Dreaming of Fathers: Fausto Reinaga and Indigenous Masculinism

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Fausto Reinaga, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, is today celebrated as Bolivia’s greatest indigenous intellectual by people from across the indigenous political spectrum. Few scholars have considered the role of gender in his work. I explore the ways in which Reinaga’s project is explicitly the redemption of the Indian man and the ways in which he shows considerable antipathy towards mestiza women and profound ambivalence towards Indian women. Despite being a close reader of Fanon’s work, Reinaga does not absorb his analysis of how gender and race intersect. Reinaga’s quandaries as he elaborated his project for the ‘emancipation of the Indian’ and the ‘revindication of the Indian man’ remain relevant today. A reading of his work offers some insight into why indigenous politicians today so often express such profound ambivalence in relation to their female political companions; and why gender needs to be at the very centre of an analysis of indigenous ideology.

Keywords: Indigenous intellectuals; masculinity; indigenous movements; Fausto Reinaga

Introduction

The election of Evo Morales to the presidency of Bolivia has been widely and rightly hailed as an important milestone for the struggle of indigenous peoples. Evo has acknowledged the debt he owes to Fausto Reinaga, an intellectual of humble origins who rejected his western education and travels in Europe to develop a radical critique of the oppression of the Indian during the 1950s and 1960s, when Indian identities were suppressed in favour of a national ideology that had the mestizo as its imagined citizen. Reinaga’s emancipatory project was directed at the revindication of the Indian man, whom he saw as the victim of colonial oppression and displaced – on many levels – by non-Indian men. His views on Indian women were decidedly more ambivalent; and, even though few scholars have noted it, gender is at the very centre of his political project. Such an analysis of Reinaga’s writings offers the opportunity to shed some light on masculinism in contemporary indigenous movements in Bolivia and beyond. Masculinism within indigenous movements has largely been put down to atavistic sexism, and ‘traditional’ gender roles; but a reading of Reinaga suggests that masculinism may have a more fundamental position within the ideologies of indigenous movements than has hitherto been considered.
Morales is a charismatic and popular indigenous leader, who was recently (in December 2009) re-elected with an increased share of the vote. In his first administration he broke with precedent in appointing indigenous women to key ministerial posts (Economic Development, Interior, Health, and Justice) as well as Silvia Lazarte to the presidency of the Constituent Assembly. Behind the public face of gender equity, however, these prominent women struggle to maintain an independent voice within cabinet and privately complain (Raquel Gutierrez, personal communication) of having their decisions controlled and approved by the president, vice-president, or other cabinet members in ways that does not happen for their male counterparts. There is consequently an ambivalence about gender issues that is sometimes difficult to account for and whose roots may very well be illuminated in a gendered reading of Reinaga’s work.

Bolivian indigenous women politicians are certainly not alone in this experience; there are many examples of the struggle women face from within indigenous movements in having their voices heard and in setting political agendas (Cervone, 2003; Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América, 2003; Radcliffe, 2008). Some women are more successful than others but they are all nevertheless pitted against discourses of power that work to their exclusion. Prominent women such as Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala, Nina Pacari in Ecuador, and Silvia Lazarte in Bolivia are very much the exceptions rather than the rule, and may not enjoy an equal position in cabinet with men, despite their public status. Another, if quite notable, exception is the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico, which from its beginnings has accorded women prominent positions and spaces through which their views can be heard (Hernández Castillo, 2002; Hernández Castillo et al. 2006; Millán, 1996; Rovira, 1997).

The relatively small number of women in leadership positions within indigenous rights organizations may be accounted for by gender hierarchies in society more generally, but this view needs to be subjected to careful examination. According to Helen Safa, women are more prominent at all levels within Afro-descended groups across Latin America (2005, p. 308 cited in Radcliffe, 2008). This disparity may be accounted for by greater sexism within indigenous communities, yet there are many indigenous groups marked by relative gender equality and where women have a high status within their communities – including considerable control over economic resources; yet even in these cultures women are less prominent within political movements than one might suspect.

