

Chapter 9: Rights, Recognition, and New Forms of Organization

The Judicialization of Afrobolivian Activism and the Rise of CONAFRO

In a recently published account, the *Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano* (CONAFRO) describes the decade starting in 2010 as the time when the Afrobolivian people finally began to step out of the ‘invisibility’ of the past to become active and visible social and political actors in Bolivia. This is attributed to the foundation of CONAFRO and a process of ethnic and cultural revival, as the introduction of the text explains:

“The *pueblo Afrodescendiente* in Bolivia, since the beginning of this decade and after a long process of ethnic and cultural mobilization, has managed to found a proper national political instance through which, in a short time and unlike other indigenous peoples, it [*el pueblo Afrodescendiente*] has had the opportunity to become one of the principal actors in the current sociopolitical conjuncture. We refer specifically to the *Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano*.¹”

The authors go on to state that:

“the Bolivian state, after a long process of invisibilization and as a response to the insistent demands, could not help but accept the *pueblo Afroboliviano* as a legal subject with the same rights, collective and individual, as the other *pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos* that live within national territory. The *pueblo Afroboliviano*, therefore, is now included in the new laws, and on the basis of that, is fighting for its political project to be taken into consideration in public policy aiming

1 “El Pueblo Afrodescendiente en Bolivia, desde principios de la actual década y luego de un largo proceso de explicitación étnica y cultural, ha logrado conformar una instancia política nacional y propia [con su respectivo brazo educativo] que, en poco tiempo y a diferencia de otros pueblos indígenas, le ha posibilitado constituirse en uno de los principales actores protagónicos en la actual coyuntura sociopolítica del país; nos referimos, específicamente, al Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano (CONAFRO) [y a su secretaría de educación, el Consejo Educativo del Pueblo Afroboliviano [CEPA]].”

at improving its quality of life in economic/productive, social/organizational and cultural/educational terms.”²

These two excerpts include a significant number of important points and developments that I want to detail, contextualize and analyze in this chapter. As I described in the previous chapter, Afrobolivian activism initially started with efforts of cultural revitalization and public performance, later introducing logics of development, diasporic politics, differentiated citizenship and ethnic rights. These efforts laid the groundwork for Afrobolivians’ (informal) participation in the 2006 Constituent Assembly that culminated with the official legal recognition of the collective subject *el pueblo Afroboliviano* in the new Bolivian Constitution ratified and promulgated in 2009. As will become clear, in recent years Afrobolivian activism has evolved in a number of key aspects and three related developments stand out as most relevant: Firstly, 21st century Afrobolivian activism relies heavily on the concept of rights. This entails a legalized language, a certain judicialization of protest and politics more generally and most strikingly an upsurge in “rights talk” (Merry 2003). Secondly, the idea of articulating demands and claiming rights on behalf of a collective subject called *el pueblo Afroboliviano* has gained significant momentum. This also entails emphasizing ethnic identity, culture, territoriality and language as the basis for collective identification rather than pointing out race, skin color and phenotype. Finally, the emphasis on *pueblo* status has sparked new forms of collective organizing that differ greatly from the prevailing modes of mobilization (as *saya* performance ensembles or NGOs in search of development funds) and draws inspiration from indigenous and other popular organizations in Bolivia.

In the first part of the chapter, I argue that a growing proliferation of rights talk and the framing of political demands as rights became fundamental to making Afrobolivian claims compatible with the logics of the Constituent Assembly. In this sense, Afrobolivian activism mirrors emerging trends of judicialization in Latin American politics (Huneus, Couso, and Sieder 2010:8; de Sousa Santos 2002). Moreover, I argue that the logics of multicultural and plurinational recognition made it vital to frame these demands-cum-rights in collective terms. The concept that made this articulation possible is *el pueblo Afroboliviano*, heavily inspired by transnationally circulating concepts of indigenous peoplehood adjusted to Bolivian circumstances (Niezen 2003; for Bolivia see: Canessa 2012b). In terms of political

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- 2 “[A]l Estado boliviano, luego de un largo proceso de invisibilización y como respuesta a la insistente demanda, no le quedó más que asumir al Pueblo Afroboliviano como un sujeto jurídico con los mismos derechos, colectivos e individuales, que los otros pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos que habitan en el territorio nacional. El Pueblo Afroboliviano, por eso, ahora está incluido en las nuevas leyes y, sobre ese fundamento, está luchando para que su proyecto político y de vida sean tomados en cuenta en las políticas públicas con el propósito de contribuir al mejoramiento de su calidad de vida en los ámbitos económico productivo, social organizativo y cultural educativo.”

organization and mobilization, the formation of the *Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano* (CONAFRO) marks a decisive shift representing a turn to a different pattern of mobilization from the development NGO organizations and the cultural/dance groups of the 1980s and 1990s. CONAFRO presents itself as the *ente matriz* (lit.: mother institution) of all Afrobolivians in much the same way as the large indigenous federations in the country. Taken together, I argue that the three trends – judicialization, the emphasis on *pueblo* status and the proliferation of new modes of mobilization – have marked Afrobolivian engagement with the state and international institutions to a great extent. In the eyes of CONAFRO, the outcome has been fairly clear and positive: hitherto marginalized Afrobolivians have achieved visibility as a collective subject of rights and are in a position to effectively push for their political project to be taken into consideration by the Bolivian state. Yet there are also critical voices and important contradictions inherent in the processes of mobilization and recognition, as I will show at the end of the chapter.

“500 years give us rights!” Framing political demands as rights to be claimed

My first encounter with an Afrobolivian organization in 2010 was instructive for a variety of reasons. I was in Bolivia in search of a new research project and was conducting preliminary fieldwork. Since I was interested in the Afrobolivian population, I casually paid a visit to the most visible Afrobolivian organization (at that time the *Centro Afroboliviano para el Desarrollo Integral y Comunitario* [CADIC] in La Paz). I was quickly called into the office of its president, Jorge Medina. Medina had just been elected to congress on the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) ticket of the special indigenous electoral circumscription (*circunscripción especial indígena*) for La Paz and received me openly and in a friendly manner. After explaining the reasons for my visit and offering to help with anything CADIC might need, he gave me the following task: compile and translate the anti-discrimination laws of various countries (he was especially interested in Brazil and South Africa and, given my nationality, asked me to include Germany). I did as he asked and stopped by his office a few days later to present my translations and discuss my findings. He was mostly interested in debating how the foreign laws might be adjusted to the Bolivian situation, since he was himself planning to propose a law against discrimination in parliament. In most of our meetings, we were accompanied by his closest assessor, who was at the same time his lawyer and had the expertise to translate Medina's ideas into legally adequate language as well as foresee possible legal trapdoors in the process. My first months of engaging with Afrobolivian politics were thus marked by laws and bureaucratic technicalities. These circumstances certainly shaped my perspective on the subject. It differs significantly from what other researchers

have written about and shared with me in personal communications. During most of the 1980s and 1990s and even into the 21st century, *saya*, culture and ‘visibility’ were the currencies of Afrobolivian mobilizations (Busdiecker 2007; Komadina and Regalsky 2016; Rossbach de Olmos 2007; Templeman 1995). Accordingly, scholars shaped their arguments in terms of these topics and some have questioned the relevance of legal discourse and the claiming of rights in understanding Afrobolivian reality.³ I argue, however, that a closer look at these instances of Afrobolivian mobilizations is long overdue. One cannot deny the increasing salience of these topics in current political discourse. Many of my interlocutors also expressed a sense of increased importance of rights, legal reform and judicialization for Afrobolivian politics.

Afrobolivians “on their way to the Constituent Assembly”

Bolivian politics in the early 21st century was marked by various episodes of civil unrest, culminating in the 2002 “water war,” (*Guerra del Agua*) the 2003 “gas war” (*Guerra del Gas*) and the subsequent toppling of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada’s neoliberal and multicultural government. Beyond matters of basic service privatization (water) and the overall economic project pursued by neoliberal governments since the 1980s (such as the selling of primary resources, e.g. gas), the protests were concerned with social inequalities, neo-colonial power relations and the large-scale disenfranchisement of vast parts of the population (poor, peasant, indigenous, etc.) more generally. In the wake of these mobilizations, Evo Morales and the MAS party won the elections in 2005, took power in 2006 and immediately called for a Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Constituyente*) in order to rework the country’s fundamental legal basis and tackle social inequality and colonial domination (Kohl and Farthing 2006).

