Dominant narratives, social violence and the practice of Bolivian archaeology

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ABSTRACT
Recent social violence in Bolivia is examined in the context of that country’s dominant historical narratives. The practice of archaeology in Bolivia is intimately tied to the development of nationalism and a history of colonialism. While the history of Bolivian archaeology has seen multiple interpretations of the past, the dominant voices have consistently emphasized understandings of the past that legitimize and bolster Bolivian nationalism and contemporary social politics. In particular, the Altiplano site of Tiwanaku has been formulated as a locus of Bolivian national patrimony, while other regions have been marginalized as ‘peripheries’ or ‘frontiers’. This understanding of history is not simply a matter of debate for archaeologists, but has very real consequences in present-day geopolitics and the lives of individuals.

KEYWORDS
historical narratives • nationalism • politics of archaeology • South American archaeology • Tiwanaku
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INTRODUCTION

In October 2003, protesters marched in the streets in La Paz and elsewhere in Bolivia, eventually leading to the forced resignation of the country’s president. Nearly 100 protesters were killed, and many more injured by the Bolivian police and military. The immediate cause of the protests was the government’s plan to export natural gas to the USA, but such conflicts, often violent ones, are common occurrences in Bolivia. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these recent demonstrations, in contrast to other such events in Bolivia, was that they made headlines in the USA and the rest of the world, forcing the resignation of the president.

At the time, the American press made much of the fact that the protesters who brought the government to its knees were mostly Indians, many of them poor miners and coca-farmers who traveled from rural areas of Bolivia to make their voices heard. Now, 2 years later, the story of Bolivia’s social violence has dropped out of any mention in mainstream international press, though it is still very much part of daily life in the country.

In Bolivia, 75 percent of the population is Indian, though the political and economic power of the country rests squarely in the hands of the minority white and mestizo urban elites. But despite this fundamental demographic reality of Bolivian society, there seemed to be a sense of surprise on the part of the news media, the multinational corporations involved in the gas conflict and even the Bolivian government officials, that these Indians, whose voices are not commonly heard in the affairs of national and international politics, could effect such dramatic change. It was as if these protesters were emerging out of the depths of history, directly onto the streets of La Paz.

Since the early days of colonialism in western South America, when a small number of Spanish conquistadores were able to subdue and later control the lives of the majority Indian population, racial politics in this part of the world have been of central concern. And as with other parts of the world, one of the central strategies of colonial control has been the creation, manipulation and dissemination of historical narratives. Archaeology, as an important interlocutor of Bolivian history, has played a central role in negotiating this fundamental, and in many ways defining, aspect of Bolivian history and society.

Discourses of colonialism, indigenousness, violence, race and cultural evolutionism are all brought to bear in these conflicts. When we are able to observe, as in the recent events in Bolivia, narratives of history playing out in the lives and deaths in the contemporary world, it becomes evident that archaeological interpretations are far from esoteric academic debates about the deep past, but are rather very present politically and emotionally charged issues. In this sense, we argue that understandings of the past need to be seen as part of the wider political, social and economic context in which archaeological discourses and research are produced.
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This article explores the recent violence and social upheaval in Bolivia in relation to the historical narratives that are employed by archaeologists and that, in many ways, define Bolivia as a nation. In particular, we examine the archaeological site of Tiwanaku, which has become the symbolic and literal focal point of the dominant narrative of Bolivian history. We will look at the role Tiwanaku has played in the overlapping narratives of colonialism, nationalism and archaeological research. We will also present a reading of alternative historical evidence that can help us better understand the ongoing violence in Bolivian society, and which points to the importance of recognizing and creating space for multiple understandings of the past to emerge.

THE NATIONALIST NARRATIVE OF TIWANAKU

By any measure, Tiwanaku is an important archaeological site. Located on the Bolivian Altiplano at an elevation of almost 13,000 feet above sea level, it is physically impressive both in the large area that it covers and in the scale of the structures that comprise it (Figure 1). It is argued from artifactual evidence that the site was part of a large sphere of influence that ranged from the Pacific coast of southern Peru to the southern Altiplano of Bolivia (Albarracín-Jordán, 1996a, 1996b; Janusek, 2002b; Kolata, 1993, 1996; Vranich, 1999). The early date of its fluorescence – approximately 500 AD, or nearly 1000 years before the rise of the Inca Empire and the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores – further marks the site’s importance.

