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INDIGENOUS TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY AND SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE DIVERSE AMERICAS

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Building Guaraní Charagua Iyambae Autonomy: New Autonomies and Hegemonies in the Plurinational State of Bolivia

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Introduction

The first Indigenous autonomy fully recognized as such by the Plurinational State of Bolivia was born on 8 January 2017, in a small town in the heart of the Bolivian Chaco called Charagua Pueblo (Cordillera Province, Department of Santa Cruz). Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy, the name its promoters gave to a new government system designed by local actors following the new Bolivian legal framework, was inspired both by Guaraní political and cultural practices and by the new lexicon put into circulation in Bolivia since its "re-founding" as a Plurinational State in 2009. Since early 2017, following a complex political construction and process of legal transition, this new Indigenous autonomous framework has replaced the municipality – the local governance form that spread across the country's rural areas following the decentralizing reforms of the mid-1990s that were promoted in the framework of what was called "neoliberal multiculturalism" (Kohl, 2002; Postero, 2009).

The extinction of the former municipality of Charagua and its "re-founding" as a brand-new Indigenous autonomy was staged via a crowded public event full of State authorities and Bolivian Indigenous movement leaders. At this event, the 46 authorities that make up the new (and complex) institutional fabric of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy were sworn in. Most but not all of the new authorities of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy are Guaraní, originally from several of the more than 100 rural communities within the autonomy's territorial jurisdiction. The territory comprises an immense but sparsely populated space (more than 74,400 km²) with some 40,000 inhabitants[1] settled only in the northwestern parts of the territory, leaving deserted the vast eastern plains that make up the bulk of territorial jurisdiction of the autonomy.

Previously elected through different mechanisms that put the pluralist and intercultural concept of democracy contained in the 2009 Constitution into practice, the new authorities of a Charagua that today proudly claims to be *iyambae*, "without owner," were sworn into office in January 2017. The swearing-in took place in an auditorium where the speakers' words – "historic milestone," "new era" "responsibility," "unity," "change," "development" – resonated with transcendence and political emotion among (pluri)national Bolivian flags and Guaraní symbols. In one of the speeches, a young Guaraní leader (captain or *mburuvicha*) declared that "the old discriminating and excluding municipal system has been buried." And in a veiled allusion to the traditional *criollo-mestizo* elites of the Bolivian Chaco, called "*karai*" by the Guaraní, he added: "The time when only a few families governed all of Charagua is over!"[2]

As if wanting to complement the words of the *mburuvicha* from the academic archives of knowledge, then-Vice President Álvaro García Linera, the highest authority of the Bolivian State present at the inaugural act of the new autonomous Charagua, brought to the coalition one of his favorite concepts: hegemony. This is a concept that occupied a good part of García Linera's speeches and writings during his time as Vice President and organic intellectual of the "process of change" (for example: García Linera, 2010, 2011). Linera took advantage of his speech to transmit to the newly elected Charagua authorities a sort of lesson in political theory coming directly from the "teachings of President Evo:"

> The Aymara and Quechua converted into State power to defend Aymara and Quechua interests, and those of non-Aymara and non-Quechua. That is the key to political hegemony, the teaching of President Evo: relying on the Indigenous-First Peoples nucleus to irradiate, conquer, articulate and bring on board the rest of the peoples, social classes and sectors.

At that time, Linera's words were rooted in a politically stable present (apparently) with a solid hegemony embodied by Morales who, always from the officialist narrative, was sustained by an "Indigenous-First Peoples nucleus" capable of "conquering" other non-Indigenous sectors. From this point of view, the lesson to replicate in the new autonomy would thus be to build a new Indigenous – in this case Guaraní – hegemony through the exercise of a (self-) government capable of questioning other non-Guaraní sectors. It is a lesson that takes on a particular meaning in a space like Charagua, with a Guaraní social majority, but ethnically heterogeneous and post-colonial, where the Guaraní have been coexisting with *criollo-mestizo* or *karai* sectors for almost two centuries from a subordinate position mediated by deep material and symbolic inequalities. These "few families" that "have always governed all of Charagua" to which the Guaraní *muburuvicha* alluded in the aforementioned speech.

In light of Bolivia's current deep crisis, however, Linera's words acquire a much more somber tone, far removed from the triumphalist epic of those who speak – or imagine they speak – from the pinnacle of a hegemony affirmed from State power. In view of the events of October and November 2019, and the alarming return to the public space of an anti-Indigenous racism that in recent years had withdrawn to the private sphere, the "teachings" of Morales and Linera, rather than showing us how to build "hegemony," understood as a certain consolidated political regime with closed contours, perhaps reveal the instability and fragility – but also the dynamism and richness – inherent in processes of social struggle. Whether for hegemony, autonomy or, as in the experience we will analyze in the following pages, when the boundaries between both concepts are blurred and the struggle for autonomy also becomes a search for building a new hegemony that shakes the foundations that sustain historical hegemonies.

This chapter proposes a journey through the construction of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy. It is a singular and significant autonomous

experience, not only because it is the first Indigenous autonomy that consolidated itself in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, acting as a vanguard for other Indigenous autonomous processes that are in different stages of development (cf. Exeni, 2018), but also because of the very characteristics of this particular Indigenous autonomy experience.

To start, it is important to point out that Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy is not located in the Andean region, where the majority of Bolivia's Indigenous population – Quechua and Aymara – is found, but in the Bolivian Chaco, located on the periphery of academic constructions and representations of Bolivianness – also of Bolivian Indigenousness – which continue to be predominantly Andean-centric. The case of Charagua thus places before us another type of indigeneity: that of Bolivia's Guaraní nation.

Second, unlike the high degrees of ethnic homogeneity of the rural Andean space, and of most municipalities in transition to Indigenous autonomy,[3] the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy is, as we will insist several times, crossed by ethnic heterogeneity and social complexity, giving rise to different and overlapping ways of occupying and living in a space in turn crossed by disputes over the exploitation of its natural resources, including natural gas.

Last but not least, the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy is, at last, a "success" case that contrasts with the difficulties and internal conflicts that have been unleashed in many Indigenous autonomy processes, in some cases blocking them *sine die* (cf. Cameron, 2012; Plata & Cameron, 2017, Exeni, 2018). Despite the elements of complexity of the Charagua experience, and all the problems and contradictions that have been experienced throughout the process and continue with the Indigenous autonomy already formally consolidated, the Guaraní leaders and their allies have managed to articulate a political project capable of convincing and mobilizing a large part of the Guaraní population of Charagua. This has prevented processes of disintegration and internal conflict among the Guaraní from threatening the continuity of the project. Thus, in addition to presenting a dense and rich overview of the Guaraní autonomy process in Charagua based on political ethnography (Auyero, 2012), one of the objectives of this text will be to try to explain the reasons for the Guaraní autonomy project's success (Auyero, 2012).

In terms of methodology, this chapter arises from a long process of meetings and dialogues that began in 2012 and continued until the end of 2015 through four stages of ethnographic fieldwork[4] that formed the basis of my

doctoral dissertation (Morell i Torra, 2018) and of this text.[5] Some of those meetings and dialogues were with those who have been involved in the construction of Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy from different intensities and positionings for more than eight years, although their roots and ramifications, as we will see, sink much deeper. After more than five years of following the process from a distance, albeit relativized by social networks, I had the opportunity in July 2019 to physically return to a now (formally) autonomous Charagua *iyambae*, "without owner." For three weeks I was able to verify, once again, how the complex, changing and fascinating Charagua reality – today perhaps even more changing, complex and fascinating – requires much more time to pose some kind of convincing analysis. Even so, despite the fact that this text focuses on the analysis of the autonomy-building process between 2009 and 2015, we will also refer to some contemporary dynamics of this recent Indigenous autonomy experience which, using a nice metaphor I heard in Charagua *Iyambae*, is still a *wawita* (baby) that is learning to walk.[6]

Problematizing the Notion of Indigenous Autonomy from Conceptions of "Proximate Experience"

The discussions of Indigenous autonomy are still removed from the daily life of rural Guaraní communities, where to a large extent it is still perceived as something played out in other arenas, e.g., in the world of the Guaraní leadership and intellectuals; in workshops organized by NGOs; in law firms and among representatives. Nonetheless, one of the phrases that can be heard most often in the communities when the issue is addressed is that the true expression of autonomy is to be found in the community: "we are already autonomous"; "we have always been autonomous in the communities, now we just need to put it on paper."