In the years and months leading up to the *Asamblea Constituyente*, Afrobolivian mobilization had arrived at a critical juncture. It was faced with the limitations of mobilizing in the realm of folklore, and of Jorge Medina’s NGO-style approach to activism. Even though CADIC was reaching different urban and rural communities with small-scale development projects and workshops, and *saya* groups had been established in all major cities, delivering a certain degree of visibility, no significant improvements for the Afrobolivian population were being achieved, according to many of my interlocutors. Through *saya*, Afrobolivians had managed to become a visible part of the folkloric mosaic of the country. They remained, however, disproportionately poor, uneducated, discriminated against and marginalized in political life, the workplace and everyday contexts. There was, in short, a lot to be done from

3 However, see Busdiecker (2009b) for an analysis pointing at the increasing importance of legal discourse.

the perspective of Afrobolivian leaders as well as from the vantage point of urban and rural communities. From the perspective of many Afrobolivians, the problems they were facing as a collective were exemplified by the failed campaign to include *Afroboliviano* as a category of self-identification in Bolivia's population census of 2001. As the first census to be undertaken after the multicultural reforms of the 1990s, the questionnaire included questions concerning proficiency in indigenous languages and cultural identity: "Do you consider yourself to belong to any of the following *pueblos originarios* or *indígenas*?"⁴ Possible categories of identification were: *Quechua*, *Aymara*, *Guaraní*, *Chiquitano*, *Mojeño*, *otro nativo* (other native), or *ninguno* (none). Afrobolivians considered the omission of the option *Afroboliviano* as a clear sign of their marginalization in official discourse. They were not satisfied with the option to mark "*otro nativo*" and specify "*Afroboliviano*," which was indeed possible, since they did not consider themselves natives (*originarios*) or indigenous. Marking "none," in turn, would downplay their cultural uniqueness and their status as a collective that can be distinguished from the national mainstream. They felt they had been made 'invisible' as a culturally different collective in need of special attention. As had previously happened, this experience of frustration led to an active campaign – led by MOCUSABOL and CADIC – to push for official recognition. The opportunity to put these claims into practice presented itself in the context of the *Asamblea Constituyente*: from 2006, Bolivia began to debate and elaborate a new constitution that promised to put an end to 'more than 500 years of colonialism.'

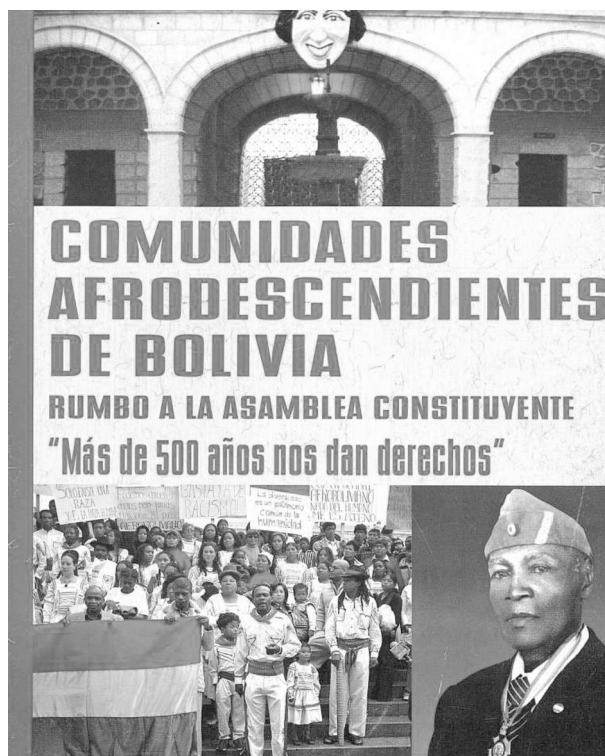
In this context, there are a number of examples of the tendency to frame political demands as rights, one of the clearest being MOCUSABOL's campaign in the context of the *Asamblea Constituyente* that stated: "*Más de 500 años nos dan derechos*" ("More than 500 years give us rights"). Here, MOCUSABOL very clearly stated that "we have to achieve recognition as a *pueblo* and demand the right to land and territory."⁵

The focus on rights and recognition that was formalized in MOCUSABOL's claims in light of the Constituent Assembly had its roots in earlier campaigns demanding inclusion in the National Census of 2001 and can be discerned as an emerging topic in *saya* lyrics as early as 1994 (cf. Templeman 1998). Yet it was only in the context of elaborating a new constitution that these demands took center stage and Afrobolivians mobilized to seize the opportunity to be included in the far-reaching reforms that the government promised would be achieved through constitutional reform. This of course also entailed framing and articulating demands in a way that was compatible with the logics of constitutional reform in Bolivia. Fundamentally,

4 "¿Se considera perteneciente a alguno de los siguientes pueblos originarios o indígenas?"

5 "Debemos lograr el reconocimiento como pueblo y posteriormente exigir el derecho a tierra y territorio" (MOCUSABOL BOLETIN 2005-06).

Figure 20: Cover of a MOCUSABOL leaflet summarizing the demands of Afrobolivians in the context of the Constituent Assembly (courtesy of MOCUSABOL).



it meant that demands had to be formulated as rights to be claimed. Sara Busdiecker (2009b), who did extensive fieldwork among Afrobolivians at the turn of the millennium, also described a shift from the “performative to the political” in Afrobolivian mobilization. She remarked that Afrobolivian organizations that were at first mainly concerned with revitalizing and performing *saya* broadened their focus to include political demands and new forms of organization beyond the performance of *saya* to counter political, legal and statistical invisibilities. In light of the Constituent Assembly, the legal dimension was of ever-growing importance.

Afrobolivians in the Constituent Assembly: formal absence, changing alliances and the ever-present *saya*

In the process of participating in the Constituent Assembly, Afrobolivian organizations have come into close contact with legal instruments and discourses as well as with the argumentative repertoire of a variety of other social movements. As Komadina and Regalsky (2016) report, Afrobolivians were not able to secure direct participation through an Afrobolivian representative and were thus forced to look to other avenues to make their claims heard. Many of my interlocutors heavily criticized the fact that before the passing of the New Constitution in 2009, Afrobolivian organizations and demands were, if not systematically rejected, at least not systematically or officially included. This furthermore intensified the impression that only legal recognition could remedy Afrobolivian exclusion.

At first, MOCUSABOL teamed up with a variety of small organizations to form an eclectic alliance of Afrobolivians, gays and lesbians, street children and other small minorities. Soon, however, MOCUSABOL and CADIC formed an alliance with the *Consejo Nacional de Markas y Ayllus del Qollasuyu* (CONAMAQ) – an indigenous organization based in the Aymara communities of the Bolivian highlands – that would serve as their way into certain contexts of decision making. This alliance was upheld even after the New Constitution was passed. Through the alliance with CONAMAQ, Afrobolivians were included in certain sessions of the *Pacto de Unidad*⁶ commissions and in commission meetings held by the ruling MAS party, which held the majority of seats in the Assembly and would thus be of great importance. As Schavelzon (2012) details in his ethnography of the Constituent Assembly, Afrobolivian voices intervened especially with regard to the formulations that would become Article 3 of the Constitution, summarizing the notion of the “Bolivian people” (*el pueblo Boliviano*) and determining who would be considered part of the entity in the New Constitution. At the same time and in addition to the strategy of participating in commissions through CONAMAQ, Afrobolivian individuals successfully approached the formal representatives of certain commissions and were given a chance to present their demands (Komadina and Regalsky 2016). There was some resistance, however, to including Afrobolivians explicitly in Article 3. Some *constituyentes* argued that singling out Afrobolivians by naming them explicitly while subsuming the other *pueblos* under the name *pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos* would be unjust and that either all *pueblos* or none at all should be mentioned in the article (Schavelzon 2012:128f). Others argued that naming them in such a prominent place would give the impression that Afrobolivians are “a macro-*pueblo*, when in reality they are only 500 people” (*“un macro-pueblo cuando sólo son 500 personas”*)

6 See chapter 2, footnote 15.

(Schavelzon 2012:128 quoting an anonymous *constituyente*). In the end, the MAS delegates (who had a vast majority in the *Asamblea*) agreed to include the formulation “*comunidades Afrobolivianas*,” alongside the “*naciones y pueblos indígena originario campesinos*” and the “*comunidades interculturales*” in Article 3 of the New Bolivian Constitution of 2009).⁷ It is interesting to note that here the plural formula “*comunidades Afrobolivianas*” prevailed, whereas later the term “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*” emerged. The discrepancy between the articles, in my view, hints at the fact that the notion of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* was not completely stabilized by the time the Constitution was debated and the status of Afrobolivian collectivity was still a matter of debate.

