

# DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

HANNE COTTYN

## **Renegotiating Communal Autonomy. Communal Land Rights and Liberal Land Reform on the Bolivian Altiplano. Carangas, 1860-1930**

Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep geschiedenis, 2014.

Promotor : Eric Vanhaute.

This dissertation is the result of a detailed research on local dynamics in rural indigenous communities of the Andean Highlands where production and government are regulated by strong communitarian structures. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bolivian government promulgated the *Ley de Exvinculación* (1874), an anti-corporatist land reform that denied the collective land rights maintained by those communities.

The central story of this dissertation centres around the thwarting rather than the progress of this reform. The province of Carangas, entirely situated on the altiplano, was one of the few rural regions where the land reform did not materialize. While this is classically explained by the signs of regional marginalization and the poor conditions for agricultural entrepreneurs, this research highlights the still largely hidden story of community defence and the multi-faceted resistance strategies deployed by the indigenous Bolivian communities. This is achieved through a combination of field work with archives in several archives in and outside Bolivia.

This case study is examined within a broader analytical framework that emphasizes the role of “peripheral agency” within a globalizing world. The research results contribute to a better understanding of global-local interactions in which local actors, in this case rural communities, creatively re-negotiate

the conditions of their participation and autonomy in the context of market and state integration. This ambition is guided by the question of how trajectories of rural change are shaped by the direction and the character of world-systemic expansion and, the other way around, how processes of globalization are driven by the dynamics of rural change. Specific questions examine the disintegration and reviving of autonomous communitarian spaces throughout the cycles of world-systemic contraction and expansion. Does this local-global interconnection lead to a more homogeneous world, or does this feed new tendencies of heterogeneity?

These questions are assessed in relation to the right on land and the imposition of standardized frameworks for land management, specifically in the rural Andes. Here, century long processes of colonial exploitation and post-colonial extractivism result in a remarkable (but increasingly more vulnerable) margin for the preservation of communitarian land management. Why were some regions able to protect these communitarian rights? How were these rights safeguarded throughout the cycles of land rights commodification? Which implications did this have on the longer term regarding power and identity in the communities of Carangas and in Bolivian society in general?

The presented analysis tests the general research hypothesis that globalization processes feed a diversity of transition trajectories and that these diverse local processes feed world-system developments through the effects of a land rights commodifying reform process in a region where land was and remained in the hands of the community. Carangas’ “exemption” from the reform cannot be

straightforwardly related to factors of isolation but was enforced through a dynamic renegotiation process. The result is a thwarted incorporation, visible in the constant (re) creation and assertion of alternative spaces for communitarian autonomy.