Through phrases of this type, recurrent and simple only in appearance, Guaraní community members appeal both to an ideal of self-sufficiency and to a differentiated organizational habitus rooted in time and space: expressed in the nuclear Guaraní organization, the community or *tëta*, through certain socioeconomic and cultural practices and territorial control (cf. Albó, 1990), as well as in instances of collective decision-making such as the assembly (ñemboati), political leadership (captains or *mburuvicha*) or other relevant social figures of community life. All this forms the core of what is known

as ñande *reko*, "our way of being," a Guaraní expression to refer to Guaraní identity and culture, and at the same time to claim them as their own.

From this perspective, rooted in the "long memory" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2003) of the Guaraní communities of the Bolivian Chaco, but also in the "short memory" of the recent experience of cultural revitalization and political-territorial articulation through the Guaraní People's Assembly (APG), the parent organization that brings together all the Guaraní communities of Bolivia, Indigenous autonomy is something that already exists in fact, present in the practice of the ñande *reko* and within the Guaraní organization that, perhaps, only needs to be recognized at the legal level: "to be put on paper."

Within the communities themselves, however, this factual conception of autonomy coexists ambivalently with other views that emerge from a situation of economic dependence and relegation strongly self-perceived as such, expressing both the difficulties of daily life in the community and the deep yearnings for transformation. These yearnings and demands can be projected through the glittering –and in a certain way, empty – signifier "autonomy." Thus, in the many Guaraní meetings and assemblies I have been able to attend during the autonomy-building process, the Guaraní "grass roots" – i.e., those who do not hold managerial positions within the supra-communal structures of the "*capitanías*" (captaincies) – projected such yearnings for change and improvement associated with the notion of autonomy: "autonomy has to come with big projects, we do not want to manage poverty"; "autonomy is development, it is seeing improvement in our communities"; "autonomy is not living as we have always lived."

While the first view – "we have always been autonomous" – shows a positive self-awareness and a politicization of the Guaraní socioorganizational habitus, conceived as spaces of "autonomy" from which to organize collective life and exercise territorial sovereignty; the second – "autonomy is not living as we have always lived" – introduces important nuances. We could say that the community members are alerting us to the risks of mystifying poverty by qualifying as forms of "Indigenous autonomy" what are in fact social reproduction and self-organization strategies deployed in peripheral spaces riddled with all kinds of material shortages and the ongoing absence of the State. In a way, the community members seem to be warning that what existed up to now was not exactly "autonomy" but relegation and abandonment. Perhaps, then, it would be not so much, or not only, about "living as we have always

lived in our communities," but, living differently and, above all, *living better* through autonomy.

These introductory notes based on perspectives of "own experience" (Geertz, 1994) on Indigenous autonomy serve to point out the tensions and ambivalences that run through a concept often taken for granted in an excessively a priori manner both in legal instruments and in the specialized literature that reveals a certain tendency to (over)understand Indigenous autonomy exclusively as a synonym of territorial rootedness, cultural recovery and/or political resistance to others – the State, political parties, extractive companies, capitalism, modernity – conceived in terms of exteriority to contemporary Indigenous societies, represented as isolated from the surrounding society and global change processes. Without any intention of entering into conceptual debates that go beyond the scope of this text, it is worth noting that it is essential to incorporate both this dimension of valuing and defending "their own" in the face of different types of external attacks and also to take into account the longings for transformation that emerge from the communities in order to understand how the Guaraní people of Bolivia,[7] particularly those of Charagua, have approached Indigenous autonomy and filled it with particular meanings and demands.

In fact, as will be seen, one of the keys to the success of the Charagua Guaraní autonomy project, which contrasts with the failure of other Indigenous autonomy projects promoted simultaneously, lies precisely in the fact that its promoters have been able to link the construction of a new Indigenous autonomy to concrete and rather pragmatic demands linked to such horizons of change, access to development and the search for a new framework of relations, a rapprochement with the Plurinational State.

On the other hand, the promoters of Charagua's Guaraní autonomy project have also shown themselves to be skilled strategists: using available legal tools to their advantage, forging different types of alliances with different actors and moving into the mire of Bolivian politics. This is part of the well-known "Guaraní diplomacy," an expression often used to refer to the Guaraní logic of negotiation and alliance with political parties and other non-Guaraní actors: flexible, circumstantial and, at times, contradictory but, in the end, responding to a strategy of relationship with the non-Guaraní Other subordinated to the achievement of concrete objectives from a "common" framework. Although the territorial scale on which the common is defined

– a community or communal faction, a supra-communal "captaincy" or the Guaraní people as a whole – can be quite varied.

It is from this type of logic, which has been a substantial part of Guaraní collective action since their political-territorial reorganization in the late 1980s, that barely six months after the approval of the 2009 Constitution the Guaraní leadership of Charagua began to mobilize its diplomatic capacity to explore one of the options opened up by the Constitution: the "conversion" of the former municipalities into new Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Autonomies (AIOC), the name given to the new Indigenous autonomous regime according to the particular formula for identifying indigeneity in the Bolivian Constitution through the triad "Indigenous First Peoples peasant."[8]

On 31 July 2009, the four *captaincies* (Charagua Norte, Parapitiguasu, Alto Isoso and Bajo Isoso) in which the more than 100 Guaraní communities settled in the (former) municipality of Charagua[9] are politically and territorially articulated, met in a "great inter-zonal assembly." They forged an "alliance" among themselves and publicly announced a decision that, although at the time its concrete scope was unknown, would change the political history of Charagua: "the decision to exercise their right to self-determination via CONVERSION FROM MUNICIPALITY TO Indigenous FIRST PEOPLES AUTONOMY" (CIPCA, 2009, upper case letters in the original).

Thus Charagua, epicenter of the Guaraní renaissance of the 1980s, an example - constructed as "exemplary" (cf. Bazoberry, 2008; Faguet, 2016) - of Indigenous peoples' access to spaces of municipal power during the 1990s, once again positioned itself as the vanguard of the Guaraní world in Bolivia in the first decade of the 2000s. They took the reins of a political project that, using the new plurinational legal and conceptual framework, places the powerful notion of Indigenous autonomy at its core.

The new Bolivian Indigenous autonomy system: many limitations, some potential

Before delving into the complex Charagua universe, it is necessary to present some notes, albeit very briefly, on the configuration of the Indigenous autonomous regime of Bolivia's Plurinational State. The Bolivian Constitution of 2009, which declares the "refounding" of the Republic into a new Plurinational State,[10] and defines this new foundational horizon through a set of democratic institutional and conceptual innovations, is at the forefront of

paradigmatic innovation with respect to liberal and multicultural constitutionalism (Sousa-Santos, 2010; Clavero, 2010) and recognition of the collective rights of Indigenous peoples.

Despite the new foundational narrative permeating the constitutional text, however, the truth is that the "new" Plurinational State's territorial organization model – one of the main points of conflict between the Movement for Socialism (MAS) government and the conservative opposition of the eastern departments during the turbulent constituent process opened in 2006 (Schavelzon, 2012) – is quite similar to that of the "old" Republic. On the one hand, ignoring the "territorial reconstitution" projects of a regional scope advocated by various Indigenous organizations in the Constituent Assembly framework, among them the Guaraní People's Assembly, the final-approved Constitution retains the main republican territorial structures, i.e., the nine departments (formerly called prefectures) of regional scope and the municipalities at the local level, now endowed with political autonomy according to a new power distribution framework.

On the other hand, the new Indigenous autonomous regime, together with the "regions," one of the Plurinational State's two new levels of political and territorial autonomy, also poses a continuity, at most a deepening, with respect to the decentralizing and multicultural reforms of the 1990s that promoted two types of local governance forms in the rural and Indigenous space: the municipalities and the Community Lands of Origin (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen*, abbreviated as TCO in Spanish). In the new constitutional framework, they are called Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Territories (TIOC). These two forms constitute the territorial base on which the new institutional systems of Indigenous autonomies must be built. Thus, from the perspective of the Indigenous movement's initial proposals and demands, one of the main limitations of the Plurinational State's new Indigenous autonomous regime is that it is fundamentally local in scope and, moreover, does not imply a re-territorialization with respect to the republican territorial organization, but rather a change in the institutional framework and political attributions of previously existing territorial entities.[11]

An important specificity of the level of Indigenous autonomy is that it is not based on a "classic" State decentralization process to lower territorial governance levels, but is conceptualized as a space for the exercise and operationalization of Indigenous collective rights, the main one being their right to self-determination, already recognized in Article 2 of the Constitution.

However, in clear conceptual contradiction, the exercise of this self-determination is "determined" by different constraints. The first, already mentioned, is of a territorial nature, since the Indigenous autonomous regime is not applied according to the territorialities practiced or claimed as "their own" by the Indigenous peoples, but is based on the municipalities and the TCOs, establishing two "access routes" (via municipality or via TCO) with slightly differentiated procedures towards the same Indigenous autonomy regime.