Once Afrobolivians had been included in the foundational definition of what constitutes the “Bolivian people” (*el pueblo Boliviano*) it was possible to pursue the goal of claiming special rights analogous to indigenous groups. This goal was achieved through Article 32, which recognizes that *el pueblo Afroboliviano* possesses the same rights as indigenous groups (*naciones y pueblos indígena originario campesinos*), “wherever appropriate” (“*en todo lo que corresponda*”). In order to ensure that Afrobolivian demands were met and the Article in question could not be erased from the final document (as had happened several times before according to many of my interlocutors from different Afrobolivian organizations), MOCUSABOL and CADIC decided to stage a massive gathering of *saya* dancers and enter the building in Sucre with drums, singing and dance while the Assembly was in session. In recounting their experiences in Sucre, my interlocutors paid this moment the most attention, seemingly confirming the widespread allegations that Afrobolivians have achieved every political milestone through *saya*. This framing nevertheless downplays the importance of barely visible, semi-official negotiations around the Constituent Assembly and overshadows the various adaptations that Afrobolivian demands underwent during this process. The watershed moment of being officially recognized has significantly changed Afrobolivian political opportunities and has enhanced opportunities for participation. At the same time, the legal provisions that come with official recognition established the parameters that Afrobolivian participation must take and identified specific topics as relevant realms of recognition while excluding others. Most importantly, official legal recognition has stabilized the notion of a nationally homogenous *pueblo Afroboliviano*, which was circulating before but has gained currency most significantly since being legally established in 2009.

7 The term *Afroboliviano* was ultimately chosen instead of the wording *Afrodescendiente* since some representatives feared that writing *Afrodescendiente* would grant further rights to “*brasileros*” (Schavelzon 2013:129), i.e. Afrodescendants from other Latin American countries.

The aftermath of recognition: *el pueblo Afroboliviano* as the subject of collective rights

Besides foregrounding the claiming of rights as adequate tools to alter past and present injustices and to improve the situation of their constituency, Afrobolivian activists began shaping their demands by way of appealing to the Bolivian state and international institutions under the logic of what Shane Greene (Greene 2007a) has called the “holy trinity of multicultural peoplehood” (culture, territory and language). The importance of this cannot be overstated. In most cases, it was not individual rights that were the center of attention, but collective ones. This in turn generated the question of how and by what means this collective subject of rights could be defined. Making Afrobolivian claims *legible* (Scott 1998) entailed positioning themselves as a legitimate *pueblo*. The Constitution is fairly specific when it comes to defining what a *pueblo* consists of (adding “historic tradition” and “world-view” to the triad of language, territory and culture). According to Article 30 of the New Bolivian Constitution:

“A nation and rural native indigenous people consists of every *human collective that shares a cultural identity, language, historic tradition, institutions, territory and world view*, whose existence predates the Spanish colonial invasion.” (translation by Constituteproject.org, emphasis added)⁸

Shaping their demands to fit this definition was not completely new for Afrobolivian activism. References to “*el pueblo negro*,” “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*,” or alternatively “*el pueblo Afrodescendiente*,” can be traced back to the early 1990s when the revitalization of *saya* sparked a boom in publications on Afrobolivians and the multicultural reforms in Bolivia had already led the way to articulations of collective identity very similar to those promoted by the 2009 Constitution. Yet in scholarly and press publications, as well as in documents elaborated by Afrobolivian organizations, references to “*el pueblo*” coexisted with references to “*la cultura negra/Afroboliviana*,” “*la comunidad negra*,” “*las comunidades Afrobolivianas*,” “*la etnia Afrodescendiente*” and so on. Reviewing these documents gives the impression that the movement was trying to consolidate itself, both in organizational terms, as I have described in chapter 8, and in terms of the concepts to be used. Each of the denominators just mentioned carries slightly different connotations and emphases. On the one hand, there is the terminological distinction between “*negro*,” “*Afroboliviano*” and “*Afrodescendiente*.” In political discourse, “*negro*” (connoting skin color) has fallen out of use and has been replaced by “*Afroboliviano*” (highlighting culture and national citizenship)

8 “Es nación y pueblo indígena originario campesino toda la colectividad humana que comparta identidad cultural, idioma, tradición histórica, instituciones, territorialidad y cosmovisión, cuya existencia es anterior a la invasión colonial española.”

and “*Afrodescendiente*” (highlighting culture and diasporic affiliations). Equally important, however, is the distinction between “*cultura*,” “*comunidades*” (plural), “*la comunidad*” (singular), “*la etnia*” and “*el pueblo*.” Referring to “*cultura*” leaves open the question of whether and in what sense this “*cultura*” relates to individuals, groups or a group. Speaking of “*comunidades*” in the plural implies acknowledging multiplicity and possible heterogeneity. The singular “*la comunidad*,” in contrast, rhetorically implies homogeneity and uniformity. Referring to “*etnia*” and “*pueblo*” additionally implies assuming specific characteristics of a community. The matter of terminology is far from conclusively settled. As I showed in chapter 6, articulations of Afrobolivianity are shaped by entangled references to phenotype, race, culture, region, indigeneity and diaspora. Even the constitutional text is not conclusive on the subject. As I have mentioned, Article 3 refers to “*las comunidades Afrobolivianas*,” whereas Article 32 speaks of “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*.” I argue, however, that in the current political discourse, alternative terms and perspectives are increasingly overshadowed by the specific articulation of Afrobolivian collectivity as a *pueblo*, which started gaining currency in the years between 2006 and 2009 (during the Constituent Assembly) and most clearly after 2009 when the New Constitution was being promulgated.

Re-articulations of Afrobolivianity and the dynamics of *pueblo*-ization

Whereas in 2005 and 2006 MOCUSABOL was voicing the demands of “*comunidades Afrodescendientes*” directed at the *Asamblea Constituyente* (see fig. 20 above), in 2014 CONAFRO stated its mission as being to work for a “*pueblo Afroboliviano fuerte y mancomunado*” (“a strong and unified *pueblo Afroboliviano*”).

I argue that the transformations this shift expresses go well beyond changing the terminology of leaflets and action plans. The political and legal re-articulation of “*comunidades Afrobolivianas*” as “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*” exhibit clear parallels to the processes that Eduardo Restrepo has described for Afrocolombian mobilization and which he termed “the ethnicization of blackness.” According to Restrepo (2004:699),

“the ethnicization of black political subjects and subjectivities must be understood as an ongoing process of the articulation of blackness in Colombia that has established a specific relationship between territory, identity, cultural tradition, nature and otherness.”

In Bolivia as well as in Colombia, this process has – especially on the level of political subjectivities and mobilization strategies – led to the prevalence of “novel modalities of collective action closely tied to the logic of the [...] state” (Pardo and Alvarez 2001 quoted in Restrepo 2004). In the Colombian case it involved the configuration of an ethnic black political subject (the black community as an ethnic group) (Rest-

repo 2004:706), whereas in Bolivia, it has led to the articulation of Afrobolivian collectivity as *el pueblo Afroboliviano*. The two processes exhibit certain similarities but differ in terms of specific content due to the different discourses pertaining to blackness and indigeneity in the two countries.