The indigenous culture I am most familiar with is that of the Aymara-speaking people of Bolivia. Here, as in other Andean cultures, the complementarity of gender relations has long been noted by anthropologists and is often referred to by indigenous politicians (Felipe Quispe, interview with author). Although there are certainly important women’s groups, most notably the Bartolina Sisas, the history of the indigenous movements in all their considerable variation has been dominated by men. This is not to say, by any means, that women have not contributed to the indigenous movement or that there is a sense that politics is a ‘man’s business’. In the turbulent decade leading up to Morales’ election, and for many years before that, indigenous women played central roles in the logistical support necessary for
mass mobilizations and were physically present in many protests, demonstrations and blockades. Sian Lazar’s (2008) work on El Alto, an overwhelmingly Aymara city that was at the centre of recent political protests, shows how political mobilization and protest is seen as a communal rather than individual act, and not only involves, but would be unimaginable without, the active participation of women. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that Aymara women are neither politically aware nor active. Indeed, in the rural communities from which most of El Alto’s population originates, political office is assumed by a married couple rather than an individual, and women are expected to play significant roles in fulfilling the demands of the political position.

Indigenous women and indigenous communities generally operate within longstanding discourses of gender and hierarchy. As has been noted by many scholars, the colonial and postcolonial domination of Indians has been effected through a feminization of Indians historically and contemporarily (Berger, 2004; Canessa, 2008; Mason, 1990), which has resulted in the images of indigenous people being more closely associated with women (Canessa, 2005; de la Cadena, 1995; Nelson, 1999). This imagery has been widely adopted by indigenous movements themselves, who sometimes present women as emblems of cultural authenticity. As Viatori notes for the Zápara in Ecuador: ‘The essentialization of women as particularly non-modern (and, therefore, especially indigenous) has established a public role for them as symbols of indigenous politics, while simultaneously marking their unsuitability for political leadership’ (Viatori, 2008, p. 198); but it is worth underlining that this essentialization emerges as part of the process of engagement with national and international political discourses and does not exist sui generis.

In his work on the Urarina of Peru, Bartholomew Dean (2003) makes the provocative argument that the indigenous rights movement not only does not reflect the traditional gender hierarchies of indigenous society but, in fact, creates new gender hierarchies and marginalizes women from power in novel ways. Indigenous movements often homogenize indigenous culture and adopt hierarchies that are part of the political terrain in which they operate. Through this process, women become marginalized and their interests subordinated to a broader ethnic struggle.

The work of Manuela Picq (2008), however, suggests that indigenous leaders do more than simply marginalize women; they use the status of the ethnic group in order actively to dispossess and abuse women. For Picq, many male indigenous politicians use the argument of maintaining their ‘traditional’ culture in order to intimidate and bully women in what are, in fact, new ways, and ensuring, for example, that they do not have access to redress in state courts. As indigenous culture becomes essentialized – strategically or otherwise – women are in a structurally weak position to defend their political and economic interests, since on them is the ever greater burden of representing indigeneity in its most authentic form.

Dean’s and Picq’s work raise an important set of questions but it is not clear what the dynamic is within indigenous movements that causes them to adopt new gender hierarchies. To what extent are the problems faced by women in indigenous organizations simply attributable to the sexism in patriarchal cultures (be they indigenous or otherwise), or do indigenous movements have their own masculinist
momentum? What is clear is that the relative absence of women within indigenous movements cannot be simply put down to some atavistic patriarchy since many – even if not all – indigenous cultures are considerably less patriarchal than national mestizo ones.

As shown by Sarah Radcliffe’s (2008) recent work on Ecuador, one of the particular pressures placed on indigenous women is that of reproducing the ethnic group. Even within cultures that have not historically controlled the fertility of women, anxiety about ethnocide has been the reason given for the greater stress put on women’s fertility, and in particular with whom they are having children. Men, in many examples across the continent, simply do not face the same pressures of having children exclusively with indigenous women.

It becomes clear, then, that an indigenous politics of liberation is going to be necessarily gendered in that its emancipatory project will need to overturn the gendered imagery of Indians as feminized and impotent as well as discourses that naturalize Indian women in particular. Powerful indigenous women such as Rigoberta Menchú evoke considerable anxiety in mestizo and indigenous groups as they challenge the masculinity of power and the feminine passivity of Indian women. This anxiety and its expression in, among other things, humour, have been carefully explored by Dianne Nelson (1999). Evo Morales has occasioned rumour and humour surrounding his own sexuality as he presents the image of a powerful Indian man, undermining centuries of a powerful colonial image (Canessa, 2008). Menchú subverts the image of the docile Indian woman; Morales undermines the image of the impotent Indian man. For both these politicians, their sexuality has entered the field of public discourse; this would be much less likely the case for non-indigenous politicians.