The second constraint is procedural: the Indigenous peoples living in the municipalities or TCOs and wishing to constitute an Indigenous autonomy must necessarily go through a process of "conversion" to Indigenous autonomy, i.e., comply with a series of prerequisites and surmount a set of successive procedures, some already defined in the Constitution itself, others through subsequent legislative development. In the case of the municipal conversion route, the one that concerns us in this text, we can summarize these procedures in four main steps, which were followed by the first 11 municipalities (among them, Charagua) that ventured onto the uncertain path of converting the old municipalities into new Indigenous autonomies in 2009. The four steps are cited below (with the chronology of the process for the case of Charagua in parentheses):

- The holding of a first referendum on "access" to autonomy to validate the beginning of the conversion process (held in Charagua and 11 other municipalities on December 6, 2009).

- The formation of an autonomous assembly representing the social reality of the municipality in conversion (in Charagua, the Guaraní Autonomous Assembly in Charagua, formed in May 2010).

- The drafting and approval by the Autonomous Assembly of an Indigenous autonomous statute outlining the basis of the new system of self-government (the Statute of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy was approved by the Autonomous Assembly on 16 and 17 June 2012).

- The implementation of the statute (previously declared constitutional by the Plurinational Constitutional Court) through a second referendum to validate the statute and make its deployment effective.[12] (The Guaraní Autonomy statute was declared fully

constitutional on 12 June 2014, the referendum for its approval was held on 20 September 2015, but the deployment of the autonomous system would not begin until 8 January 2017).

Although this procedural route, which involves all the public powers of the Plurinational State (legislative, executive, constitutional and electoral), has turned the exercise of the right to Indigenous autonomy into a veritable bureaucratic odyssey, the Indigenous autonomy system of the Plurinational State also has some transformative potential that should not be underestimated. In contrast to municipal institutions – homogeneous throughout the Bolivian territory and thus alien to the diversity of Indigenous forms of organization and institutional traditions – the new Indigenous autonomous regime opens up new spaces for democratic deliberation and horizons of political self-determination. Even with limitations, the inhabitants of the autonomies under construction can collectively discuss what their institutionality should be, based on their own local cultural realities and, finally, on their democratic will.

Building a new post-municipal institutional framework to regulate communal life and access to paid political office is not an easy task. In fact, by the end of 2020, only three of the 11 municipalities that began the autonomy process at the end of 2009 have managed to complete the process, forming their AIOC governments at different moments: Charagua (2017), Chipaya (2018) and Salinas de Garci Mendoza (2020) (cf. Cameron & Plata, 2021:147).[13]

In the rest of the municipalities, despite having a much more homogeneous ethnic composition than Charagua, the processes have been blocked at different stages of their development by various types of internal conflicts in which differences (generational, political, socioeconomic, religious) and divergent understandings of how to express indigeneity politically (Cameron, 2012) emerged among Indigenous peoples.

Although there were all kinds of internal conflicts in Charagua, they were largely attenuated by the existence of a major antagonism: the one between *karai* (non-Indigenous elites) and Guaraní, which is at the base of the historical creation of Charagua as a territorial space.

Karai Colonization and Guaraní Displacement: Sociospatial Basis of Contemporary Charagua

Unlike other rural Bolivian municipalities, created from the municipalization process that opened with the 1994 Popular Participation Law, the territorial space now occupied by the former municipality of Charagua, now Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy, was mapped out at the end of the 19th century. Specifically, in 1894, a legislative provision decreed the creation of a new administrative division (a "municipal section") in the province of Cordillera, subdividing this new municipal section into four "cantons" and establishing that one of them, Charagua, would be its "capital."

At that time, Cordillera was a remote part of the Republic of Bolivia, a frontier region "pacified" *manu militari* just two years earlier, in 1892, when the battle of Kuruyuki (cf. Combès, 2014) took place. This was a sad episode of war in which the Republican Army crushed what would become the last great armed rebellion of the warlike Guaraní, then known as "Chiriguanos," causing between 500 and 1,000 Indigenous casualties. Such was the historical denomination, that of "Chiriguano", received by the Guaraní-speaking society of the last foothills of the southeastern Andes, formed through a process of ethnogenesis between Chané-Arawak groups established in the region and Tupi-Guaraní groups that arrived later from present-day Brazil and Paraguay. A society that was originally "mixed" – Chané and Guaraní, Guaraní and Chané (cf. Combès and Saignes, 1995) – but which had decided to call itself (and organize itself) only as "Guaraní" since its political and territorial rearticulation process.[14]

Although the creation of a new "municipal section" from a governmental office would alter only slightly the territorial occupation processes on the ground, we can consider that the Charagua we know today was born at the end of the 19th century through the aforementioned legislative act. To begin with, a peripheral and "wild" space was formally incorporated into the republican State order of territorial and population administration. Thus, it formally sanctioned the de facto colonization undertaken on the ground through the cattle haciendas, the Franciscan missions and the founding of "towns" by criollo (karai) colonizers: the colonizing trilogy that from the last third of the 19th century well into the Republican stage would, with the invaluable help of the Republican army, definitively break a world that had managed to remain free of Spanish colonial tutelage thanks to its reputed warrior ethos,

combined with a centrifugal political logic based on a strong sense of group autonomy (Saignes, 2007).

On the other hand, following some of the existing forms of territorial ascription, the legislative provision of 1894 drew some external limits and internal territorial subdivisions ("cantons") that, although redefined with more precision, have not changed substantially since then, constituting the territorial basis of the "zones" in which the new Guaraní autonomous government is structured, as we will see.

Even more importantly, these cantonal subdivisions established a political center for this new administrative unit: the *karai*-majority Charagua Pueblo, founded in 1873 on an ancient Guaraní community, which became the "capital," together with some peripheral rural "cantons" with a majority Guaraní population distributed in dozens of communities juxtaposed to private cattle-raising properties. The progressive process of spoliation and territorial concentration unreversed until the end of the 1990s (and then only partially) would leave the Guaraní communities with almost no access to land and therefore dependent on the sale of their labor power (under extremely exploitative conditions) in either the *haciendas* or the sugar mills.

Even with precarious links, the municipality's rural cantons became administratively subordinated to Charagua's *karai* people, who accumulated not only political centrality as the seat of municipal institutions, but also practically all services and infrastructures. Contemporary Charagua was thus born from a racially hierarchical conception and practice of social space: with the *town* (*karai*/"modern") constructed in opposition to the *countryside* (Indigenous/"backward") displaced to the periphery of space and "*charagüeño*," a term that became synonymous with *karai* even though it was of Indigenous origin.

As in Bolivia as a whole, things have unquestionably changed a lot today. Charagua Pueblo, with more than 4,000 inhabitants, is a dynamic area with a growing population and social complexity: many Guaraní people have arrived from the communities or were born in the town, as well as Andean migrants of Quechua and Aymara origin who control almost all the commerce and transportation, many of whom settled in Estación Charagua, a new urban center of about 2,000 inhabitants located a few kilometers from Charagua Pueblo. On a daily basis, another type of "whiteness" is also flocking into the town: that of the Mennonites, an ultra-orthodox Anabaptist group of Central European descent who have settled in the rural areas near

Charagua Pueblo since the mid-1980s through the purchase of land from decaying *karai haciendas*.

Nonetheless, despite these profound transformations that threaten "Charagüeñity," understood as a marker of white-creole distinction against the Indigenous, the post- (and neo-) colonial configuration of Charagua is still in force: expressed in the material and symbolic relegation of the communities with respect to the urban nucleus or in daily interactions between *karai* and Guaraní permeated by racism. It is from this racially hierarchical configuration of social space, based on *karai* colonization and Guaraní displacement, that we can understand one of the deep meanings that run through the Guaraní autonomy project: the will to (re)Guaraníze Charagua, i.e., to place the Guaraní in the political center; questioning, including and "converting" the non-Guaraní from this new centrality. This is how Milton Chakay, Guaraní sociologist, puts it, drawing a sort of Guaraní theory of hegemony:

> That the brother who comes from Oruro, from Potosí, and lives in the Indigenous autonomy begins to be a Guaraní. This is what we want, and is why we say: let them be included, let them be included! That the traditional *karai*, the aggressor, who at times subdued the Guaraní, be converted. And that is why we say: "Guaranízation". Indigenous autonomy must allow Guaranízation. (M. Chakay, personal communication, 6 June 2012)

Even without explicitly expressing itself in such terms elaborated by the Guaraní intellectual leadership within the framework of the autonomy project, the Guaranízation of Charagua in fact began at least two decades earlier. It would do so through two processes central to understanding the Guaraní autonomy project: the political and territorial re-articulation of the Guaraní communities into "captaincies" attached to the Guaraní People's Assembly, and the assault of the captaincies on municipal power.