According to Restrepo (2004), in Colombia, the question of territory was crucial, since the logics of recognition established by Colombian legislation made the territorial integrity of a given ethnic group an important aspect in determining their legitimacy. In Bolivia, the politics and the language of indigeneity as well as the ensuing regimes of recognition differ from the Colombian case. Bolivian discourses on indigeneity have been in constant flux and include shifting references to language, dress, the colonial encounter, self-identification and marginalization (for a concise overview see Canessa 2007). The discourses of regimes of multicultural recognition that are most relevant to the Afrobolivian case are the Law of Popular Participation and more broadly the multicultural Constitution of 1994, which have been circulating in many communities. As criteria for being considered indigenous, they emphasize pre-colonial origins, history, language and culture, and self-positioning as belonging to the same socio-cultural unit (Canessa 2007:203f.). Another important factor is the very strong association of Afrobolivians with *saya*, stemming from the fact that the revitalization of *saya* was the backbone of the emerging movement and Afrobolivians became visible in Bolivia first and foremost as *saya* dancers. The process of recognition emerging from this combination was what Lioba Rossbach de Olmos (2011) has called *patrimonialización* (i.e. being recognized as cultural patrimony of the nation) and what many of my Afrobolivian interlocutors refer to as *folklorización* – mostly with a negative connotation. In the wake of official recognition, folklorization and patrimonialization have been enhanced in certain ways, adding up to what I term the *pueblo*-ization of Afrobolivian collectivity.

Pueblo-ization moves beyond the association of Afrobolivians with folklore by introducing further elements that contribute to a cultural and historical definition of Afrobolivianity, following the Constitution's definition of a *pueblo* as a collectivity that should possess “cultural identity, language, historic tradition, institutions, territory and world view.” In order to plausibly articulate the Afrobolivian collectivity as a *pueblo*, Afrobolivian organizations smoothly latched onto representations of *saya* as authentic Afrobolivian culture, yet made great efforts to emphasize its value as cultural practice beyond folklore. One vivid example is Martín Miguel Ballivián's (Ballivián 2014) claim in the context of his analysis of *saya* as a space of encounter and education in Afrobolivian communities. He asserts that *saya* means “living well with happiness in community, from our worldview” (*“resulta ser el Vivir Bien con Alegría en Comunidad, desde nuestra cosmovisión”*) (Ballivián 2014:13) positing *saya* as the backbone of an Afrobolivian *cosmovisión*, analogous to the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien* (Acosta 2015). In the same vein, Afrobolivian orga-

nizations have been very active in promoting the symbolic monarchy “*el Rey Afroboliviano*” as an example of historical continuity of Afrobolivian leadership and have furthermore positioned the king as a sort of ‘traditional’ authority figure for the Afrobolivian people (see chapter 7 and also Busdiecker 2007; Revilla Orías 2014b). Similarly, certain other ‘cultural elements’ like the funeral rite *mauchi* and dances like *zemba*, *baile de tierra* and *cueca negra*, have been introduced to a wider public. In the context of fostering an image of cultural distinctiveness, references to Africa and African culture have also been on the rise in conceptualizing Afrobolivian culture. Yet references to Africa and African cultural roots are employed to legitimize claims to a unique and recognizable Afrobolivian culture that is put forth politically as a founding claim to the *pueblo* status equivalent to that of indigenous groups, not as a means to position Afrobolivians as a different kind of collective (transnational, diasporic) in need of a different set of practices of recognition.

Another striking example is the campaign to revitalize Afrobolivian Spanish (*la lengua Afroboliviana*), a historically distinct creole variant of Spanish that has fallen out of actual use. Afrobolivian individuals and organizations have been taking up the findings of linguists researching this Afrobolivian Creole language (Lipski 2008; Pérez Inofuentes 2015; Sessarego 2011a; Sessarego 2014) in order to substantiate their claim to the status of a *pueblo*. For example, Juan Angola Maconde (2012) has recently published a dictionary of Afrobolivian Spanish terms and the “long-lost ‘black Spanish’” (Lipski 2007:1) has also been introduced as a part of the *Currículo Regionalizado del Pueblo Afroboliviano*.

Similarly, the ubiquitous references to the Yungas as the region most traditionally associated with Afrobolivians and their culture (see for example Busdiecker’s [2009a] discussion of the importance of place for concepts of Afrobolivianity) are now discursively pitched to resonate with discourses around indigenous territories (*territorios indígenas*) very common in political and legal discourse in Bolivia. The struggle for land was particularly important in the mobilization of various indigenous groups in the Bolivian lowlands who had not benefitted from the land reform in the 1950s (Lacroix 2012). In 1996, the Bolivian government issued an updated law of land reform (*Ley INRA*), recognizing collective indigenous ownership of land. This law was heavily influenced by ILO declaration 169, and reflects the declaration’s demand that “governments shall respect the special importance for the cultures and spiritual values of the peoples concerned of their relationship with the lands or territories [...] which they occupy [...]” (ILO 169, Art.13). The Bolivian Constitution of 2009 also includes references to indigenous territory and many of the special entitlements granted to the recognized *pueblos* in the Constitution are explicitly or implicitly tied to notions of territoriality.⁹ As far as most sources up

9 On the one hand, in Article 30, which defines the concept of “*nación y pueblo indígena originario*,” territoriality is listed as one of the markers of a *pueblo*. Several of the special rights

until very recently go, references to the Yungas as ‘Afrobolivian territory’ or the ‘region of Afrobolivians’ went no further than to say that a significant part of the Afrobolivian population historically lived there and that there are still many *comunidades* where Afrobolivians make up a significant proportion of the population. By no means did it add up to an exclusive claim to that territory by Afrobolivians which would put them in direct competition with other segments of society. As land rights and territory are among the most tangible and economically significant (and thus most highly contested) aspects of the *pueblo* status, Afrobolivian claims in this regard have not been as straightforward as they have been in the realms of culture and language. Afrobolivian activists are very keenly aware that touching on the subject of exclusive land rights in the Yungas might mean losing most of the support that they have enjoyed from indigenous groups. This does not stop them from invoking the concept in their action plans, agendas and programs though, as CONAFRO’s most recent agenda shows. CONAFRO instated a *Secretaría de Tierra, Territorio y Medio Ambiente* whose central responsibility is to “push for [the land of] Afrobolivian communities being recognized as our territory.”¹⁰ I have described notions of Afrobolivian autochthony in the local context of Cala Cala (see chapter 3) and have also hinted at the importance of the Yungas in articulations of Afrobolivianity more generally (see chapter 6). As a consequence of *pueblo*-ization these discourses have now also entered political rhetoric.

Finding ways to argue for Afrobolivian cultural distinctiveness, historic tradition, language and a relationship to territory similar to that of indigenous peoples was an important step on a discursive level. What Afrobolivian activists very quickly and astutely learned in the months after the promulgation of the New Constitution and the following general elections held in late 2009 was that in order to open up spaces of participation and harvest more concrete benefits of recognition, one further step was necessary: *el pueblo Afroboliviano* needed an *ente matriz* – literally a “mother entity,” meaning a single institution that represents a “strong and unified *pueblo Afroboliviano*.”

listed in Article 31 are also linked to territoriality (self-determination, prior consultation, the right to participate in the benefits of the exploitation of natural resources). What is more, territoriality can also serve as a foundation for claims to political autonomy of an indigenous group within the boundaries of a specific territory.

10 “*Gestión para que las comunidades Afrobolivianas sean declaradas nuestro territorio.*”

The *Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano* (CONAFRO): the organizational response to the *pueblo* discourse

The history behind and around CONAFRO's foundation is instructive for a variety of reasons. First of all, it shows the great influence of newly opening spaces and possibilities for Afrobolivian individuals and organizations in the Plurinational State. Economic funding from the Ministry of Education, specific legal provisions, and institutional support from a variety of state institutions were crucial in the founding of CONAFRO. Secondly, CONAFRO as an organization mirrors the changing political articulations of Afrobolivianity in its structures, goals and aspirations in the sense that CONAFRO is the idea of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* turned into an organization. Conceptualized as a nationally active organization that represents dispersed communities and local grassroots organizations with a unified voice and under a centralizing logic, CONAFRO as an organization is the outcome of Afrobolivian interpretations of indigenous social movements (*movimientos sociales*). *Movimiento social* has become a ubiquitous term in Bolivian politics nowadays, and even members of the current government repeatedly speak of themselves as being "the government of social movements" (see also Torrez and Zegada 2008). For most of my interlocutors, the term describes certain practices and modes of legitimation of power and representation that allegedly counter hegemonic neoliberal forms of governance. For them, a *movimiento social* and its leaders represent the people (*el pueblo*). Its representatives' authority is legitimized by the base through voting and ongoing participation in debates and the exchange of ideas. Interestingly, many adherents of this view conceptualize their way of doing politics in opposition to the very widespread NGO-like structures of organizations and their technocratic, developmentalist attitudes and actions. Compliance with this model seems to be a prerequisite for obtaining any attention from state institutions. One of the main characteristics of this model is the existence of a national-level organization that represents the group in question vis-à-vis central state organs, while the regional and local levels are the arenas in which most of the debates take place. Only if an organization fits this definition can its members hope to benefit from state-funded programs that are channeled through *movimientos sociales*. One of the main obstacles to Afrobolivian mobilization, activists stated, was the fact that no national organization existed before the foundation of CONAFRO and that they were not able to make any substantial progress due to this situation.