Gender and sexuality matter, then, when Indians take power but to what extent the marginalization of indigenous women is a product of the sexism of national or indigenous cultures, or indeed something else, is not clear. Fausto Reinaga was the most important indigenous intellectual of his generation and continues to be highly revered today, not least by the President of the Republic. In what follows, I offer a gendered reading of Reinaga’s work. Although there are clear echoes of his ambivalence towards Indian women in contemporary indigenous politics, I am not suggesting that he is the direct source of such ambivalence; rather, I suggest that Reinaga’s writings illustrate the importance of gendered analyses of indigenous ideologies and the ways gender lies at the very centre of such political projects – whether or not they be explicitly recognized. A reading of Reinaga can be highly instructive as his work sheds light on the gender issues at the very centre of indigenous politics. It is, by now, almost trite to note that power is gendered and racialized so it is that much more surprising that analyses of indigenous ideologies of liberation pay such scant attention to gender. If the oppression and marginalization of Indians over centuries was partly effected by an ideological feminization of Indians, then a politics of liberation can but include gender at its very core. The broad liberal assumption that the politics of liberation should automatically include the emancipation of women (even if this may be delayed) misses the point that liberation, in this case of indigenous people, may be predicated upon an
increased marginalization of women. First, however, we must explore the political and social context in which Reinaga was operating.

**Indians and Indianismo in Post-revolutionary Bolivia**

The Bolivian Revolution of 1952 was forged out of an alliance between urban *mestizo* intellectuals and indigenous miners and farmers who overthrew the Creole oligarchy. In the wake of this Revolution, public expressions of indigenous consciousness were repressed and apparently erased in order to forge a new single Bolivian *mestizo* nation, along the lines of the Mexican model several decades earlier. Through legislation aimed at agrarian and education reform, in particular, Indians were to be converted into yeoman peasants, *campesinos*. The impressive political force of indigenous mobilization was co-opted first by the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario government and then by the army in a military–peasant pact. For more than 20 years after the Revolution, ethnic identity was resolutely subsumed under class positions. Indigenous culture was folkloricized and belonged as much to Creoles as to anyone else (Choque, 1992; Bigenho, 2005; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1986).

During this period Fausto Reinaga was virtually the sole voice of an indigenous politics, and through his *Partido Indio Boliviano* articulated an *indianista* project that sought to liberate Indians from the yoke of neo-colonial oppression and restore them to their rightful place in national life. His influence on succeeding generations of indigenous activists is profound and widely acknowledged (Hurtado, 1986; Lucero, 2008a; Stephenson, 2005; Ticona, 2005).

In his time, Reinaga ran counter to political currents, not only by speaking for the Indian cause but also in explicitly rejecting the ethos of *mestizaje*; that is, he followed Fanon, whom he tirelessly quotes, in rejecting the hollow promise of incomplete assimilation for the colonial subject. For Reinaga there was not one hybridized Bolivia, but two: the Indian Bolivia and the non-Indian Bolivia (Reinaga, 1969, p. 174) with little distinction between whites and *mestizos*. The Indian Revolution he proclaimed had as its task the overturning of white and *mestizo* rule and the ascendance of the Indian, not the absorption of the Indian into *mestizo* society.

In 1968 he reorganized the executive committee of the *Partido Indio Boliviano*, bringing in a number of activists who in the 1970s would form the Movimiento 15 de Noviembre (November 15th Movement) (Hurtado, 1986, p. 32) and the Movimiento Universitario Julián Apaza (the Julián Apaza University Movement) (Yashar, 2005, p. 168). Out of these groups would emerge the two broad strands of indigenous mobilization. On one end of the spectrum are the *indianistas*, such as Felipe Quispe, who would appear to most closely adhere to Reinaga’s ideas of an Indian Revolution that saw colonial racism as the central issue facing Indians. On the other end of the spectrum are politicians such as Victor Hugo Cárdenas (vice-president in Sánchez de Lozada’s first administration), and more recently Evo Morales, whose politics are more inflected with class analyses (Yashar, 2005, pp. 168–172). It is the latter group that has achieved the greatest formal political success.