The (Progressive) Guaranízation of Charagua: From the Popular Participation Law to the Autonomy Referendum

In a surprising "rebirth" process after almost a century of lethargy following the defeat of Kuruyuki in 1892, the formation of the Guaraní People's Assembly (APG) in 1987 would lead, in a matter of a few years, to hundreds of previously dispersed Chaco communities, and even Guaraní migrant communities from the outskirts of Santa Cruz, organizing themselves into supra-communal territorial and political structures called "captaincies." These structures were in turn flexibly attached to the APG with a high degree of internal decentralization. With their own network of authorities (*captains* or *mburuvicha*) and collective decision-making systems based on the assembly (ñemboati), the captaincies – currently a total of 29 in three departments (Santa Cruz, Tarija and Chuquisaca) that cover part of the Chaco ecoregion – form the territorial base of a new Guaraní movement. This movement, influenced by the continental Indigenous movements and the new languages of indigeneity, organized itself into a larger political structure that claims a shared identity above regional differentiations and the centrifugal logic of the historical Guaraní world itself for the first time in its history (Saignes, 2007).

In Charagua, the place where the APG was formed as a result of the sedimentation of a series of previous relationships between the Guaraní and non-Guaraní allies (especially institutions linked to the Catholic Church), the Guaraní initially organized themselves into three captaincies with their own paths. While two of them (Charagua Norte and Parapitiguasu) would be formed *ex novo* at the same time as the birth of the APG, the Isoso captaincy (divided into two independent captaincies since the beginning of 2000: Upper Isoso and Lower Isoso) had a very long history behind it. Sometimes united into a single captaincy, sometimes separated into "high" and "low", the Isoso captaincy did not disintegrate with the advance of the colonial front. It managed to maintain its political structure based on the hereditary transmission of the position *of mburuvicha guasu* or "Great Captain" between lineages often at odds with each other, forming a sort of Isoso "royal house" whose influence (and internal disputes) can be traced to the present day (Combès, 2005).

This sociohistorical configuration, together with the more clearly Chané heritage in the region's settlement, has given the people of Isoso a clearly

differentiated identity, sometimes even opposed to the rest of the Bolivian Guaraní world. Thus, within Charagua itself, a Guaraní "we" of variable perimeters is drawn that, depending on the context, encompasses the whole of the "Guaraní people" of Charagua, but can also contract into a more delimited "we" crossed by long-standing differentiations, such as that which separates the Isoso-Guaraní from the Ava-Guaraní (of the captaincies of Charagua Norte and Parapitiguasu): "brothers" today in shared struggles as "Guaraní people," but "brothers like Cain and Abel were," to quote an eloquent biblical metaphor used by an Isoso community member to explain the type of brotherhood that unites (and separates) them from their Ava neighbors (personal communication, 2 August 2014).

Since the formation of the APG, the actions of the captaincies, with their own nuances among them, focused mainly on solving the communities' material needs, forging links with different development NGOs and placing special emphasis on the pressing issue of access to land. The latter situation would be partially calmed through the land-titling process in a special agrarian regime of collective ownership managed by Indigenous organizations (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* or TCO) initiated in 1996 through the regularization of all agrarian properties in Bolivia (cf. Colque et al., 2016). Although this agrarian reform process did not succeed in reversing the unequal agrarian structure of Charagua and the Chaco region as a whole, and led to the legalization of private properties within the territories demanded by the Guaraní captaincies, the TCOs did consolidate their sense of territorial jurisdiction.

Without leaving aside the land issue, a transcendental change would take place with the entry into force of the 1994 Popular Participation Law (LPP). With the LPP in place, the captaincies became political (and electoral) actors, directing a very significant part of their organizational energy to the renewed spaces of municipal power: doing politics, which broke with the *karai* monopoly of politics, but at the same time doing it together with the *karai* and according to their rules of the game. One of the most graphic explanations I could gather about the multiple but also ambivalent effects of the LPP in Charagua's political life (in this regard, Bazoberry, 2008; Faguet, 2016; Albó, 2012) comes from Roberto Vargas of Charagua, who synthesized them through two concepts: "resources" and "Guaraní uprising" (see Bazoberry, 2008; Faguet, 2016; Albó, 2012).

The *karai* had deep roots in the town after several generations plus two administrations as mayor of Charagua – the first one before the LPP and the

second one with it already in force. Roberto Vargas experienced two types of transformations in Charagua, the first of which he judges as clearly positive: the exponential increase of economic resources transferred directly from the State's general budget. This consequently increased the municipality's capacity to "execute works and projects" – a leitmotif of the post-LPP municipal policy – in the whole of a territorial jurisdiction that was expanded beyond the town to incorporate in its radius of action the rural areas, now organized in "municipal districts" (the former "cantons") with advocacy capacity in budgetary distribution. Roberto assumes the second, albeit without enthusiasm, as irreversible: the "Guaraní uprising" or their emergence and consolidation as decisive actors in municipal political life. So decisive was that emergence that, in his own words, he would be the "last *karai* mayor in the history of Charagua."

Indeed, in 2004, after Roberto Vargas' second administration, one year ahead of the electoral victory of the "first Indigenous president of Bolivia," a Guaraní, Claudio López, became mayor of the municipality for the first time in Charagua's history. He would do so under the APG's acronym and with the organic support of the North Charagua and Parapitiguasu captaincies, while the Isoso ones, always "autonomous," chose to support their own candidate, in this case under the MAS acronym. After López's administration, in whose final stretch the long transition process from municipality to Indigenous autonomy would begin, the two "transitory" mayors who succeeded him – Domingo Mérida (2010–2015) and Belarmino Solano (2015–2017) – would also be Guaraní, as would most of the municipal council members.

From the Guaraní viewpoint, one of the most evident effects of the Guaranízation of the Charagua political field was the dissonance between the appeals to ethnic loyalty as "Guaraní" and the divergent party affiliations of both Guaraní leaders who entered the municipal political game and their voters, who did not always follow the slogans of the assemblies that pre-selected the candidates who would run in the elections, seeking to collectively guide the individual vote. Thus, for example, Charagua's first Guaraní mayor, Claudio López, is considered an "organic mayor" because, even without the participation of the Isoso captaincies, he was previously nominated by the Guaraní captaincies and pulled a massive vote in the Charagua Norte and Parapitiguasu communities ("organic vote"). In contrast, the second Guaraní mayor, Domingo Mérida, an Isoso-Guaraní, did not have the official support of the organic structure of any of the four captaincies but was elected because

he was able to weave his own strategy of alliances with *karai* sectors of the people and, above all, with different Isoso factions and lineages that opposed the official leadership of the two Isoso captaincies.

Thus, if the LPP can be qualified as an undoubted success in terms of Guaraní access to the spaces of municipal power, the Guaraní experience within – and in recent years at the head of – the municipal institutionality was pierced by numerous frustrations and deep ambivalences. This is evidenced by the Guaraní option to replace the municipal framework with a different (and better) institutional one, as it revealed those ambivalent dimensions, remaining strongly impregnated with the Guaraní experience in municipal politics.

As we saw above, the decision to convert the municipality into Indigenous autonomy arose from a "magna assembly" among the four captaincies. But the definitive starting signal for the conversion process was the celebration of the access referendum, held on 6 December 2009, coinciding with the general elections that, already in the new plurinational framework, would give the second consecutive victory to Evo Morales and the MAS. The close results of the referendum, where the "Yes" would prevail with 55.7%, as well as its unequal territorial distribution throughout the Charagua geography (a clear "No" in the town; a resounding "Yes" in the Ava captaincies; and a tie between "Yes" and "No" in the Isoso captaincies)[15] show how it expressed several of the differences that riddle Charagua's variegated society: ethnic (and class) differences between town and countryside, between *karai* and Guaraní, but also among the Guaraní themselves.

Moreover, the results of this first referendum, very similar to the one that would be held six years later for approval of the autonomy statute, anticipated one of the dynamics that would mark the whole autonomy construction process: the resistance of a good part of the non-Guaraní sectors, which mobilized a discourse of minoritization and denunciation of "exclusion" that reversed the historical direction of racism. Although these sectors did not stop the deployment of the process, a few months after the referendum they managed to gain access to municipal power (with the Isoso-Guaraní Domingo Mérida as mayor) in the April 2010 elections, which included the specification that, in the case of the 11 municipalities in conversion to Indigenous autonomy, their municipal authorities would have a "transitory" character until approval of the statute.

In this complicated context, the development of *another institutionality* would begin with the promoters of the autonomy project (the four captaincies) out of a municipality dominated by opponents of Indigenous autonomy, who would mobilize all municipal institutional resources to block its progress and exhaust their five years in office.