The archaeological site of Tiwanaku is primarily composed of a variety of monumental structures, including a large constructed pyramid known as the Akapana, a large raised platform adjacent to a sunken temple, and another massive raised structure called Pumapunku. The central part of the site and the section most photographed and visited by tourists is actually a ‘reconstruction’ of dubious fidelity that was undertaken by the Bolivian government in the 1960s under the direction of Carlos Ponce Sanginés. This monumental portion of the site was surrounded by many smaller structures that may have housed the thousands of permanent or transient residents who once occupied the site (Kolata, 1996). The archaeological site of Tiwanaku is located next to the modern town of Tiwanaku and other modern villages scattered throughout the valley.

At least since the arrival of the Inca into the southern Titicaca Basin in the fifteenth century, the decaying site of Tiwanaku has been of interest to students of the past. The Inca rulers appropriated the symbol of Tiwanaku, along with other large sites, as a primordial birthplace of their own creator deity, Viracocha (Urton, 1999). By the early twentieth century, Tiwanaku had become a focus of the young field of archaeology. Adolf Bandelier (1911), Arthur Posnansky and Shearer (1945) and Wendell Bennett (1934,
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1936) conducted work at the site and became the early authors of the archaeological narrative of Bolivia.

As with archaeological narratives around the world, the early studies of Tiwanaku were closely linked with the history of European colonialism. The cultural evolutionist theories that framed early archaeological narratives were in large part created as explanations and legitimizations of the control of people and resources in the European colonies (Lyons and Papadopoulos, 2002; Mamani, 1996; Pratt, 1992). Monumental sites like Tiwanaku came to be seen as physical evidence of the progress of history, as increasingly complex and hierarchical civilizations replaced their more primitive antecedents – the implication being that European colonial powers were the inheritors of this lineage of progress and domination that derives from the natural flow of history (Posnansky, 1957). This view became further cemented with the publication of Julian Steward’s (1948) *Handbook of South American Indians* (Bennett, 1946), a magnum opus of neo-evolutionary anthropology that squarely places Tiwanaku as a key milestone in the development and advancement of Andean civilization.

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In many ways, however, Steward’s overarching work merely formalized
a narrative that had been under development since the early days of Spanish colonialism. As a kind of microcosm of the colonial world, the early missionaries, mercenaries and administrators mapped a political geography onto the South American landscape in which the central Andes and Pacific Coast were seen as a region of rapid cultural advancement associated with monumentality and social stratification, at the expense of other regions that were seen as culturally primitive, historically stagnated, and closely tied to the natural world (Kojan, 2002; Pagden, 1982). In spite of other interpretative frameworks, as the culture historical approach used by Ibarra Grasso (1953), Stig Ryden (1947) and others, such narratives of domination persist right up into the present scholarship, only strengthened by the consolidation of positivist and evolutionary frameworks. Current archaeological debates about the cultural history of the Amazonian lowlands, for example, continue to focus on the ability (or inability) of people to form ‘complex’ societies in the tropical forest (Heckenberger et al., 2001; Meggers 1971, 2001). Stanish (2001: 41) succinctly captures the conventional wisdom about the central Andes in his description of this as a ‘culturally precocious region’, making a clear reference to an evolutionary model of culture.

The contemporary upshot of these longstanding historical narratives is that Andean archaeology has become synonymous with the study of the development and dynamics of the state. In Bolivia, this focus on the state has become almost exclusively targeted at the site of Tiwanaku, especially in the wake of nationalist ideology following the social revolution of 1952. Most of the major archaeological research projects conducted in Bolivia are contextualized in relation to Tiwanaku – they are investigating the site itself, looking at the development of the ‘Tiwanaku state’ in the Titicaca Basin, or the impact of Tiwanaku across other parts of the Andes. Until quite recently, very few archaeological projects were conducted in Bolivia that were not explicitly directed at understanding some aspect of the Tiwanaku state.