Envisioning CONAFRO and the logic of *movimientos sociales* as a form of governance

The meetings that would eventually lead to the creation of CONAFRO started out as rather informal gatherings in the city of La Paz. According to Juan Angola Macon-

de, it was mainly Afrobolivian public functionaries – employees of the *Ministerio de Educación*, the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Rural y Tierras* and the *Viceministerio de Comercio Exterior* – as well as Angola himself who conducted the initial meetings at *La Prensa*, a restaurant in the government district of La Paz. They were sometimes accompanied by non-Afrobolivian co-workers from state institutions and occasionally by other urban Afrobolivian activists. During these meetings, they came up with the idea of founding a nationwide Afrobolivian organization, “*un ente matriz*” for the *pueblo Afroboliviano*. Planning the founding of an *ente matriz* was their response to repeated rejections of Afrobolivian demands by national and international institutions due to the fact that there was no nationally active, representative Afrobolivian ‘mother institution’ through which funding could be channeled or representation organized. For example, there was no formal mechanism or transparent election on behalf of the Afrobolivian constituency to elect Jorge Medina as their candidate to run for the post of *Asambleísta Nacional* in 2009. Medina always claims to have been elected democratically during an *ampliado* (public gathering) of the *pueblo Afroboliviano* held in La Paz. His critics argue that he seized the opportunity and used his contacts established as leader of CADIC to take advantage of a vacuum in the ranks of the MAS party to be elected as the only available candidate. Be this as it may, the Afrobolivian leaders meeting in *La Prensa* in 2010/11 recognized that their project lacked institutional backing and representation in the eyes of the state. This is why they decided that *el pueblo Afroboliviano* needed an institution representing it on a national level.

In this regard, they explicitly pointed to indigenous groups whose nationally active organizations had accomplished nationwide recognition and representativeness in the eyes of state institutions. Since MAS’s rise to power in 2005/2006, these indigenous organizations have enjoyed an unprecedented level of direct influence in national politics. As members of the *Pacto de Unidad* (see footnote 15, chapter 2) and coordinated by the *Coordinadora Nacional por el Cambio* (CONALCAM), the large indigenous *movimientos sociales* have exerted great influence on the national government since 2005. Certain key leaders of these movements have also been integrated into the structures of the state. As Nancy Postero (2017:31) has recently reminded us, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party – also according to repeated statements by Evo Morales himself – is not supposed to be “a traditional party, but the political instrument of the social movements that form its base.”¹¹ By the time Afrobolivian leaders were envisioning CONAFRO, they were keenly aware of these new forms of governance in what has been termed the “New Indigenous State of Bolivia” (Canessa 2012a) or Bolivia’s “post-multicultural” moment (Postero 2006).

11 By 2017, the accuracy of these kinds of statements is in doubt as the MAS has concentrated power in state institutions to a great extent, creating open dissent from various social movements (see Postero 2017:17).

With this in mind and their experiences from the Constituent Assembly still vividly present, they developed a strategy to found an Afrobolivian organization that would meet the standards of an *ente matriz*, a legitimate *movimiento social*.

It is crucial to note that the idea to found CONAFRO did not arise from the rural communities that are often represented as the backbone of the organization: it was envisioned within the ranks of a very limited number of formally educated, politically connected and urban-based activists. They realized that the MAS government had shifted its focus from NGOs and the traditional development sector to what government rhetoric called *movimientos sociales*, organizations representing a certain constituency, not merely *working on behalf* of somebody. The political shift away from organizations like CADIC – that responded to the developmental ideals of the neoliberal multiculturalist state and never pretended to represent the Afrobolivian people, but rather worked on their behalf – made it necessary to envision a completely new Afrobolivian ‘entity’: an ‘entity’ that could legitimately claim to represent the whole of the Afrobolivian population throughout the country and not only certain factions of urban residents, rural communities or political allies. In order to achieve this level of representation, they based their plan on the ideal of forming an organization committed to “organic leadership” (*liderazgos orgánicos*), a mayor buzzword in Bolivian politics and part and parcel of the MAS government’s claim to legitimately govern by the will of the people (*gobernar obedeciendo*). In order to claim “organic leadership,” they decided that it would be necessary to convene a national Afrobolivian meeting in order to discuss their plan, hold elections and spread the word. Consequently, they then set out to find an institution that would fund a National Afrobolivian Congress in order to be able to consult with the constituency and ground the organization in democratic procedures. However, initial attempts to secure funding from the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights failed due to conflicting interests and competing leaders’ interventions. The anti-CONAFRO faction mainly comprised of Jorge Medina and his followers associated with CADIC, who branded CONAFRO supporters as opportunistic “*arribistas*” (*parvenus*), unrightfully seizing the opportunities created through the years-long mobilization of the older generation of leaders. The proponents of CONAFRO in turn denounced the sectarian practices of Medina’s followers as hindering Afrobolivian political mobilization in order to secure personal benefits. This dispute has still not been resolved today and is mirrored by the conflicts between competing organizations at the local, regional and national levels.

Eventually, the proponents of CONAFRO seized an opportunity directly linked to new legal provisions and the generalized political opening for Afrobolivians following the passing of the New Constitution in 2009. In the aftermath of the passing of a new educational law (*Ley 070*) in 2010, the *Ministerio de Educación* approached Afrobolivians and urged them to found a *Consejo Educativo*. The thirty-seven groups officially recognized by the New Constitution (including Afrobolivians) were to play

a crucial part in the reform of the educational system that was high on the agenda at that time. Law 070 had ratified the institution of *Consejos Educativos de Pueblos Originarios* originally instated by the last educational reform in the 1990s (“*Ley No. 1565 de la Reforma Educativa del 7 de Julio de 1994*”) and granted these councils new rights and responsibilities. Each *pueblo* – through its respective *Consejo Educativo* – had to elaborate the fundamental tools for introducing a new kind of education that would accompany, deepen and broaden the country’s process of decolonization and change. Since Afrobolivians did not have an educational council (the legal provisions of 1994 only envisaged councils for “*Aymará, Quechua, Guaraní y Amazónico multiétnico y otros*”) the Ministry of Education urged them to create one. For that purpose, the Ministry of Education agreed to economically and logistically support a National Afrobolivian Congress and the proponents of CONAFRO took advantage of that opportunity to not only found a *Consejo Educativo* but to simultaneously launch their *ente matriz*.

The “*I. Congreso Nacional Afroboliviano*” was held on 2 and 3 September 2011 at Casa John Wesley in La Paz. According to the organizers, the event hosted representatives from all major cities in the country as well as a great number of communities in the Yungas. The objectives of founding a *Consejo Educativo* as well as electing representatives and ratifying the structures for the newly established CONAFRO were accomplished. Most members of the original group did end up in important positions as official representatives and continue to shape the work of CONAFRO today.