Recreating Another Institutionality: Not as the Municipality Nor as the Captaincy

"It has been a revolution we would never again have done so suddenly in our normal life," said Belarmino Solano after the first referendum in 2009. Like a revolution: in such terms he expressed his experience from within as vice president of the Guaraní Autonomous Assembly in Charagua, the deliberative body in charge of drafting and approving the statute with the institutional basis of the new Indigenous autonomy that followed the Bolivian legal framework.

Composed of some 50 Guaraní representatives elected by "their own rules and procedures" in different rural communities of the four captaincies, without the presence of any Charagua Pueblo representative since its neighborhood organizations refused to participate, the Assembly met periodically in Charagua Pueblo between 2010 and 2012 to imagine a new Charagua. Without its own premises, or a public financing system, its marathon meetings were held in the same place where APG was born 30 years earlier: in the headquarters of Arakuaarenda, an intercultural training institution linked to the Society of Jesus. It and the non-governmental Center for Research and Promotion of the Peasantry (CIPCA), with an office in Charagua since the 1970s, are two of the Guaraní people's main allies, and would play an important role in accompanying the autonomy process.

The statute resulting from the Autonomous Assembly meetings, approved by its plenary on 17 June 2012, with some changes due to observations by the Plurinational Constitutional Court, and declared fully constitutional on 12 June 2014,[16] is made up of 104 articles that combine declarative aspects ("values and principles," "vision of development") with other regulatory and technical ones (the organization of the autonomous government, the competence and fiscal regime), as well as elements much more linked to the Charaguan reality: from "access to and use of water" (art. 77), to "hunting and fishing" (art. 70), including coordination between "Traditional Medicine and Western

Medicine" (art. 96). It is a legal text, but of a heterodox legal nature, in which logics of the municipality's Liberal-Western legal culture and organizational schemes are juxtaposed with Guaraní categories, contributions of the new Bolivian constitutionalism, Guaraní organizational forms and a set of elements that imply an effort to incorporate local problematic issues, as well as the legal identification of cultural identity or ñande *reko guaraní*.

According to René Gómez, president of the Autonomous Assembly, "the Guaraní being is centralized in the statute." He is alluding to a set of symbols, principles and values in Guaraní that permeate the ñande *reko* statute while seeking to culturally orient the horizons of autonomy (R. Gómez, personal communication, 26 April 2014). Among the most repeated is the concept of *Yaiko Kavi Päve* ("To Live Well"), a linguistic Guaranízation created ad hoc from the famous *Vivir Bien* or Aymara *Sumaq Qamaña* incorporated into the Bolivian Constitution, something that, in turn, illustrates the important influence of Bolivian constitutionalism on the autonomy statute, in which this is translated into a vernacular language from Guaraní.

From Belarmino Solano's point of view, however, the "soul of the statute" is its governance structure. He was a member of the commission in charge of designing it, a task he describes as the "most complicated" since the core of the discussion was nothing more and nothing less than "who is going to have the power":

> Then we would say, 'Is [power] going to be held by one person? Or who else can hold it?' And another would say, 'No, it has to be the base, it has to be society as a whole!' 'And now how are we going to design this structure?' (...) What I was defending was that power should lie with the people. But that the organizations should not be part of the government, that is, the captaincies, because they cannot be judge and jury, they have to be like another separate coordinating body (...) Another comrade [defended that] those who assume this power should directly be the captaincies and that the *mburuvicha* be at the head. (B. Solano, personal communication, 11 September 2014)

Belarmino's retrospective account of the internal discussions of the commission that designed the "soul of the statute" illustrates the intrinsic complexities of any effort of instituting imagination by pointing out a central

dilemma at the time of hammering out a "Guaraní government." Officialize the existing Guaraní organizational structures (the four captaincies) with their *mburuvicha* or captains at the head? Or think up another institutionality, inspired by the Guaraní modes of organization, but with the Guaraní organic structure on the outside? In Charagua, this dilemma was resolved in favor of the second option, the one defended by Belarmino: to create another institutionality that was not like the municipality, but not like the captaincy either, revealing how the construction of Indigenous autonomies are not only processes of officializing "traditional" forms of government, but also of democratic innovations that seek, perhaps, to institute new institutional traditions affirmed from what is Indigenous.

In this decision, the division between "the organic" (the captaincies) and "the political" (the entities of State power), which orients Guaraní political action normatively, weighed heavily. It seeks to subordinate Guaraní political participation in State authorities to the organic decision-making channels. Aware that, in the new Indigenous autonomous framework, "organic" becomes "political," i.e., part of the State structure, the promoters of the Guaraní autonomous project sought to protect their organization from the regulations and rigidity of the State, keeping it formally "autonomous" from the Guaraní autonomous government itself.

The institutional design of this new autonomous government is considerably complex. It is characterized first by a profound decentralization (territorial, organizational and elective) between each of the six zones into which the government is territorially structured. And second, by the heterogeneity of political logics and democratic mechanisms put into practice within an institutional framework made up of three types of bodies: 1) Ñemboati *Reta*-Collective Decision-Making Body; 2) *Mborokuai Simbika Iyapoa Reta*-Legislative Body; and 3) *Tëtarembiokuai Reta*-Executive Body.

The fundamental basis of the autonomous government is the six zones:[17] Charagua Norte, Parapitiguasu, Alto Isoso, Bajo Isoso, Estación Charagua and Charagua Pueblo (see map below), based on forms of territorial ascription previously consolidated by different means (legal and de facto): through previous "cantons" or, with the Popular Participation Law, municipal "districts"; the territory titled under the TCO regime and claimed as "their own" by the four Guaraní captaincies; and the territorial spaces in which the two main urban centers of Charagua are located – Charagua Pueblo and its neighboring Estación Charagua.
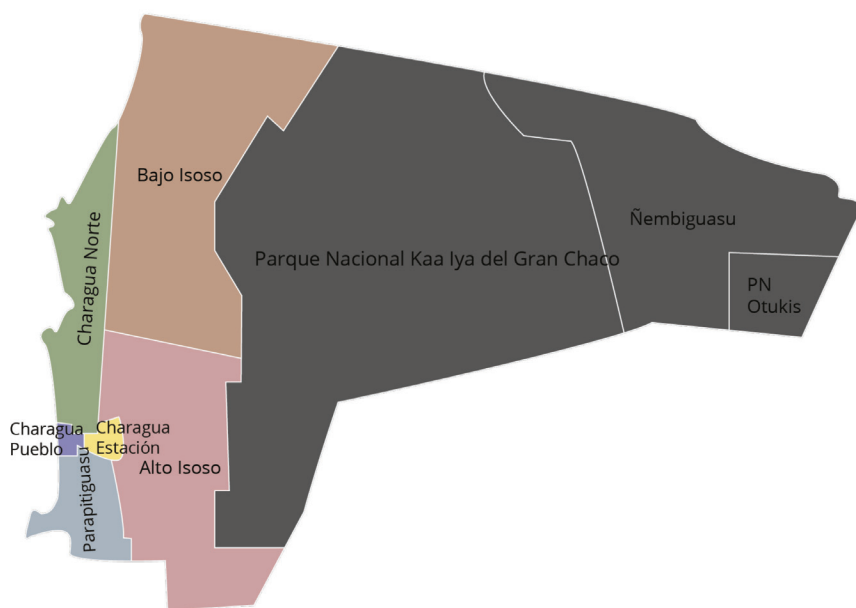
Figure 17.1. Map of the Territorial Organization by Zones of the Guaraní Charagu a Iyambae Autonomy. **Source:** Pere Morell i Torra, 2018.

All of the 46 representatives of the three bodies that make up the autonomous government are elected in a decentralized manner in each of the six Zones and, in addition, through the elective systems each Zone deems appropriate, whether or not they pass through the secret individual vote mediated by political parties. This option for the elective autonomy of the Zones, which implies the coexistence of different elective mechanisms and democratic legitimacy within the autonomy, seeks to establish a sort of new coexistence pact with the non-Guaraní Other, based on the non-imposition of the elective "uses and customs" of one Zone over the other. This did not prevent the sectors opposing autonomy from mobilizing as one of their main discourses the alarmist denunciation of the "end of democracy" and the "universal vote," supposedly threatened by some Indigenous "uses and customs" that would be imposed in the urban areas, conceived as antagonistic to democracy.