Ayamar historian Carlos Mamani (1996) insightfully argues that the mestizo elites of Bolivia realized quite early on in their nation-building efforts that Tiwanaku provided a local symbol to reinforce the notion of a national patrimony. Tiwanaku, with its proximity to the capital city of La Paz, its monumental scale, its antiquity, and its remarkable assemblage of large statues and decorative artifacts make the site seem eerily preordained to serve the role of a national symbol. Although today the most prominent parts of Tiwanaku are recent (and not very faithful) constructions designed by archaeologists, the site now provides an ideal embodiment of Bolivia’s narrative of indigenous heritage.

We recognize that this focus on the Tiwanaku state has, without question, produced some important archaeological research. From this work, we know a great deal about, for example, the socioeconomic formation and
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We would argue that the position that Tiwanaku occupies in both these archaeological narratives as well as in the national consciousness of Bolivia goes far beyond its architectural or artifactual importance. Tiwanaku has come to symbolize and embody the evolutionary rise of “complex societies” that are seen as emerging out of the primordial depths of Andean history, and has ultimately come to play a key role in the creation of Bolivia’s national patrimony.2

The symbolic imagery of Tiwanaku as the primordial embodiment of the Bolivian state is ubiquitous both within archaeological narratives, as well as in public life. The image of the Gateway of the Sun, with its distinctive central figure, can be seen on the 200 Boliviano note, on the front of government offices and banks, as well as on less official public spaces of corner stores, tailors, internet cafes and butchers. Many of the largest and best-preserved statuary from Tiwanaku were transported the 60 km to the capital of La Paz and placed in one of the most prominent squares of the city – directly across from that other potent symbol of national pride, the football stadium.

The construction of this sense of nationalist history is closely tied to the concept of the indigenous – a presence which is hard to ignore given Bolivia’s 75 percent majority Indian population. As with other Latin American countries with sizable Indian populations, Bolivian nationalism has incorporated and appropriated the concept of the indigenous for its own aims (Almaraz, 1967, 1969; Rivera, 1987). In the nationalist rhetoric of the country, particularly following the 1952 land reform, Bolivia was formed as a modern, multicultural, multiracial union that embraces the diversity of its past and present. In this formulation, the history of one segment of its population can be proudly shared by all Bolivian citizens. Thus, the
political integration of the Tiwanaku state (Albarracín-Jordán, 1996a, 1996b; Janusek, 1994, 2002b; Kolata, 1993, 1996), the dynamics of population and community growth and intensification (Albarracín-Jordán, 1996a; Bandy, 2001; Hastorf, 1999; Hastorf et al., 2001), agricultural production (Erickson, 1993, 2000; Hastorf, 1999; Kolata, 1989, 1993, 1996), monumentality (Protzen and Nair, 2000; Vranich, 1999), as well as many other subjects of importance. Following Ponce’s work at Tiwanaku, many scholars have contributed to our understanding of the social, political and economic structure of the site (Albarracín-Jordán, 1996a, 1996b; Erickson, 2000; Kolata et al., 2000; Stanish, 2001). While some archaeologists have argued that Tiwanaku should be seen as a politically hierarchical state, other research points to a more complex and less centralized form of social, political, economic and ideological organization (Albarracín-Jordán, 1996a; Janusek, 2004). Despite much recent discussion of multiculturalism and diversity in relation to the development of Tiwanaku, most of these interpretive models revolve around an explicitly cultural evolutionary reading of history that prioritizes state development.

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pre-Hispanic history of the country is seen not as the heritage of the majority Indian population, but as the national patrimony of the country as a whole.