Structural and ideological basics or: what it means to be an “*ente matriz*”

The conceptual basis for CONAFRO’s activities is the idea of a collective Afrobolivian entity with similar life conditions, problems, goals and aspirations. Similar to the Constitution, which made “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*” the subject of collective rights without further explanation, the founders of CONAFRO took this collectivity (*el pueblo Afroboliviano*) and its boundaries for granted as self-explanatory. CONAFRO has subsequently tried to position itself as the ‘natural’ representation of this *pueblo*. The organization’s agenda specifically states that a strong and unified *pueblo Afroboliviano* (“*un Pueblo Afroboliviano fuerte y mancomunado*”) lies at the heart of their political efforts. CONAFRO is thus a clear step towards a unifying discourse on a national scale and tries to counter regionalist tendencies and the often cited rural-urban divide. While previously, people regularly addressed issues referring to “*los negros*,” “*los Afrobolivianos*,” “*las comunidades Afrobolivianas*” or “*la cultura Afroboliviana*,” CONAFRO’s agenda exclusively works with the term “*el pueblo Afroboliviano*”: the political articulation of a variety of different Afrobolivian communities (urban and rural) under a single banner. This very specific rhetorical, political and legal articulation of an Afrobolivian collectivity as *un pueblo* has a variety of consequen-

ces. In the field of political organizations it requires the existence and at the same time strengthens the position of a unified representation (i.e. CONAFRO). Rhetorically, it aligns Afrobolivians' political programs with indigenous politics, thus rendering them politically and legally compatible but also creating potential for rivalry in view of limited resources. As I mentioned at the outset, the foundation of CONAFRO must be seen as a response to the overall political climate in Bolivia (*el proceso de cambio*) and specific opportunities and obstacles for Afrobolivian organizations and representatives at certain moments. As we have seen, official recognition and favorable circumstances for a certain type of organization motivated the founders of CONAFRO to a great extent. In this respect, it is also telling to analyze the organizational structure and the political discourses of CONAFRO and its leaders. This analysis will further strengthen my point that CONAFRO is envisaged as a very specific, new type of organization at the same time responding to and envisioning the idea of a *pueblo Afroboliviano*.

Structurally, CONAFRO purports to mirror both peasant union structures and elements of the nationally active indigenous and peasant organizations like CONAMAQ, CIDOB and CSUTCB. It consists of different *secretarías* which work in different thematic areas and thus resembles the *sindicatos* of most Yungas *comunidades*. Interestingly, CONAFRO's statutes have ever since the outset envisioned the possibility of creating regional and local branches of the organization. At least informally, such sub-groups now exist in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz. Yet CONAFRO remains a top-down project to a large extent.¹² Rather than being born through the 'organic' agglomeration of local organizations – as official rhetoric has it – CONAFRO first created a national super-structure that it now tries to fill with local organizational life. This drive to be the all-encompassing organization for all Afrobolivians is what differentiates CONAFRO from its predecessors. Another important difference – especially in contrast to CADIC, its most serious competitor for funds, legitimacy and followers – is that the people occupying positions within CONAFRO are elected representatives rather than employees chosen by appointment. Accordingly, neither the board of directors/executive committee nor the technical commission are the most important groups in deliberation and decision making. This role is – again, at least theoretically – reserved for the National Congress, which purports to unite the whole *pueblo* and reach decisions by consensus. CADIC, on the other hand, is organized much more hierarchically and answers to a completely different organizational logic. It has a self-appointed founder-director (Jorge Medina) who hires employees to work in the different areas the organization tries to cover. The fact that Medina was at the same time the director of this company-

12 In this sense, CONAFRO mirrors the perspective and the practices of government-led development projects that are equally top-down in many instances, as my discussion of a project in Cala Cala in chapter 10 will show.

like NGO and positioned himself as the most legitimate representative of his *pueblo* sparked fierce criticism and lead to a great amount of conflict between Medina and the emerging CONAFRO. In terms of their general political discourse, official mission statement and objectives, CONAFRO differs only marginally from CADIC. The small differences that do exist, however, point in the same direction as the organizational differences already mentioned, namely that CONAFRO first and foremost claims to represent an Afrobolivian constituency and lobby for it politically. The same is true for the activities CONAFRO is mostly responsible for. The organization is much less involved in workshops, projects and training courses, but focuses rather on lobbying, intervening in political discussion and placing CONAFRO members in government institutions and ministries.

An important claim always put forth by CONAFRO activists is that “CONAFRO belongs to the *comunidades*” (“CONAFRO *es de las comunidades*”). Ideally and in discourse, CONAFRO is designed to function as a national confederation of local Afrobolivian community organizations. This discursive move is crucial in the struggle for legitimacy, since only the national representation of a legally recognized collective subject can hope to convince state institutions of its legitimacy. Yet in practice, there are no communal Afrobolivian ethnic organizations, since there are no exclusively Afrobolivian communities. The only organizational CONAFRO member from the Yungas is Tocaña’s *Centro de Expresión e Integración Cultural Afroboliviano* (CEICA), an organizational remnant from the times of *saya* revitalization in the 1990s that organizes *saya* performances in the community. Besides that, there are no formally established Afrobolivian communal organizations that could become part of CONAFRO. The ‘representation’ of communities that CONAFRO purports to effectuate is based on certain community representatives’ participation in the National Afrobolivian Congresses and is thus highly informal, opaque and volatile. Especially beyond the CONAFRO strongholds in the Yungas around the town of Coroico (mainly the *comunidades* of Tocaña and Mururata) and the urban organizations in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, CONAFRO’s legitimacy as the representative of Afrobolivian interests is highly contested. Cala Cala’s residents, for example, took considerable pride in having “sent away” CONAFRO representatives that were trying to “take advantage” of the community and its members and did not work for or speak on behalf the “*comunidad* Cala Cala.” Even though they later expressed their allegiance to CONAFRO on paper for strategic purposes, individual members kept on insisting that they did not feel represented by or did not actively participate in CONAFRO activities.

Strategies and achievements

According to its official mission statement, CONAFRO is fighting for an Afrobolivian presence in contexts of public decision and policy making in order to advocate

for development projects that benefit its constituency. Interestingly, this general mission statement hints at the logics and strategies that marked Afrobolivian politics and mobilization in the past (development) and at the same time directs attention to the newly established spaces of official participation in government-related spheres as the main site of struggle in the present. Indeed, up to today, CONAFRO has mainly tried to place its members in political and administrative positions. This inevitably leads to disagreement and conflict, since the expectations of hired and salaried government employees on the one hand and social movement activists and representatives on the other tend to differ greatly. Whereas government employees (at least ideally) should go about their tasks impartially, activists are expected to take sides, fight for their cause and lobby for the interests of their constituency. CONAFRO leaders who have managed to obtain administrative positions struggle to balance the expectations related to these different roles – mainly with limited success. Given the reduced opportunities to exert concrete political influence from an administrative position that most of the activists-turned-*funcionarios* have to deal with, this is hardly surprising. Of course, the presence of Afrobolivians in spaces of public administration has long been overdue – and in some cases the mere fact that an Afrobolivian person sits behind an official desk is a political message – but for the large bulk of Afrobolivians the situation has hardly changed and the effects of CONAFRO's actions remain largely symbolic. Critics argue that CONAFRO's strategy only benefits its leaders (who end up in lucrative government jobs) and does little to improve the situation of their constituency. To the contrary: CONAFRO's strategy even facilitates cooptation and weakens the organization's overall power to fight for a common cause instead serving a select few that pretend to work for their people but claim all the benefits for themselves. From the perspective of CONAFRO's leaders, however, it is only from within the state and government structures that Afrobolivian mobilization can succeed and reach the desired goals. For them, the aspiration to enter government jobs is neither a form of cooptation of the organization, nor a matter of individual activists reaping the benefits of collective mobilization (*buscar los apetitos personales*). Rather, it is the logical consequence of the legal empowerment and the official inclusion granted by the New Constitution. Where, if not in government offices, could Afrobolivian people request inclusion on the basis of the Constitution? How, if not through the alignment of CONAFRO with the governing MAS party, could this inclusion be accomplished? These are common rhetorical questions CONAFRO leaders direct at their critics, thus making a case for their kind of mobilization. CONAFRO leaders are, obviously, aware of the risks such a strategy entails. In particular, the close alliance with the MAS party is considered a possible future liability and is not unanimously supported by the leadership. What is more, few if any of the CONAFRO leaders I have met struck me as particularly fond of the MAS party on purely ideological grounds. Even though they may swear allegiance to Evo Morales, MAS and

the *proceso de cambio*, they mainly do so on strategic grounds. Whether the strategy is beneficial for Afrobolivians in general or rather directed at personal benefit for certain individuals – as some critics argue – is an open question.