As regards the institutional design of the autonomous government (presented graphically in the following pages), it maintains, albeit with

Guaraní-ized names, the classic division between "legislative" and "executive" powers. The main novelty is thus the incorporation of a composite third body of "collective decision," the *Ñemboati Reta*, in which attributions of the executive and legislative control powers, election and revocation competences of these powers and quasi-legislative functions are intermingled. Qualified in the statute as the "highest decision-making body" (art. 19.I), this new entity embodies the idea of social redistribution of power launched by Bellarmine and repeated by many of the promoters of autonomy: "that power should be vested in the people." Without any parallel in the previous municipal institutionality, or in the Liberal tradition based on political representation through the secret individual vote, its most immediate institutional reference is the *ñemboati* or assembly, the main Guaraní decision-making body and one of the central elements of the *ñande reko* or Guaraní "way of being." It is a body that proposes decision-making through collective deliberation and direct participation of the different territorialized population centers (whether in rural communities or urban barrios) through an assembly system with three ascending territorial authorities that follow the logic of territorial organization by zones: 1) *Ñemboatimi* (Communal or Neighborhood Assembly); 2) *Ñemboati* (Zonal Assembly); and 3) *Ñemaboati Guasu* (Autonomous Assembly).

In the case of the first two assemblies, their incorporation into the new government structure implies a recognition and institutionalization of different socioorganizational spaces existing informally in the previous municipal framework, without full legal recognition within the municipal system. Examples are the communal and zonal assemblies of the four Guaraní captaincies and certain deliberative mechanisms existing in Charagua's two urban nuclei (such as the Neighborhood Boards or the Town Hall Forums). On the other hand, the *Ñemboati Guasu* (literally, "great assembly") is a newly created entity with the vocation of representing the autonomy's six Zones. While the communal/neighborhood assemblies and the zonal assemblies are based on the direct participation of the population, the *Ñemboati Guasu* works from a logic of political representation: via their respective zonal assemblies, each of the six Zones elect four representatives (two men and two women) for a three-year term.

If the main novelty of the legislative body, heir to the former Municipal Council, is the change from seven representatives to 12 (two per Zone) and the establishment of gender parity in the body's internal composition, the
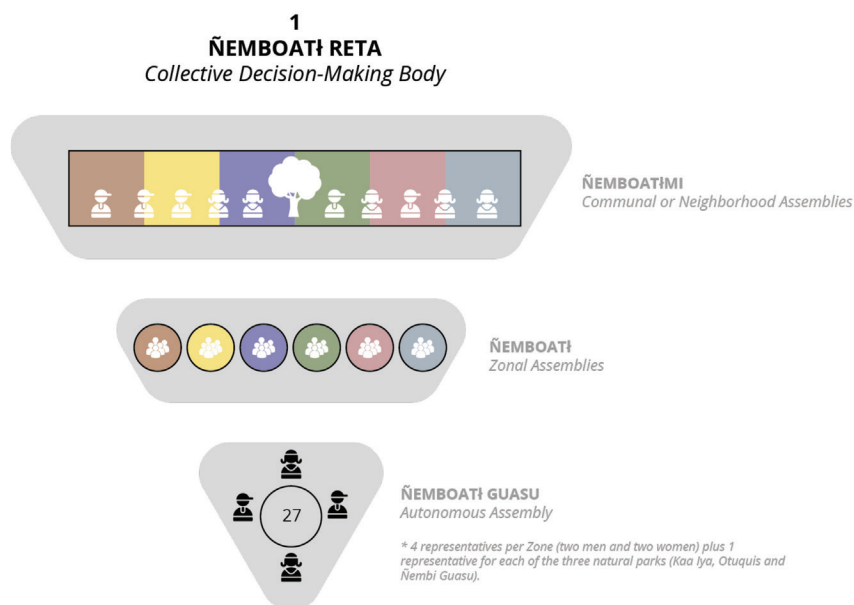
Figure 17.2. Internal organization of the *Ñemboati Reta*. **Source:** Author's elaboration (Morell i Torra, 2018) based on the Guaraní Charagua Iyambae Autonomy Statute.

new executive body represents a major break with respect to the municipality, especially at the symbolic level: the disappearance of the mayor, an omnipresent figure who brings the presidential liturgies of Bolivian republicanism to the local world. The new executive body is multi-personal in nature: composed of six "zonal executives" (one per Zone), elected every five years according to the rules of each Zone) and a new figure, the *Tëtarembiokuai Reta Imborika* ("coordinator") abbreviated as TRI, who, while not concentrating the previous municipal mayor's attributions, term of mandate (three years) or system of election (rotating by Zones), is similar in that it is an individual figure who deals with "executive power" (or, at least, part of it) and seeks to represent the whole of the municipality's autonomy.

Another of the significant contributions of the new autonomous design that merits highlighting is the establishment of gender equity criteria in the internal composition of the collegiate government bodies, i.e., the Ñemboati
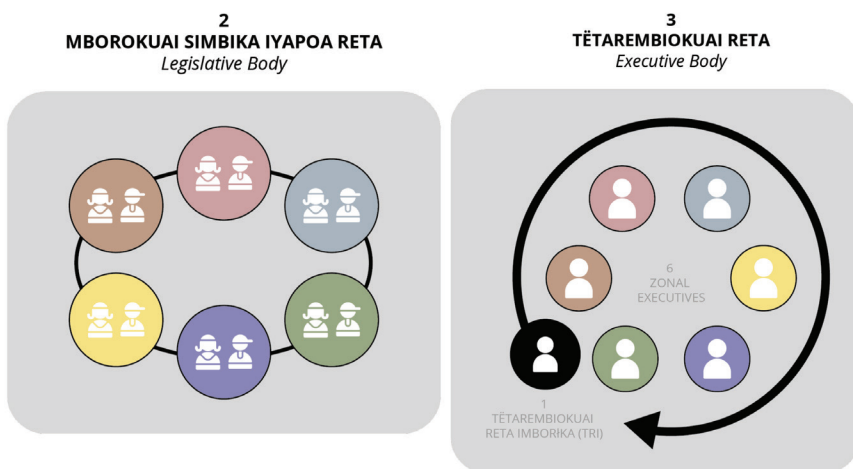
2
MBOROKUAI SIMBIKA IYAPOA RETA
Legislative Body

3
TËTAREMBIOKUAI RETA
Executive Body

6
ZONAL
EXECUTIVES

1
TËTAREMBIOKUAI
RETA IMBORIKA (TRI)

Figure 17.3. Organization of the legislative and executive bodies of the Guaraní Charagua Iyambae Autonomy. **Source:** Source: Author's elaboration (Morell i Torra, 2018) based on the Guaraní Charagua Iyambae Autonomy Statute.

Guasu and the Legislative body. This is an important advance with respect to the municipal framework, where there were no mechanisms to guarantee parity in the candidacies to the Municipal Council until the entry into force of the new Electoral Regime Law (2010), which introduced the obligatory nature of gender equity and alternation in all electoral processes of the Plurinational State, a measure that radically transformed the gender composition of both the Municipal Councils and the Plurinational Legislative Assembly itself, becoming one of the most equitable parliaments in the world (De Marchi & Gómez, 2017). In reality, the conception of gender equity in the collegiate bodies of the Guaraní Autonomy goes a little further than the Bolivian Electoral Law, since the equitable presence of women within such bodies does not depend either on the position they occupy on the candidate slates (in many cases, relegated to the second and fourth positions) or on the electoral results, but rather on a criterion, set by the statute itself prior to the electoral process, which directly affects the gender composition of the bodies: each Zone must necessarily elect one woman and one man for the Legislative Body, and four women and four men for the *Ñemboati Guasu*.[18]

Such advances should be understood as one of the fruits of the advocacy (and insistence) of female leaders within the Guaraní organic world, leaders who are still emerging but found opportunities to assert their voices with the opening of new arenas for collective deliberation that the autonomy construction process entailed (in this regard, Morell i Torra, 2018, pp. 360-363). As in all spaces of political responsibility (in Bolivia and beyond), however, the Guaraní organic and leadership world continues to have a clear male bias. Thus, albeit with some exceptions, the vast majority of positions within the organizational structure of the Guaraní captaincies continue to be held by men, relegating women to roles conceived as eminently "feminine" (such as secretary). Likewise, in Guaraní deliberative arenas, such as communal and inter-communal assemblies, it is usually men who have a greater presence and voice.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite the gender equity criteria in the conformation of the legislative body and the *Ñemboati Guasu*, the dynamics of gender inequality and male over-representation are still clearly reproduced in the executive body, which continues to be perceived as the main space of power in the autonomy. So far, the two TRIs (autonomy coordinators) that have succeeded each other in office between 2017 and 2021 have been men, and only one woman has acceded to the position of zonal executive; the other five being dominated by men. Besides reflecting the structural gender inequalities of a patriarchal society, all this also reveals the difficulties women, Karai as well as Guaraní, encounter in reconciling political participation (which requires constant travel and displacement, leaving family responsibilities, etc.) with a gender system that displaces women from political decision-making spaces, making them responsible for practically all reproductive and care work within a "domestic sphere" conceived as separate from the public arena and devoid of politicization (Segato, 2016, pp. 94-95).

