellers. Reciprocity, according to Johnsson (1986), is a core value among the Aymara. This ideal is expressed in the several cultural institutions that are founded on reciprocal exchange. It is a matter of “balanced reciprocity” in Marshall Sahlins’ (1972) terms, in which the donor expects a return of approximately equal value. Dominique Temple (1989), who has studied the economic culture of the Andes, expresses a view that differs from Gudeman’s but is quite common among anthropologists in general. She stresses that there is a radical difference between the capitalist economic culture of exchange (which she calls Western) and the economic culture of communitarian reciprocity found in the economic culture of the Andes. She holds that the economies, as value systems, are organized on reciprocity and not on exchange. Exchange and reciprocity should not be confused, because reciprocity is the reproduction of the gift, its generalization. In Temple’s view, exchange is motivated by the desire of each one of the partners to satisfy his desires. Each seeks his own self-interest, and ownership takes the form of an individual or collective privatization. Economic reciprocity, by contrast, is motivated by

the other's need, by the common good, understood as communitarian being. In an exchange relationship, one is expected to make a restitution of equal value, and it is competition that determines the exchange. Reciprocity is based on the gift, which obliges the other to reproduce the gift. Contrary to the equality of exchange, the rule is inequality. For Temple, redistribution organizes the productive reciprocity that is the measuring rod of power and prestige. It is the gift that is considered the basis of society. A man who is successful in his work is appreciated because he is capable of giving (Vachon, 1988:1-4). Reciprocity is the basis for traditional institutions such as *ayni*, *compadrazgo*,<sup>10</sup> and the fiesta systems.

For Temple and many other anthropologists reciprocity is the "core of society" and the basis for social life because it establishes binary relationships, which constitute the very beginning of society. Contrary to this common view, Gudeman holds that the central act in communal economy is maintaining and allotting the base. Gudeman would say of the reciprocal relations described above, if they are acted out between people who belong to the same community, not that they are expressions of reciprocity but that they are ways to allot and share the base. The point is that reciprocity does not come before redistribution but is rather the result of and the expression of community that expands its borders. "Allotment makes and signifies mutuality and shared identity before the act of giving extends their bounds" (Gudeman, 2001:81).

In Temple's view the motivation for participating in a fiesta or taking on a sponsorship would derive mainly from the principle of communitarian reciprocity, but, as discussed above, I think it could also derive from the principle of exchange and accumulation. The sense of individual autonomy is more emphasized in the ideas of personhood in the city compared to the rural communities, and people would be motivated to accumulate social and economic capital in the urban context. If we accept Temple's view, it is possible to identify two different kinds of economic systems or principles in Bolivia, one based on exchange and competition and another based on reciprocity and redistribution. The problem concerns the possibilities for them to meet. As Gudeman remarked, one perspective offers an essentialist, relational, and altruistic model while the other emphasizes a modernist and atomistic perspective based on self-interest. Is it forever ordained that one of them has to be more dominant than the other? Gudeman's alternative bridges the polarization and sees these perspectives as constituting different realms of the same economy. "Both realms are ever-present but we bring now one, now the other into the foreground in practice and ideology. The relationship is complex: sometimes the two faces of economy are separated, at other times they are mutually dependent,

opposed or interactive. Always their shifting relation is filled with tension” (ibid.:1).

## VII. BEING WELL SEEN, WELL-BEING, AND DEVELOPMENT

If we return to the introductory anecdote of this article, we see that in the light of the Aymara definition of poverty and wealth and the importance of fiestas as means to share the base and express reciprocity, Graciela and Amanda’s way of using their resources is rational. They would rather invest in social relations than in material resources. It is not material resources per se that render the person enough social prestige to be “well seen”; it is rather the person’s (or ideally the married couple’s) capacity to establish and maintain social relations through which mutual relations may be expressed and wealth redistributed. It is possible that Graciela and Amanda felt that they *had to* participate due to kinship obligations or other kinds of relationships. If a close relative is calling on his network, it is very important to be loyal and support her, unless there are very strong reasons not to. Still, it is obvious that Graciela and Amanda gave the social and cultural ideals priority. They chose to dance in the festival even if their children did not have shoes on their feet. Having good shoes might not be the most important issue in their social circles. Participating in the festival could lead to new contacts, which in itself could generate income.