Both groups, however, continue to draw on Reinaga as their principal inspiration. Quispe met Reinaga in 1971 and refers to Reinaga with some frequency.
Somewhat more surprising, perhaps, is that Morales, in an interview published on his own website, cites Reinaga as the politician/writer who had the greatest influence on him in his youth; and Tony Lucero (2008b, p. 82) quotes a newspaper interview with Morales saying: ‘More than any politician, I admired a writer, Fausto Reinaga and his works like La revolución india . . . He allowed me to understand who we are as Quechuas and Aymaras’. Morales’ vice-president Alvaro García Linera, himself an important indigenist intellectual, has also claimed Reinaga as one of his principal theoretical influences (Lucero, 2008b) and has argued that his indianismo continues to be a strong force in contemporary indigenous politics – and by no means simply among intellectuals and leaders (García Linera, 2004 cited in Lucero, 2008b, p. 82).

For a whole generation of indigenous activists, Reinaga was the only Bolivian intellectual they could read on the issues of the position of the Indian, colonialism and racism. One of the consequences of an assimilationist national rhetoric was that there was simply no political space to discuss the structural and humiliating racism that people suffered on a daily basis, and it is to these concerns that Reinaga so powerfully spoke. To raise these issues was difficult as one ran the risk of being considered unpatriotic, subversive or even racist.

Reinaga notes that in patriotic songs to the republican leaders, Bolívar and Santa Cruz are represented as seeking revenge for the Conquest. In one of the songs, Bolivians are addressed as ‘Children of the Sun’ (Reinaga, 1969, p. 175) and Reinaga concludes that the ‘cholaje’ – that is, the mixed and urban population – has robbed the Indian of even his gods (1969, p. 176). In this manner, according to Reinaga’s analysis, even as ‘Bolivians’ are imagined as white they still consider themselves to be descendants of the Inkas and, in a deft ideological move, the children of the Spanish conquerors become the heirs of glorious but defeated Inkas. The stain of colonialism is thus removed and the mestizos and Creoles could busy themselves with further dispossessing Indians of their lands, a process that continued for 100 years after the republic was founded.

Much of Reinaga’s prose is decidedly bilious as he expresses his frustration at the way Indians are essential to the nation through their labour in cities and fields, and their blood on the battle field even as they are rendered invisible in national discourses, as this excerpt from Revolución india illustrates:

The Indian, the Indian makes the parks with picks and shovels, the avenues, the skyscrapers, the cinemas, the schools, the universities, the palaces, the football pitches, the landing strips, the roads; the Indian sows and harvests the sugar cane, the Indian extracts gold from teoponte, the Indian extracts oil, that black blood of the Pachamama. The Indian, the slave, is the only one who moves in the Republic, he moves here and there, chewing coca, sweating blood and hunger (sic) in order that his ‘white’ master eats and whiles away his time doing ‘politics’. (Reinaga, 1969, p. 179)

Passages such as these inspired generations of indigenous activists, and they point to the invisibility, even impotence, of the Indian as a citizen and political subject. Denied his citizenship and robbed of his ancestors, the Indian is reduced to slavery. The Indian Revolution that Reinaga calls for is more than simply a liberation struggle for Indians; it is the rehabilitation of the Indian as a political subject, possessed of pride and dignity. Behind the rage of indianistas such as Reinaga and Quispe is the
frustration of suffering years of humiliation and a desire to live with pride and dignity. The political subject that would take up this position of dignity as imagined by Reinaga was, however, specifically male even though the profoundly gendered aspects of his work have been largely unappreciated.

**Gender in Reinaga’s Work**

In Bolivia, the Indian man has historically been a ‘problem’; but unlike black men in the Americas, the Indian man has not been portrayed as predatorily hypersexual. Certainly there is a long history of anxiety about Indian perfidy and their penchant for mindless violence but this anxiety did not have sexual overtones. Indeed, Indian, especially male, sexuality has been considered to be barely existent to the point that in the early decades of the 20th century there were serious policy debates about the Indians’ capacity to reproduce given their dangerously low libido (Larson, 2005).

For centuries Indian masculinity has been defined by its impotence, both sexual and political, and so it is not surprising Reinaga explicitly seeks to recover that potency. He offers a lengthy dedication and poem to his father in *Tierra y libertad* (Reinaga, 1953), the final lines of which read:

> You are not dead... you are still alive... fixed in me,
> Big or small, I am the same son,
> Who aspires to be like you, that is, a MAN! (Original capitals)

Reinaga’s work over many decades contains the recurrent theme of being a man, an Indian man, and his politics articulate the redemption and revindication of the Indian man; consequently, his father figures prominently.