The First Steps of Autonomy: Walking among Expectations, Realities and Inertias

Imagining a new institutional framework is a difficult task, as Belarmino Solano reminded us above. But not as difficult as deploying it, something he himself was able to experience. After his time in the Autonomous Assembly in charge of drafting the autonomy statute, a space where new and important Guaraní leaderships would be forged, Belarmino began a meteoric political

career that would lead him first to the municipality's (transitory) office of mayor, heading the MAS slate (allied with the four captaincies) in the municipal elections of March 2015. Then, in September 2016, he was elected to the coveted position of TRI or autonomy coordinator, moving directly from the mayor's office to occupy this new executive figure and, incidentally, reflecting in this leap the continuities between TRI and mayor, between the new autonomy system and the old municipal system. Belarmino thus became the first person to occupy a position he himself had helped devise, having to manage the formal extinguishing of the municipality and the transition to a post-municipal public management model, as well as the important expectations of change linked to the arrival of the Indigenous autonomy after a conversion process of more than six years.

Such expectations would become explicit political discourse and electoral strategy during the campaign for the second referendum to approve the statute which, after more than a year of waiting and bureaucratic delays, was finally held on 20 September 2015 (cf. Morell i Torra, 2017). Although other discourses also structured the Yes campaign, such as the defense of a new, more participatory democratic model or a redistribution of economic resources more favorable to rural communities, one of the central arguments linked the Yes to autonomy with the idea of rapprochement with the Plurinational State and its development resource distribution system ("works", "projects", "programs") in rural areas, closely linked to the staging of political loyalty with the MAS government. In the words of Belarmino himself in a speech given after the victory of the Yes vote in the referendum:

> The projects we have started here as a municipal government [of the MAS allied with the four captaincies] will not be cut; they have to continue and they will continue, even more with the autonomy because we will work directly with the central government and brother Evo Morales. (Belarmino Solano, recording by the author, September 20, 2015)

Rapprochement with the top level of the Plurinational State was not just a speech; it was backed with action the day before the referendum, when "brother" Evo Morales came to Charagua Pueblo to announce the fruition of a decades-old demand by all the actors of Charagua that, in itself, embodies the idea of rapprochement and development: an international highway

connecting Charagua with the city of Santa Cruz and Argentina, financed with Chinese capital. A few days before his arrival, (former) Vice President García Linera also visited Charagua, in his case to stage the beginning of an ambitious state natural gas extraction project in the Parapitiguasu Zone which, like the highway, generated important development expectations. Linera's visit to inaugurate a new hydrocarbon project gave support to another central discourse of the Yes campaign: the possibility that the benefits from the extraction of natural gas from the Charagua territory would go directly to the autonomous government, without the appropriation of royalties by the Santa Cruz departmental government.

Despite the deployment of this strategy of linking Indigenous autonomy to the idea of development, which is indeed an elaborate strategy but at the same time requires little effort as it is inscribed in the common sense of Charagua society as a whole, since everyone in Charagua wants/needs "more development," the fact is that the results of the 2015 referendum, in which the Yes won with 53%, were quite similar to those of the first referendum in 2009. As then, the No also won (even more convincingly) in urban areas in 2015 and the Yes won in rural Guaraní areas (convincingly in Charagua Norte and Parapitiguasu, and by a handful of votes in Isoso). This demonstrated that there are historical accumulation processes, socioeconomic structures and collective loyalties that are not easily altered through political discourses and strategies. But even without provoking movements in the underlying currents that structure Charaguan society, such as the differentiation between Karai and Guaraní, the discursive strategy of the Yes, close to the communities' concerns and languages, at least managed to maintain support among the majority of Guaraní communities.

Once the victory of the Yes vote definitively opened the way towards the consolidation of Indigenous autonomy, the new autonomous government installed as of January 2017 not only had to assure major works and projects of a spectacular nature but also manage the daily problems of Charaguan society, especially rural Guaraní communities, with many unmet needs and, consequently, with strong expectations of change that increased with the arrival of autonomy, and of the projects and works that were inaugurated almost simultaneously.

In July 2019, I visited Don Justino (pseudonym) in Aguaraigua, a Guaraní community in Bajo Isoso located about 100 kilometers from Charagua Pueblo. Despite the initial claim to decentralize the new autonomous administration

to rural areas, the offices of most of the autonomous government bodies are located in Charagua Pueblo, including the offices of the new zonal executive of Bajo Isoso, one of the areas farthest from the urban core. Don Justino was one of the community members who had been part of the Autonomous Assembly that drafted the statute and also supported the Yes campaign in the 2015 referendum. But in spite of his personal involvement in the autonomy project, Don Justino's assessment of its implementation was emphatically negative:

> There is no improvement, the projects are not reaching Isoso, the authorities spend all day in their office in Charagua and don't come to the communities. Before, with the municipality, at least something arrived, only a little, but something. But now ... nothing! The roof of our little school is falling down and the kids have been going hungry for months because the school breakfast has been cut off. I worked hard, you know, for autonomy. But the autonomy failed. You can write it down that clearly. (Personal communication, July 24, 2019)

In reality, Justino's disenchantment, shared, although not so emphatically, by many community members with whom I spoke, was not something new: it was just that it was previously directed against the municipal authorities and, now, against the new autonomous authorities, from whom a different behavior is expected (and demanded) as they are invested with a different type of democratic legitimacy that, in rural areas, no longer passes through the secret individual vote mediated by political parties, but through the zonal assembly.

In Justino's criticism, however, there was something new that I also perceived in the criticisms of other Charagua residents not directly involved in politics: a handling of information, data and very concrete figures on the management by their authorities, especially of budget items and expenditures in each Zone. In this sense, one of the elements that even those most critical of the new autonomous framework felt was working well was the mechanisms of social control over the management of the zonal executives, at least in rural Zones where, thanks to the socioorganizational experience of the Guaraní captaincies, there are consolidated inter-communal assemblies that have been working de facto for years.

In the current autonomous framework, these entities, called Ñemboati, do not just conduct periodic social monitoring of government representatives, as they already did in the municipal framework, although in an unregulated manner and depending, in the end, on the will of each municipal government. In addition, they now have the power to "recall" any zonal representative (be it the executive, the legislative or the Ñemboati Guasu). This power of revocation had already been put into practice to revoke the zonal executive in the North Charagua Zone, who had been unable to justify all the expenses and invoices in one of the quarterly "reports" that must be presented to the assembly.

While Justino's criticisms came from outside the autonomous government structure, there were also all kinds of critical views from within the structure's three types of bodies – each one traversed by different political logics, democratic legitimacy and territoriality. Each in its own way revealed the limitations and problems of these first years of autonomy. But if there was one thing that authorities, technicians and autonomy workers, who made up a considerably larger body than with the municipality, agreed on, it was, first, the constant bureaucratic obstacles of the central State when implementing basic administrative procedures to ensure the functioning of the autonomy; and second, the lack of state funding, which, contrary to what was conveyed during the campaign for the Yes, was still framed in the same system of municipal funding despite the fact that as an Indigenous autonomy a greater number of competences were assumed than as a municipality.

This is the extent of the coincidences between members of the autonomous government structure. Another of the most clearly visible dynamics is the existing tensions between different indigenous autonomy bodies (legislative, executive and Ñemboati), which can be summarized on two levels. A first level of tension has to do with the decentralized territorial structure, in both organizational and elective terms, as well as in budgetary terms, and the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy can be understood as a sort of confederation between quasi-sovereign Zones. Although this ensures coexistence in a common framework that allows the multiple differences that cross the variegated Charagua society to be overcome, it also increases the dynamics of disintegration and competition between Zones, especially when the distribution of scarce economic resources to execute works and projects comes into play.

In this way, despite the existence of highly aggregated demands in the territory as a whole, such as the demand for its own financing system, differentiated from that of the municipalities, the dynamics of inter-zonal competition make it difficult to find spaces for shared struggle as Indigenous autonomy. Neither have the entities common to the whole of the autonomy (the TRI, the legislative body and the Ñemboati Guasu) managed to articulate these spaces, since the representatives in such entities, elected territorially in each of the six Zones, consider themselves, and are considered, representatives answerable mainly to their own Zone.