As I have shown in this article, participating in and sponsoring fiestas is intimately connected to the sense of belonging to an urban community, it is reinforced as such by different actors, and people are prepared to use large proportions of their scarce resources in order to participate. The fact that the middle and upper classes of the city criticize the fiestas makes it interesting to use them as a weapon in the ethnic struggle for influence and recognition, which is also done by the groups that promote the revitalization of Aymara culture and identity. The ideals of generosity and feast giving seem to be embraced more or less actively by most people, but there are bases for challenging the traditions. This is also one of the practices where contesting perspectives are visible. Diverging views could be based, on the one hand, on different gender interests as in the case of separated or discontented women at Wawanakaxa, and generational preferences as in the case of Pedro’s brother, or, on the other hand, on a conflict between the community versus the market realms of economy.

There are implications for development cooperation and poverty reduction strategies depending on whether we take Temple’s, Gudeman’s or the neoclassicists’ view of what constitutes the economy in the Andes. I contend that Gudeman’s reconceptualization of the economy offers an

understanding of what poor people value and actually do. Agencies working with development and/or poverty reduction would be more effective if they paid more attention to “community” and to what keeps communities together. Gudeman rhetorically asks if “development policies should aim at restructuring societies in the name of the market, or if, instead, emphasis should be placed on community – on strengthening the value domain of the base in order for people to become innovators” (Löfving, 2005:20).

By one-sidedly focusing on the market aspect of the economy, as is often the case, development projects or poverty reduction strategies run the risk of not accomplishing their aims, since people’s motivations might be elsewhere. Gudeman’s (2005) distinction between the concepts of well-being and standard of living pertains here.

If standard of living is focused on goods and services, and can be measured across economies by calculations, such as yearly income or average purchasing power, well-being is a qualitative judgment in relation to a community; it is a local concept about people-in-relationships. (Ibid.:131)

This distinction is important because, as noted by Gudeman, “development” can have different purposes.

In my experience, the international donors of Wawanakaxa rarely understood the implications of the community that evolved around the project. Many donors saw this and other projects they supported as being created around a temporary state of “being in need” and not as parts of lifelong strategies to resist poverty. For many members of Wawanakaxa, the community was created to establish long-lasting relationships. For many, the investments made (labor, goods, and money) were part of a lifelong poverty reduction strategy. Diverging views of project organization and management between donors and receivers of development aid are common in this process and sometimes even obstructive. The discrepancies that could be identified between, on the one hand, traditional ways of valuing redistribution, generosity, and social prestige, thereby allowing for the fact that some members have more assets (provided they redistribute them eventually) and, on the other hand, donors’ “poverty” criteria for target groups may create internal problems and cause conflicts within groups. The pressure on some members to redistribute their assets was sometimes reinforced by application of the donors’ perspectives. Accumulation of capital for investments (which is also part of tradition) becomes difficult and is not tolerated by the group. There are instances of members being forced to leave the group in order to advance economically who, had they been able to stay, could have contributed to the dynamics of the community, the innovation and growth of the economy. In Gudeman’s

view, “development means helping people to build a base that supports mutuality and survival” (2005:135).

This is not to say that the values and practices created in community may not vary and change. In the city, the strength of kinship ties varies and there seems to be growing room for individualism, which makes people, mainly young people, consider different alternatives. Personhood based on individual autonomy, which is promoted, for example, by the Protestant congregations, may also be used to legitimate a choice of action in relation to the fiestas that could be seen as disloyal to group solidarity. Individualism is also encouraged through the influence of a western-inspired lifestyle and consumerism. In sum, development could be seen as a way of enforcing the market principles upon people; thus the failure to recognize the dialectics between community and market has important political implications.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)

<sup>2</sup> The study was undertaken in the 1990s with qualitative methods based on participant observation in combination with bibliographical studies.

<sup>3</sup> Simón Yampara, personal communication, May 1999.

<sup>4</sup> “*Vivir bien en armonía con otros elementos de la naturaleza*” (Yampara Huarachi 1999:19).

<sup>5</sup> During the 1980s, some troupes in festivals in La Paz and Oruro were created by young people working with culture and consciousness-raising activities.

<sup>6</sup> *Preste*: a section- or community-wide sponsor (rural); a neighborhood- or market- or factory-wide sponsor (urban); also a sponsor of fiestas for private saints.

<sup>7</sup> *Ayni* was traditionally a system of reciprocal relations mainly practiced between kin. *Ayni* refers to reciprocal labor assistance and several other kinds of exchange (or gifts) and assistance.

<sup>8</sup> Buechler (1980) mentions the *asuti* (acknowledging the child’s birth), *rutucha* (first haircut), baptism, homecoming from the military, betrothal and wedding ceremonies, funerals, and All Saints’ Day.

<sup>9</sup> *Casera*: a regular customer or supplier.

<sup>10</sup> *Compadrazgo* is a formalized alliance that creates ritual ties of kinship.

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