His mother, however, as far as I can gather, is only mentioned once (Reinaga, 1967, p. 18) in all his work, and then principally to assert his Indian origins in the face of critics who have suggested he was an urbanized Indian, a *cholo*, himself. All Reinaga tells us of his mother is that she observed the anniversary of the death of Tupak Katari ‘with infinite sorrow, shedding oceans of tears, each 15th of January, in her house in Santa Bárbara (near Macha), dressed in mourning clothes’ (Reinaga, 1967, p. 18). He accords her nobility in ancestry and demeanour, but her only political role is to weep.

His prose when talking about the Pachamama, the Andean earth goddess, is markedly different and considerably more sentimental, such as in his prologue to *Tierra y libertad*: ‘The Pachamama is the mother of man. She nourishes him, shade she gives in this “vale of tears”, and when he falls victim to death she receives him with infinite maternal tenderness into her warm lap’ (Reinaga, 1953). This imagery owes much more to the cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism than it does to Andean concepts of motherhood where the Pachamama is not normally described in terms of being anyone’s actual mother; she is the spirit of the earth. Reinaga, here and in much of his writing, displaces the human mothers of Indians in a way he never does for fathers (he does not, for example, ever write that the *achachilas* are the fathers of Indians).

Reinaga describes the Indian woman as ‘an open wound that breaks the soul’ (1969, p. 129), whose life is miserable toil: ‘She procreates and works; works and procreates.
That is the Indian woman’ (1969, p. 129). It is her role in procreation that causes Reinaga the greatest grief because she reproduces not only the Indian, but the cholo as well. This ‘wound’ that cannot be staunched is bleeding the life blood of the Indian away. Her tragedy is that she is a vehicle for the lust of whites and cholos:

For her, love is as fleeting as the light from a fire fly, or simply does not exist; when she was still a girl she was deflowered by the white (q’ara) sacristan or priest of the village. Virginity has no value for her; she lost it before she ever had any sense of what it was. And if she is impregnated she gives birth in just the same way as a ewe: she gives birth on the mountain next to her flock; alone, absolutely alone, without doctor or nurse… puerperal, she takes the fruit of her womb; she takes it up and returns to her flock. (Reinaga, 1969, p. 129)

And so the Indian woman knows no love and is deprived of any sexual honour. She is also the vehicle through which America was colonized and the mestizo populations of the Andes were born:

Colonial life for the Spanish in America was: guts, phallus and vagina. The blindness of moles, the cruelty of hyenas and nameless stupidity is what characterized that society. It is these people who bred in the spotless bowels of the Indian woman of Tawantinsuyu. The raped Indian woman, impregnated against her will, forces herself to give birth – and without a drop of love – to the cholaje of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia; cholaje which has inherited all the negative, somatically as much as psychically; the worst from the Spaniard as from the Indian. (Reinaga, 1969, p. 401).

Referring to this passage, Stephenson (2003, pp. 158–159) argues that the Indian woman takes on the significance of the ‘virginal “true” essence of the lost utopia’. ‘Ironically’, she writes:

even as Reinaga historicizes the material struggle through the insertion of the indigenous man’s subjectivity, he, at the same time, denies the subjectivity of the Indian woman in all its complexity in relegating her to the domain of the symbolic. (Stephenson, 2003, p. 159)

It is not clear to me, however, that he does simply relegate the Indian woman to the representation of a utopian virginal essence. As Stephenson herself points out, he barely mentions Indian women in his work at all, much less elaborate a symbolic structure around them. What is true, however, is that in his work he attempts to do what many of his successors have tried: to insert the Indian man as the historical subject – in other words, to reclaim those stolen gods of power and redeem their masculinity. The Indian woman is problematic in this project (then and now) because for all her stoicism she does indeed give birth to the cholaje of the Andes. The Indian woman is the mother of the cholaje and the Indian man is doubly emasculated: in his historical powerlessness and in being replaced by Creole and cholo men.

The role of men and women in creating the cholaje is, of course, very different. For Octavio Paz the iconic Mexican relationship was that between Cortés and the Indian woman Malintzin (La Malinche). La Malinche betrays her people in beings Cortés’ consort and translator and becomes the mother of all Mexicans. There is no parallel male figure in Mexican history; once they are defeated, Indian men cease to be protagonists of history, be that national history or – perhaps more
importantly – personal history. Indian men’s displacement by white men lies at the very centre of his political rage and at the heart of his politics of liberation.