This project of homogeneity essentially places the majority Indian population of Bolivia as a kind of historical remnant from a remote past that is no longer theirs (Mamani, 1996). In this national narrative, there is little room for the cultural persistence and the independent voice demonstrated, for example, by the October uprisings. The presence of poor, rural Indians, among others, educated about the international politics and economics of the policies of globalization, and demanding that their voices be heard and accounted for in the twenty-first century, is simply incompatible with this homogenizing narrative. The image preferred by the supporters of Bolivia’s nationalist narrative is that of the winter solstice celebration at Tiwanaku in which Indians, mestizos and tourists perform an invented ‘ancient’ Aymara ceremony complete with royal processions, public oration and other rituals more rooted in Bolivian nationalist practice than in the poorly understood ritual life of Tiwanaku 1000 years ago.

These rituals are carried out within the imaginative ‘reconstructions’ of Tiwanaku implemented in the 1950s and 1960s by Carlos Ponce Sanginés, an avowed nationalist who views archaeology as an important tool in developing a sense of national pride for Bolivia.

The fact cannot be ignored by anybody that the indigenous farmers of Bolivia, Peru and Mexico are connected to the high pre-Hispanic cultures. In spite of the changes that have occurred since the conquest, many characteristics have persisted. Despite the intense introduction of foreign patterns, a pre-Columbian cultural nucleus remains solid as a traditional continuity. For that reason, the archaeologist of the countries of native ancestry must decipher to the deepest roots of the nation and the foundation for nationhood. (Ponce Sanginés, 1978: 5–6)

Tiwanaku is now seen largely as a symbol of Bolivia’s monumental and primordial roots, rather than a place where long ago people (Indians, to be specific) lived out their lives, and continue to do so. In this sense, the physical site of Tiwanaku is constantly being naturalized, reproduced and reaffirmed in contemporary Bolivia.

**ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES**

One of the implications of the narrow focus on the site of Tiwanaku is that other parts of the country are somehow devoid of the same rich archaeological heritage. From a casual, or even a careful examination of Bolivian archaeology, one might reasonably be left with the understanding that its
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deep history is synonymous with the history of Tiwanaku (indeed, we will ultimately argue that this is a specifically constructed understanding). But such a perspective ignores the existence of significant archaeological evidence not directly associated with Tiwanaku (Angelo, 1999; Brockington et al., 1995; Erickson, 1995, 1997; Kojan, 2002; Lecooq, 2001; Mamani, 1996; Nielsen, 2001, 2002; Rivera et al., 1993).

It is only when we begin to look beyond the dominant, Tiwanaku-centered narrative that archaeological research becomes relevant to our understanding of the contemporary social upheaval and violence, such as that seen last year in Bolivia. We see these ‘alternative’ narratives not as replacements for the focus on Tiwanaku, but as additions to it. These narratives provide a more complex, even a more contradictory reading of Bolivia’s past rather than a more parsimonious one.

The archaeology of other regions of Bolivia has been all but ignored by Bolivian and foreign archaeologists alike. Readings of a more diverse (and complex) past such as those provided by scholars working in other regions such as the eastern and southern valleys (Byrne, 1981; Ibarra Grasso, 1953, 1960) were treated with contempt or assimilated into the dominant understanding of the past. Such histories have been relegated to the status of ‘peripheral’ or ‘frontier’ zones as compared with the Tiwanaku ‘center’. For example, since the early days of Bolivian archaeology (Bennett, 1936), it has been clear that other regions, such as the eastern and southern Andes and the western Amazonian uplands, contain significant evidence of pre-Hispanic occupation, and this evidence has only been strengthened in the intervening years (Brockington et al., 1995; Erickson, 1995, 1997; Kojan, 2002; Ponce Sanginés, 1957). Recent research indicates that the eastern Andes was occupied from at least the early Formative period (approximately 2000 BC) (Brockington et al., 1995) right up to the arrival of the Inca (Janusek, 2002a) and later the Spanish (Klein, 1993; Larson, 1988). Evidence from paleoethnobotanical studies indicates that many of the earliest cultivars grown in the Andes and the Pacific coast, such as two species of bean (Phaseolus vulgaris and P. lunatus), chile peppers (Capsicum spp.), sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas), manioc (Manihot esculenta) and Canna edulis were likely domesticated in the eastern Andean foothills and western Amazon (Pickersgill, 1969; Pearsall, 1992: 177). There is good ethnohistoric documentation (Assadourian, 1995; Oberem, 1974) and iconographic evidence from other parts of the Andes (Lathrap, 1973) that suggests there was a long-term pattern of trade and exchange between the Andes and the Amazonian lowlands, which by geographic necessity would have made the eastern and southern Andes an important trade route (Angelo and Capriles, 2000). Yet, the story of this region’s past remains well outside the canon of Bolivian history.