On the other hand, the second level of tension reveals, once again, the inertias and legacies with respect to the previous municipal system, something clearly evidenced in the ambivalent and uncomfortable position – perhaps precisely for that reason, full of potentialities still to be developed – of the Ñemboati Guasu, the representative and common authority for the whole Autonomy that is part of the new collective decision-making body, formed by 27 representatives of the six Zones. The Ñemboati Guasu is "the right arm of the bases, because we come from the base, we are one step away from the organic and one step away from the political." This is how Faviola Chavarría, one of its "assembly members" conceived it during the first management (2017–2019) of this new body (personal communication, 13 July 2019).[19]

The Ñemboati Guasu is conceived as an entity of social control of the legislative and executive powers, at the same time as it is a body that, in direct communication with the zonal assembly instances which that is why Chavarría conceptualized it as the "right arm of the bases" – defines the Autonomy's strategic plans and has the capacity to issue "mandates" of obligatory compliance to both the legislative and executive bodies. However, this new entity, the one "that most clearly breaks with municipalist institutionality" (Ledezma, 2017, p. 6), has not yet finished finding its place within the institutional framework of the Autonomy, as evidenced by the fact that, unlike the other two bodies, it does not have a regular funding line in the autonomous budget to ensure its functioning. For the time being, the Ñemboati Guasu is still struggling to win its place among the other autonomous bodies, which, according to several members of the Ñemboati, have not yet managed to get rid of the municipality "chip."

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We close this chapter by returning to the initial reflections on Guaraní autonomy as a hegemonic project, which we have brought up from the voice of Álvaro García Linera, someone who has recently experienced the disintegration of a hegemonic project that he himself helped forge. Something that can be understood as a lesson not so much about "hegemony" as a synonym of strength and solidity, but about the fragility, reversibility and, if you will, delicacy of sociopolitical transformation processes, such as the one documented in these pages, leaving many open edges, since the *wawita* of autonomy is still growing and, as we have seen, the first steps are always hesitant, zigzagging.

What is certain is that the next steps of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy will take place in a radically different context, surely much more complicated than the one in which it was conceived. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Charagua Guaraní have strategically used the approach to the Plurinational State – and above all, to their former government – to build their autonomy and improve the situation of their communities, autonomy also opens new spaces from which to organize and defend collective interests with respect to and, if necessary, against the State. It is still too early to see how this "new" Guaranízed Charagua – but where very old dynamics are still in force – will respond to the challenges ahead. In any case, assuming its fragility and delicacy, the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy continues to move forward, because after all, autonomous processes are always under construction.

NOTES

1   According to the population projections of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística for 2020. Available at: https://bit.ly/2H6thIX

2   For the transcription of the speeches of the 7 January 2017, event, I rely on the live webcast by Radio Santa Cruz-Charagua, a bilingual radio station belonging to the IRFA Foundation's radio network that broadcasts from Charagua Pueblo and has a significant following in rural Guaraní communities.

3   One of the most up-to-date analyses of the degree of progress of the different processes of constructing Indigenous autonomy can be found in Exeni (2018).

4   The first fieldwork period lasted between late March and early August 2012; the second between early April and late October 2014; the third between early February and early May 2015; and the fourth between September and November 2015. During these fieldwork periods, I conducted multiple unstructured interviews, held informal conversations in multiple contexts and, in addition to being part of different spaces of Charagua's sociability – in the ambivalent quality of "participant observer" – I have

tried to attend every event more or less linked to the autonomy process. Although I always try to cite the origin of the sources that support the statements and information, in some cases they do not come from a particular identifiable source but from the observation deployed over time and from the information that flows during the encounters and interactions of ethnography itself.

5   The dissertation is available at: https://bit.ly/3j1wo1D

6   I would like to thank the Guaraní people of Charagua for opening the doors of their process to me. I would also like to thank Marcelo Alberto Quelca, Magaly Gutiérrez and José Ledezma for always being willing to talk and share with me after so long.

7   In addition to the experience of Charagua, among the total of 17 municipalities that cover the territory claimed as "ancestral" by the Guaraní people, up to four municipalities have a majority Guaraní population that is currently in different stages of conversion to Indigenous autonomy: Gutiérrez and Lagunillas (both in the department of Santa Cruz), and Huacaya and Macharetí (in the department of Chuquisaca).

8   The term "*Autonomía Originario Campesina*" (First Peoples Peasant Autonomy), like the constitutional category of "*naciones y pueblos indígena originario campesino*" (Indigenous First Peoples peasant nations and peoples), is hardly used by the Guaraní, who, like other Indigenous peoples of the Bolivian lowlands, identify themselves as "Indigenous peoples" (now also as "nation") and, above all, are wary of the practical implications (especially at the territorial rights level) of the incorporation of the term "peasant"(*campesino*) associated with the Andean Quechua and Aymara migrants settled in Guaraní territory. In this text we will mostly choose to use the term "Indigenous autonomy" when referring to the legal figure AIOC.

9   There are notable differences both in the number of people in these communities (some have fewer than 10 families while others may have more than 1,000 people), and in their territorial distribution among *captaincies*, which also vary in size. According to data from the Community Territorial Management Plan prepared by the new Guaraní autonomous government (complemented by fieldwork data), the distribution of communities by captaincy is as follows: Charagua Norte, 31 communities; Parapitiguasu, 11 communities; Alto Isoso, 27 communities and Bajo Isoso, 41 communities.

10 Regarding the Bolivian Indigenous autonomous regime and its deployment in practice, we highlight the following analyses: Albó & Romero, 2009; Cameron, 2012; Tockman & Cameron, 2014, Tomaselli, 2015; Morell i Torra, 2015; Exeni, 2015, 2018; Plata & Cameron, 2017; Alderman, 2017.

11 Although there is the potential for "Indigenous First Peoples peasant regions," formed from the aggregation of previously constituted local Indigenous autonomies, their creation is very complex – no attempt yet exists – and, in addition, the Constitution explicitly states that the regions (Indigenous or non-Indigenous) that are formed cannot cross departmental boundaries (art. 280.I). Likewise, it establishes a series of obstacles – the need for a specific law to support it – for those autonomies (via municipality or TCO) that cross municipal administrative boundaries.

12 It should be noted that in June 2019, as a result of pressure from Indigenous organizations involved in autonomy conversion processes, the requirement for a second referendum was eliminated (through an amendment to the Framework Law on Autonomies and Decentralization), a problematic requirement in that it implied submitting to an individual secret vote a document (the statute) previously approved by the Autonomous Assembly through community democracy mechanisms.

13 In addition to the first eleven municipalities that in 2009 opened the municipal pathway of the AIOC with dissimilar fates, ten new municipalities started AIOC processes between 2014 and 2020 (Cameron and Plata, íbid.)

14 Although the term "*Chiriguano*", with popular pejorative etymological connotations, has disappeared as a category of social self-identification, and all (ex)*Chiriguanos* self-identify as "Guaranís" – compared to the 96,842 people who self-identified as Guaranís in the 2012 Census, only 327 did so as "*Chiriguanos*" [data available at https://bit. ly/3kb0IbK]-; the term "*Chiriguano*" continues to be used and claimed from historiography from another non-pejorative etymological genealogy (as a synonym for "*mestizos*") considering that it better reflects the specificity of the Bolivian Guaraní world rather than the generic category "Guaraní". (For a detailed analysis of the controversy regarding the denomination of the Bolivian Guaranís, see Morell i Torra, 2018, Chapter 4.)

15 For a more detailed analysis of the 2009 referendum's electoral results and their distribution logics according to the complex sociopolitical geography of Charagua, see Morell i Torra (2018, pp. 330-332).

16 The Autonomy Statute of Guaraní Charagua Iyambae is available at: https://bit. ly/35b0UkV

17 Apart from the six zones, the populated areas of Charagua, the formal jurisdiction of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy, extends further east to encompass areas that are almost entirely barren, but of great ecological value: two natural parks (Kaa Iya and Otuquis) and an Ecological Conservation Area (Ñembi Guasu). In a strategy to try to establish jurisdiction over this space, these three areas are also incorporated into the structure of the autonomous government and each has its own representative in the Ñemboati Guasu.

18 A small nuance should be introduced here with respect to gender parity in the Ñemboati Guasu. It is that, as noted in the previous footnote, there are three uninhabited areas of the autonomous territory (the Kaa Iya Natural Park, Otukis and the Ñembiguasu Ecological Conservation Area) that have a representative assigned to them. Equity is only guaranteed for the representatives of the Ñemboati Guasu from the six inhabited areas.

19 For a knowledgeable look at the first steps of the Ñemboati Guasu by someone involved in its technical support from the beginning, you can consult the text by José Ledezma (2017) on the website of the Arakuaarenda Foundation: https://arakuaarenda.org/panel/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Articulo-Web-J.-Ledezma-3.pdf

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