The sharpness with which Reinaga feels this displacement of masculinity is illustrated in a passage of *Revolución india* where he recounts a tale of events in the community of Kharasi. The story begins when the priest in the confessional hears that the beautiful bride, Rosa, is a virgin. The priest reports this to the lawyer and a muleteer who then plot to deflower her. The priest marries the couple and Reinaga tells us that the wedding feast is rushed in order that the bride and groom can consummate the marriage. The couple ‘according to tradition and custom’ are undressed and laid on the nuptial bed by the marriage sponsors (*padrinos*). Then ‘at the moment they were about to join in copulation’, the priest and his friends suddenly appear in the bridal chamber:

> The Indian man pretends to be fast asleep; he is as if dead. And the Indian woman, immobile, with her eyes shut and gritting her teeth, suffers in silence the deflowering of her virginity. The force of the muleteer breaks her hymen; and then the priest and the lawyer dive into the blood of the Indian maiden.

> Within minutes, the discovery of the three bandits passed from mouth to mouth. The birlochas … hurried to the theatre of crime. Mischief appeared on eyes and lips. The smile was half hatred and half satisfied vengeance. Not an echo of feminine solidarity resounded in her heart for the unfortunate Indian woman … not an echo… (Reinaga, 1969, p. 130)

This account is clearly much more than the retelling of a tale he has heard; the story is highly sensationalized and has a pornographic tone. The consummation of the marriage becomes a public event even before the priest and his companions arrive; the other participants of the wedding party conspire to speed up matters, and the couple is also undressed by others. The arrival of the priest is not therefore the first intrusion into their intimacy. Although he does not present it this way, the account is as much an allegory as it is a retelling of a tale; the central theme is not so much the rape of a young woman, but the humiliating impotence of her husband.

In metaphorical terms the purpose of Reinaga’s work is to wake up that husband but there is an enduring ambivalence towards the woman that ripples through his work for, however much she grits her teeth, and with however little love she gives birth to the sons and daughters of white men, thus creating the *cholaje*, she is nevertheless their mother. And even if these Indian women give birth full of resentment, do they not nevertheless love their children?

Despite being an avid reader of Fanon (Lucero, 2008a), one aspect of the postcolonial philosopher’s work that is missing from Reinaga’s writing is the understanding of how colonial racism operates on a sexual level with an ambivalence towards dark women and a desire for white ones. I suggest that Reinaga was blinded to the intersections of race and sex in ideologies of colonial domination – not because he considered them unimportant – but precisely because they were at the very centre of his politics of liberation. A Fanonian analysis would have undermined a fundamental plank of Reinaga’s political philosophy: Indian liberation is foremost a liberation of Indian men.
Indigenous leaders’ penchant for white women whilst insisting that indigenous women have relations only with indigenous men has been widely noted by many commentators. Evo Morales is certainly not immune to this and has even explicitly used his attractiveness to white women as a political tool (Canessa, 2008). This phenomenon has largely been interpreted as simply machismo, but in engaging in such relationships they are inverting the prerogative of the colonial white man to take Indian women as sexual partners. They also, however, expose the profound ambivalence towards Indian women that Fanon would have clearly understood. Indian women become mothers, mothers reproducing the group; and in so far as they are sexually desirable they retain their historical role as sexual objects for whites and mestizos. It is in this role that they appear in Reinaga’s writings.

**Dreaming of Fathers and Mothers**

Whether Indian women love their mestizo children or not (as Reinaga suggests), it is clear that there are millions of Bolivians who love their mothers and grandmothers ‘de pollera’; that is, who dress like Indian women. To say that one’s mother was ‘de pollera’ is to lay claim to an indigenous authenticity. Such a statement is often made with emphatic pride but one simply does not hear people make the same declaration about fathers; no one says ‘my father was “de ch’ullu y poncho”’. People tend not to mention Indian fathers at all. In personal histories as well as national ones the Indian man is denied a role.

Their invisibility is contrasted to the prominence of Indian women who not only occupy markets and street corners but are in the very homes of the middle and upper classes as domestic servants; indeed, many families prefer a woman dressed as an Indian (i.e. de pollera) to one dressed ‘de vestido’. Perhaps this is because the class differences can be more comfortably reduced to racial ones but, at any rate, middle-class and elite Bolivians have an intimate familiarity with Indian women they tend not to have with their male counterparts.