When we begin to interrogate this peripheral position further, we see that this understanding of regions such as the eastern and southern Andes was
deep history is synonymous with the history of Tiwanaku (indeed, we will ultimately argue that this is a specifically constructed understanding). But such a perspective ignores the existence of significant archaeological evidence not directly associated with Tiwanaku (Angelo, 1999; Brockington et al., 1995; Erickson, 1995, 1997; Kojan, 2002; Lecoq, 2001; Mamani, 1996; Nielsen, 2001, 2002; Rivera et al., 1993).

It is only when we begin to look beyond the dominant, Tiwanaku-centered narrative that archaeological research becomes relevant to our understanding of the contemporary social upheaval and violence, such as that seen last year in Bolivia. We see these ‘alternative’ narratives not as replacements for the focus on Tiwanaku, but as additions to it. These narratives provide a more complex, even a more contradictory reading of Bolivia’s past rather than a more parsimonious one.

The archaeology of other regions of Bolivia has been all but ignored by Bolivian and foreign archaeologists alike. Readings of a more diverse (and complex) past such as those provided by scholars working in other regions such as the eastern and southern valleys (Byrne, 1981; Ibarra Grasso, 1953, 1960) were treated with contempt or assimilated into the dominant understanding of the past. Such histories have been relegated to the status of ‘peripheral’ or ‘frontier’ zones as compared with the Tiwanaku ‘center’. For example, since the early days of Bolivian archaeology (Bennett, 1936), it has been clear that other regions, such as the eastern and southern Andes and the western Amazonian uplands, contain significant evidence of pre-Hispanic occupation, and this evidence has only been strengthened in the intervening years (Brockington et al., 1995; Erickson, 1995, 1997; Kojan, 2002; Ponce Sanginés, 1957). Recent research indicates that the eastern Andes was occupied from at least the early Formative period (approximately 2000 BC) (Brockington et al., 1995) right up to the arrival of the Inca (Janusek, 2002a) and later the Spanish (Klein, 1993; Larson, 1988). Evidence from paleoethnobotanical studies indicates that many of the earliest cultigens grown in the Andes and the Pacific coast, such as two species of bean (Phaseolus vulgaris and P. luantus), chile peppers (Capsicum spp.), sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas), manioc (Manihot esculenta) and Canna edulis were likely domesticated in the eastern Andean foothills and western Amazon (Pickersgill, 1969; Pearsall, 1992: 177). There is good ethnohistoric documentation (Assadourian, 1995; Oberem, 1974) and iconographic evidence from other parts of the Andes (Lathrap, 1973) that suggests there was a long-term pattern of trade and exchange between the Andes and the Amazonian lowlands, which by geographic necessity would have made the eastern and southern Andes an important trade route (Angelo and Capriles, 2000). Yet, the story of this region’s past remains well outside the canon of Bolivian history.

When we begin to interrogate this peripheral position further, we see that this understanding of regions such as the eastern and southern Andes was...
quite deliberately manufactured. While the former is the main cocoa-growing region of the Andes, and the latter has been a main source of mineral resources, both regions have been conceptualized as empty frontier zones. In order to gain control of these regions the Spanish Crown, following the heels of population displacements and social realignment enacted by the Inca (D’Altroy, 2001), implemented a program of forceful relocation of the original occupants of this region – many of whom were sent to work in the infamous silver mines of Potosí – and brought in foreign laborers from other parts of the Andes and the Amazonian lowlands (Klein, 1993; Larson, 1988; and see Werlich, 1968 for a Peruvian study). In this sense the colonial powers were recreating, through discursive practice, some of the conceptual models with which they had come to understand Andean societies, and which continue to be used by scholars, as part of an essentialist construction of the Andino (Van Buren, 1996).