The widespread criticism and conflicting claims notwithstanding, CONAFRO has managed to position the organization as the legitimate representation of Afrobolivians, at least in the eyes of most government institutions. The *Ministerio de Educación* is firmly allied to CONAFRO for a variety of reasons. First of all, various CONAFRO members work for the Ministry of Education, blurring the boundaries between government functionaries and social movement activists. Secondly, CONAFRO institutionally integrated the Afrobolivian *Consejo Educativo (CEPA)* as its *Secretaría de Educación*, thus fusing an officially recognized institution with its social movement organizational structures. In practice, this means that all efforts to work with CEPA must necessarily go through CONAFRO since their secretary of education is at the same time the director of the *Consejo Educativo*. This double role is a direct consequence of the parallel founding of CEPA and CONAFRO, and effectively makes CONAFRO the exclusive gatekeeper for educational programs directed at Afrobolivians by the Ministry of Education. What is more, CONAFRO has successfully managed to monopolize access to government-sponsored positions for advisors and functionaries of the newly founded *Instituto Plurinacional de Estudio de Lenguas y Cultura (IPELC)* and its Afrobolivian branch, the *Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Afroboliviana (ILC-AFRO)*.

Working with the *Ministerio de Educación* served as a key argument for CONAFRO activists positioning themselves as the legitimate representatives of the *pueblo Afroboliviano* vis-à-vis other government institutions. Having established a precedent through the close alliance with the Ministry of Education, CONAFRO representatives managed to secure important supporters in favor of their claim to legitimacy. Very importantly, CONAFRO managed to successfully negotiate their way onto the governing MAS party's electoral ticket. In the 2014 elections, for example, it was CONAFRO co-founder and Secretary of International Relations Mónica Rey who ran for the position of *Diputada Supranacional* for MAS and was eventually elected for a five-year term starting in 2015. More recently, in the same vein, CONAFRO managed to place their former executive Juan Carlos Ballivián in an important position in the *Defensoría del Pueblo* that is run by an ombudsman closely linked to the MAS party since 2016. Through their close alignment with the ruling MAS party, they also secured support from the MAS-led regional government (*prefectura*) of La Paz and its *Prefecto* Cesar Cocarico (2010–2015), from MAS representatives in different regional and municipal parliaments, as well as government-friendly NGOs and media. Successful mobilization, in turn, allowed CONAFRO to secure funds and deliver programs, projects and workshops to various communities. What is more, the visibility of CONAFRO leaders in the aforementioned positions convinced many Afrobolivians that CONAFRO would

be able to effect palpable changes and adhere more strongly to the narrative of representing the Afrobolivian people since CONAFRO leaders had successfully managed to get into those positions.

Beyond placing individuals in strategic positions within the government hierarchy, public administration and the ruling MAS party, CONAFRO has mobilized the media in order to generate support for the organization. What is more, CONAFRO has managed to affiliate most of the urban organizations in all major Bolivian cities (with only a few exceptions remaining loyal to Jorge Medina and rejecting CONAFRO's leadership), thus channeling the regional support base of these organizations. Additionally, CONAFRO has been involved in a series of publications and scholarly projects, most prominently in a collaborative project with FUNPROEIB-Andes increasing its visibility and thus its scope of operation and legitimacy.¹³ Yet, as the next section will show, neither the conceptual basics of the New Constitution, nor the organizational perspective represented by CONAFRO are uncontested.

The limits of recognition

First and foremost, it is important to recognize the groundbreaking character of the New Constitution for Afrobolivians. In light of the country's history and the prevailing discourses on national identity and cultural diversity that are in their majority mute on issues concerning Afrobolivians, it can hardly be overstated what this kind of symbolic inclusion means for many Afrobolivians. It is the long-desired visibilization, inclusion and acknowledgement that so many people have fought for in recent decades. It is the official acknowledgement by the state that Afrobolivians are, in fact, "Bolivians, too" (Busdiecker 2007). The extremely high hopes many Afrobolivians invested in the subject of recognition also explain, at least in part, why the palpable effects (or rather the lack thereof) are so meticulously scrutinized.

There are a number of factors I would like to highlight as pointing to the limits of legal recognition and with that also to the limits of mobilizing Afrobolivians as a *pueblo* in the sense of the Constitution. I have addressed the more subtle tensions between Afrobolivian everyday sociality and the logics of the Constitution in chapter 5 and will elaborate on the subject from the perspective of Cala Cala in the next chapter. Here I will focus on the consequences as experienced in the realm of political mobilization and organizational life more broadly. The limitations of the prevailing modalities of recognition my interlocutors most commonly expressed relate to different aspects. On the one hand, there are certain contradictions with regard to the collective subject of recognition: *el pueblo Afroboliviano*. On the other

13 See <http://fundacion.proeibandes.org/proyectos/conafro.php> [18/07/2017]

hand, the specific rights granted to this collective subject do not escape criticism. Finally, and this is a problem not limited to the realm of legal recognition but concerns Afrobolivian activism more broadly, the question arises whether it is indeed possible to articulate a sufficiently cohesive Afrobolivian collectivity in practice. I will now address these criticisms in more detail.

In the sections above, I have pointed out the seminal importance of the concept of *pueblo*, as it has important consequences for the way an Afrobolivian collectivity is imagined and mobilized. In their mission statements, Afrobolivian organizations were very successful at making their claims compatible with the language of recognition; they furthermore managed to convince the *Asamblea Constituyente* that a distinct Afrobolivian collectivity should be recognized under the premises of the *pueblo* status; and finally, they were quite successful in arguing their case in negotiations with different government agencies. Remember that Afrobolivians have the same rights as indigenous peoples “*en todo lo que corresponda*,” “wherever appropriate,” leaving it to the interpretation of the parties involved in a specific project, law, initiative or court case whether and to what degree a certain situation justifies the extension of indigenous rights to Afrobolivians. What is more, as I have described in the section on CONAFRO, the Afrobolivian leadership has managed to establish a legally registered, nationally active and – in the eyes of the state – widely accepted national organization. So it might seem that official recognition was a success story. Yet there is one decisive aspect where the success story is increasingly dubious. Whereas the state (for example, different ministries, parliaments and the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*), the governing MAS party and international cooperation have embraced CONAFRO as the legitimate representation of *el pueblo Afroboliviano*, CONAFRO’s leadership is repeatedly questioned by large parts of the Afrobolivian population. Although framed mostly as a critique of individual leaders, I would argue that behind the criticism directed at CONAFRO and its leadership by many individuals lies discontent with the underlying logics of recognition that CONAFRO can hardly change. This is also something CONAFRO leaders recognize, yet they point to the fact that the regime of recognition they have to operate with does not allow for certain things the population would most urgently demand.

Robert Albro (2010a) has pointed out that the New Bolivian Constitution recognizes only a very specific collective indigenous subject to the exclusion of others. For him and others, the definitions of what constitutes an indigenous *pueblo* in the 2009 document reflect a strongly Aymara-centric view, legally privileging a certain collective indigenous subject while at the same time marginalizing alternative versions of indigeneity – in Albro’s case urban indigeneity in provincial towns (cf. Shakow 2014). His critique goes further than the concerns that have been voiced by the self-represented *mestizo* population of the country – namely that the representation of Bolivia as a mostly indigenous country leaves out an alleged *mestizo*

majority – to suggest that even though the New Constitution must be seen as a milestone in the struggle for indigenous rights, it nevertheless fails to recognize a large part of the self-identified indigenous population. A similar argument can be made for the Afrobolivian population since Afrobolivian recognition is based on the same limited premises as indigenous recognition. For Afrobolivians in urban contexts, the utility of official recognition is highly doubtful, since the collective subject and the associated rights aim at homogenous, territorially bounded communities and their purported way of life. Thus the rights do not resonate with the grievances of individuals living in highly diverse urban environments, and recognition remains an elusive achievement with no practical consequences for most urban Afrobolivians.