This intimacy is not simply the fact of sharing a domestic physical space with a servant but the many instances of elite men taking these servants as sexual partners. As Marcia Stephenson (1999) has shown, the sexual experience with Indian servants is a central theme in Bolivian literature. Such relationships and many others like them are the very source of the cholaje that Reinaga so despises. Many rural and urban elite men have had sexual relations with Indian women and many too have mothers and grandmothers who were Indian women. These relationships, of course, follow in the long tradition down from the very early days of the Conquest when women were the spoils of war. In later years, sexual access to Indian women developed into a privilege of race and class – a privilege, it goes without saying, that was reserved for men; white women did not have a similar access to Indian men.

When indígenista leader Felipe Quispe was once asked what his motivation was, he famously replied: ‘So my daughter will not be your domestic servant’. For Bomberry (2008, p. 1791) this statement ‘captured the deeply embedded subordination of [indigenous people]…in Bolivia and their determination to change the very structure of the state’. What is absent but suggested in his statement
is that Indian women should be in Indian homes, or at the very least not in white ones. His retort also pointed to the most common image of the Indian woman, as that of a domestic servant, but one can see echoes of Reinaga here in the fear of the sexual vulnerability of Indian women in the homes of the cholaje and the broader angst about the Indian women as reproducer of this class as well as Indians. It is interesting that Quispe makes no mention of his sons; here, as elsewhere, the Indian man is absent.

In an insightful passage, Victoria Bomberry reminds us that:

The ubiquitous trope of the Indian grandmother who is always present no matter where one might be located in the Americas has emerged and turned to face her grandchildren. At her side is the Indian grandfather, who together confront their grandchildren, no longer content to feed their romantic notions and tenuous connections to indigeneity but demanding that they become true political subjects. The double vision that allows people to avow and then disavow their own Otherness in the eyes of the state is a function of mestizaje that belies its utopian vision built on a particular political imaginary of hybridity that effectively suborns Indians. (2008, p. 1794)

The problem is that the Indian grandfather does not stand at the side of the Indian grandmother. The body of the Indian father and grandfather are not only silenced, but invisible. Many mestizos simply do not have Indian fathers or grandfathers and, even if they do, would prefer not to acknowledge the fact. An Indian grandmother (or even better, a great-grandmother) is a benign recognition of racial and cultural hybridity that, since the Mexican Revolution, characterizes the imagined American nation for many countries. It is not, however, a recognition of one’s Indian identity.

Considering gender in Reinaga’s work sheds light on the masculinist nature of an indigenous politics of liberation. It allows one to consider that the marginalization of women within indigenous movements is not simply a function of patriarchal relationships within indigenous communities. Given that a central element in the colonial and postcolonial domination of Indians has been to feminize the Indian subject, it should not be surprising that the collective liberation of Indian peoples be seen as an intrinsically masculinizing process. Reinaga’s quandaries as he elaborated his project for the ‘emancipation of the Indian’ and the ‘revindication of the Indian man’ remain relevant today. A reading of his work offers some insight into why indigenous politicians today so often express such profound ambivalence in relation to their female political companions; and why gender needs to be at the very centre of an analysis of indigenous ideology.

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Notes

[1] The term ‘Indian’ is not without its controversy. Fausto Reinaga himself explicitly preferred the term over ‘indigenous’, which he saw as racist because it naturalized Indians and elided the political content of what he saw as an essential part of being Indian (1978, p. 96). For Reinaga, ‘indio’ denotes a colonial relation in which the unequal relationship between Indian and white are clearly understood. He believed in the importance of making this relationship clear. As he repeatedly said: ‘As Indians they oppressed us and as Indians we will liberate ourselves’. When referring to images and practices that are rooted in this colonial relationship, I use the word ‘Indian’; otherwise, I use ‘indigenous’.

[2] Laureano Machaca tried to found an Aymara Republic in 1956 in Puerto Acosta (Ticona, 2003) in the wake of the Revolution, and went as far as leading an army of 4000 people, but he died in combat against government forces and with him his Republic.

[3] Available at: http://www.evomorales.net/Castellano/pages/not010415.htm (accessed 24 January 2009).

[4] Cholo has historically primarily referred to Indians assimilated to urban life. Reinaga is somewhat unusual in his usage of the term as he uses cholo and cholaje to refer to mestizos generally and, quite often, to anyone who is not Indian.

[5] Here I quote it in full; translation mine.

[6] The ch’ullu is a woollen hat with long ear-flaps.

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