Of all of the encomiendas, the large estates granted to the Spanish conquistadores, those of the coca-producing eastern Andes were by far the most profitable (Klein, 1993). By forcibly removing the local inhabitants and thereby detaching the workers of the coca plantations from a sense of ownership, the colonial elites were able to very efficiently skim the profits from the eastern Andes for their own benefit. This pattern of resource exploitation in the eastern Andes is an ongoing one, and has been one of the chief complaints of the recent ‘anti-globalization’ protests in Bolivia.

We can see in this colonial history of regions like the eastern and southern Andes the deliberate construction of a ‘marginal’ or ‘empty’ space – much as the American West was constructed as an empty space to be colonized and exploited by the expanding dominant American society (Klein, 1997). In this sense, the archaeological narratives that inform our current understandings of Bolivia have been significantly derived from, and actively created by, the colonial powers beginning in the sixteenth century. Different parts of the country that do not fall within the focus of the Bolivian nation-state, or its ruling elites, have been displaced to a marginal status and brought into a historical system derived from an evolutionary paradigm with its center at Tiwanaku (Angelo, 1999).

Archaeological and ethnohistoric investigations away from the Tiwanaku ‘core’ have without doubt contributed to our understanding of the histories of other regions not only in Bolivia (Julien, 1978; Murra, 1975; Tarragó, 1977). However, many of these works reproduce the historical construction that defines peripheries and marginal regions through archaeological discourse, presenting these places and their inhabitants as the outcome of the evolutionary process of the rise and decline of the Tiwanaku state (Bandy, 2001; Kolata, 1993; Ponce Sanginés, 1978). As seen in the recent protests in Bolivia, this conceptualization ultimately supports the representation of these regions as sources of extractable resources in whose lands the Inca state, the colonial regimes, the republican governments, and most
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recently, the proponents of globilization became interested—a narrative fashioned in a strict evolutionary perspective, and the economic practice of extraction and maximization of resources (D’Altroy et al., 2000; DeMarrais et al., 1996).

Archaeology has founded much of its authority on the construction of systems of classifications and explanations derived from questions about whether or not South American Indians were civilized. A genealogy for these hegemonic systems and discourses is traced by Castañeda (1996: 138), who argues that the sixteenth-century ideology of the conquest was defined in terms of ‘civilization’ and the capacity to transform and dominate nature. The invention of the ‘Other’ was driven by questions about the presence or absence of the classic markers of advancement: systems of urban and socioeconomic organization, political hierarchy, agriculture and technology, writing and religious moral values (Pagden, 1982); needless to say, these markers were usually categorized and measured in Western terms.

The view of the Altiplano as the core of Bolivian civilization, while other parts of Bolivia are seen as peripheral frontiers, is a form of orientalism, in the sense that it is an ontological distinction that defines and reinforces power relations (Said, 1978). The dominant Tiwanaku-centered narrative simultaneously positions the urban elites of Bolivia at the axis of Bolivian society and history, and paves the way for the efficient and continued extraction of labor and resources from other regions of the country.

Despite the vast wealth extracted from the southern and eastern Andes, these regions continue to be seen as remote ‘hinterlands’. Since the dismantling of the encomienda system in 1952, coca has been produced mainly by poor small-scale farmers, some of whom marched and died in the October protests, and whose crops mainly benefit those further down the line in both the legal and illegal coca trade. In a similar vein, the infamous mining regions of Potosí and Oruro became depopulated after the fall of the mining economy in the international markets, causing extreme economic recession for its former inhabitants and forcing them to leave for other parts of the country. Most of Bolivia’s electricity, which powers the cities of La Paz, Cochabamba, Sucre and others, is produced in the massive hydroelectric plants of the eastern Andes, yet many of the local communities there have poor electrical infrastructure, or none at all. The natural gas project that was the catalyst for the October demonstrations was designed to exploit gas reserves in the eastern Andes and western Amazon with little benefit to the communities of those regions, and in some cases causing devastating environmental problems. This pattern of the simultaneous creation and exploitation of the ‘hinterland’ is one that has been underway since the early days of European colonialism.
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