And even in rural settings, the question remains whether it is possible to mobilize people and also to work on their behalf within the logics of the New Constitution. Due to the Constitution's homogenizing impetus and its narrow definition of community, it is hardly able to grasp the reality of the Afrobolivian presence in rural *comunidades*. Being a direct organizational response to the Constitution and its ensuing political logics, CONAFRO suffers from the limitations these conceptualizations have inscribed in its organizational structure. Taking cues from large national indigenous confederations, the basic idea behind CONAFRO is to agglomerate territorially based, ethnically homogenous Afrobolivian communities in its organizational structure. The problem is that such homogeneous Afrobolivian communities do not exist. This situation is not limited to CONAFRO, but has accompanied Afrobolivian activism since the very beginning. When Afrobolivian organizations aimed to spread their logics and demands throughout the rural Yungas and engaged in a process of mobilization that transcended the urban context, they often encountered the same set of problems. The idea of the existence of a unified “*pueblo Afroboliviano*” required rural communities to subscribe to it in order to legitimize the leadership of its proponents. Besides recruiting urban residents with at least some Afrobolivian ancestry to strengthen the urban bases of the movement, leaders sought support from rural Afrobolivian communities and their leaders. The problem they encountered was the generalized absence of a clearly defined Afrobolivian leadership in most rural communities. With the exception of Tocaña, Afrobolivians in the Yungas are a minority in all *comunidades* and since they are integrated into the system of peasant unions across ethnic boundaries, there was no such thing as an Afrobolivian leadership in the Yungas – at least not in a formal, widely accepted sense. This led to complicated issues: If there is no formally agreed upon leader of a given community, who can be addressed as representing community A or B? In most cases, urban organizations turned to specific individuals who showed interest in CONAFRO and who claimed to enjoy an elevated informal status within their respective community. However, this practice was very volatile in gathering support and longstanding alliances. Additionally, the in-

formally chosen representatives did not go unquestioned and in many cases their claims to leadership were strongly challenged. This led to conflicts within and between rural communities and made the mobilization of a constituency defined in ethnic terms highly problematic.

Similar to the case that Restrepo describes for Colombia (2004:706), there are no ethnic organizations of Afrobolivians in the Yungas that could form the basis of an ethnic movement or become the pillars of an organization claiming to represent *un pueblo*. Mónica Rey (1998:91) has argued that, beginning in colonial times, the *saya* groups in *comunidades* with Afrobolivian populations had functioned as a “hidden organization” (*“organización oculta”*) providing Afrobolivians with the possibility of salvaging their “ancestral tribal organizations” (*organización ancestral de carácter tribal*) in the context of slavery. This view is corroborated by descriptions of complex hierarchies structuring the *saya* until the first half of the 20th century. In an often cited testimony by Manuel Barra – one of the oldest inhabitants of Tocaña – he meticulously describes how certain leadership positions structured *saya* performances (Centro Pedagógico y Cultural “Simón I. Patiño” 1998b). In the same vein, Martín Ballivián (2014) argues that *saya* groups had important social and political meanings in the time before the Agrarian Reform of 1953. As far as the information I collected during my fieldwork goes, there was not much left of these structures by the time the urban residents sought to establish links to rural communities in the 1980s. They relied instead on groups that had been constituted fairly recently and dated back only to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their foundation was mainly motivated by workshops organized by the urban residents, the nationally publicized hype around *saya* and the economic possibilities associated with *saya* performances for certain audiences. Thus, by organizing dance groups, rural residents recreated a space conceptualized as exclusively Afrobolivian that in some instances could serve as the basis for a proto-ethnic organization. The question is to what extent the *saya* groups can be considered as an organizational space parallel to the peasant unions and whether they can serve as the organizational matrix to articulate an Afrobolivian ethnic movement in the Yungas that would give substance to CONAFRO’s claims to leadership. The cases of Cala Cala and other *comunidades* – where no exclusively Afrobolivian political organizations have emerged – suggest that this is rather not the case.

Conclusion

As I have shown in the preceding chapters, there is a great number of parallel processes that shape Afrobolivian mobilization and the articulation of a collective Afrobolivian subject. Rooted in the efforts to revitalize Afrobolivian dance and culture in circumstances marked by migration, discrimination and the appropriation

of Afrobolivian traditions by *mestizo* popular culture, the *Movimiento Afro* in Bolivia embarked on different organizational and political routes in order to make its claims heard. Some strategies meant appealing to the logics of multicultural reform and stressing parallels with indigenous groups in terms of suffering and disenfranchisement. Others relied on embracing the opportunities for public visibility provided by folklorized culture or engaging in continental networks of Afrodescendants, foregrounding African roots as a means of claiming cultural uniqueness and differentiated citizenship. The responses to these claims are as varied as the strategies employed. In some instances Afrobolivian demands have been heard and accepted, and certain goals have been achieved. In other cases the struggle for recognition and equality continues.

In this chapter, I have highlighted three more recent developments: the judicialization of Afrobolivian activism, the discursive consolidation of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* and the foundation of a nationally active *ente matriz*. Afrobolivian political activism has undergone a decisive transformation in the sense that political goals have been reformulated as rights to be claimed from the state. This judicialization of politics resonated with trends on a regional scale (Sieder, Schjolden, and Angell 2005b; Couso, Huneeus, and Sieder 2010; Sieder 2010), as well as with the national political context dominated by the Constituent Assembly and the eventual promulgation of the New Constitution between 2005 and 2009 (cf. Schilling-Vacaflo 2010). The framing of political demands in legal language and the strong focus on making an impact within the constitutional reform process in turn fostered the discursive consolidation of the concept of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* and eventually sparked an organizational response through the formation of CONAFRO in 2011. CONAFRO's limitations in terms of making a political impact, as well as the serious doubts many Afrobolivians express with regard to the legitimacy of its leadership, point us towards more general limits of recognition. These limits have to do with the frictions caused by the contrast between the Constitution's definition of community and actual conditions on the ground. Whereas the former relies on the idea of ethnically homogenous and territorially bounded communities (*pueblos*), the latter are shaped by ethnoracial heterogeneity, deep economic entanglements and historically grounded social integration.

Even though Afrobolivian organizations have been able to benefit from a limited number of government policies that favor officially recognized *pueblos*, the prevailing logic of mobilization as a *pueblo* is highly contested, as is the question of leadership. The mobilization of Afrobolivians based on the propagation of a homogeneous collective subject expressed in the idea of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* is fraught with contradictions and remains an unstable and volatile political project. By subsuming the experiences and particularities of very small and dispersed rural and urban communities, it obscures many decisive facets of what it means to be *Afro* in different contexts in Bolivia. Even the much less homogenizing term 'Afrobolivian

communities' (in English and in the plural), that I use as a shorthand to refer to the *comunidades* in the Yungas with varying levels of Afrobolivian population, is not unproblematic. As I showed in chapter 3, what it means to be *Afro* in Cala Cala is so intimately tied to the history of this particular place, and in many cases even to specific individuals, that it cannot be generalized to apply even to the neighboring *comunidades* and even less to a shared sense of Afrobolivianity on a national scale. Speaking of a single, unified, and homogeneous *pueblo Afroboliviano* presupposes a level of Afrobolivian groupness that I have not encountered in Cala Cala or elsewhere.

Thus the “*Movimiento Afro*” remains fragmented despite the efforts at unification pursued by CONAFRO. Quarrels between rural and urban, between Nor and Sud Yungas, between families, political factions and generations are still very common. The unifying efforts of CONAFRO notwithstanding, different leaders rally support independently and Afrobolivian mobilization is hampered by factionalism and strong competition between certain charismatic personalities. Most organizations only rhetorically address a nationwide audience and a single *pueblo*, but in political practice focus their actions on certain cities or *comunidades*. It is in this context that the foundation of CONAFRO and the impact of its mobilizations must be analyzed. Its formation is a top-down project, responding more to the plurinational logics of recognition and the rhetoric of *pueblo* status than to the grassroots initiatives of local organizations.

In the next chapter, I discuss a case from Cala Cala that reflects many of the contradictions that emerge when the concept of *el pueblo Afroboliviano* is engaged in local contexts. Through the analysis of a tourism project based on ‘Afrobolivian culture’ in Cala Cala, I shed light on the local engagements of nationally circulating ideas of Afrobolivianity. I will draw together the arguments made with respect to the notions of what it means to be *Afro* in Cala Cala and my analysis of broader articulations of Afrobolivianity, fleshing out concrete contexts in which the plurinational perspective on Afrobolivianity is engaged and negotiated by *Cala Caleños* against the backdrop of local understandings of community and belonging.

