Meeting the Generals: A Political Ontology Analysis of the Paraguayan Maskoy Struggle for Land

Valentina Bonifacio *Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia*

Abstract: The defence of indigenous rights in Latin America has often benefited from an alliance between indigenous and nonindigenous sectors of the population. However, the narratives of these struggles have often been shaped by the assumptions of nonindigenous commentators. In this article I confront different public transcripts of the Paraguayan Maskoy struggle for land in the 1980s. Drawing on the emergent framework of "political ontology," I argue that the ontological categories sustaining modern political narratives inhibited the inclusion of the Maskoy political practices in the public transcripts of the land claim process, and that the acknowledgement of these practices could encourage more inclusive forms of collaboration.

Keywords: indigenous peoples, land struggles, ontology, political praxis, Paraguay

Résumé : La défense des droits des Autochtones en Amérique latine a souvent profité d'une alliance entre les secteurs autochtones et non autochtones de la population. Les récits de ces luttes ont toutefois souvent été colorés par les postulats de commentateurs non autochtones. Dans cet article, je compare différents discours (ou texte) publics de la lutte pour les terres de la nation paraguayenne Maskoy dans les années 1980. M'appuyant sur le cadre émergent de « l'ontologie politique », j'avance l'argument que les catégories ontologiques soutenant les récits politiques modernes ont empêché l'inclusion d'aspects spécifiques des praxises politiques des Maskoy dans les discours (ou texte) publics du processus de revendication territoriale. La reconnaissance de ces praxises politiques de la part des groupes de soutien, d'autre part, pourrait encourager des formes de collaboration plus inclusives.

Mots-clés : peuples autochtones; luttes territoriales; ontologie; praxis politique; Paraguay

Introduction

When the Maskoy indigenous people of Paraguay created an organization to initiate a land claim at the beginning of the 1980s, they were part of a wider movement of indigenous organizing throughout Latin America. This momentous process has been the subject of a vast anthropological literature (see Assies et al. 2000; De la Peña 2005; Gledhill 2000; Postero and Zamosc 2004; Ramos 1992, 2001; Sieder 2002; Warren and Jackson 2002, 2005), which has raised several highly relevant questions. With regard to the wider political context, Warren and Jackson (2005) argued, for example, that the emphasis on collective rights put forward by indigenous organizations has deeply challenged the liberal focus on the individual rights of undifferentiated citizens or that ethnic mobilization has fostered grassroots democratization in Latin America. Others, like Hale (2004), have argued that while states responded to indigenous mobilization by creating the figure of a "tolerated Indian"—one allowed to perform cultural differences inside the framework of a "multicultural" nation but denied more radical political demands—in some cases, the movements used the limited spaces created for their own purposes. All these analyses have demonstrated an extreme capability, on the part of indigenous people, to strategically and creatively adapt their identity practices to the context where demands take place and to translate local concepts into (trans)national discourses that resonate with those brought forward by NGOs and sometimes by nation states. Moreover, the mediatory role of legislative tools has grown in importance over time, often becoming the focus of both indigenous meetings and global campaigning for indigenous rights. These tools, such as the ILO (International Labor Organization)—Convention 169,[1] have proved to be valuable instruments in mediating the confrontation with the modern state by officially adopting its own procedures and forms. The legislative sphere, we could say, has become one of the main official battlegrounds for contemporary struggles on indigenous rights.

The Maskoy political history resonates with many of these points. In 1981, for instance, under the Stroessner dictatorship, the Paraguayan government approved the Law 904/81-Estatuto de las Comunidades Indígenas, which stated the right to land of indigenous people (and in particular to 100 ha per family in the Chaco region). This law arose from both the influence of the NGOs sector (Prieto 1994) and from a strategic alliance between important members of the army on the one hand (i.e., General Bejarano) and the missionary and academic sectors of the country on the other (Chase-Sardi 1987). However, even if Law 904/81 represented a fundamental battleground in the Maskoy struggle, two aspects of the land claim process need to be further developed, as they raise important issues at both political and ontological level: the Maskoy's focus on the individual encounters with politicians as crucial moments of the fight and the central role of shamans in these encounters. To further develop my argument and to emphasize the crucial implications that emerge when taking into consideration these two aspects, I build on what has been recently referred to as political ontology.

Political ontology, in the anthropological literature I refer to, is a perspective that frames the tensions between indigenous peoples and nonindigenous institutions in terms of conflicting or multiple ontologies (see Blaser 2009, 2010; Brigg 2007; Clammer et al. 2004; De la Cadena 2010; Descola 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998). In Blaser's words, political ontology aims at highlighting "the power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology" and the "conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other" (2009:11). In this article I show how different narratives of the Maskoy struggle for land are related to different ontological systems leading to different political practices. In particular, following Blaser's suggestion (2009), I define as "modern" the nonindigenous narratives of the fight to highlight their connection with what Latour (1991) has termed "the modern constitution."

According to Latour, the modern constitution establishes a separation between nature—the domain of nonhumans and facts, of "objects" to be represented by scientists—and society, the domain of humans and their symbols, of subjects to be represented by politicians (Latour 1991:21; see also De la Cadena 2010). The consequence of this division of labour is a delimitation of two spheres of knowledge: the political sphere as concerning humans and their representations, and the scientific sphere as concerning the analysis of "facts." The empirical style that we currently use to establish truth in science was founded by Boyle in the 17th century. It was based, in its origins, on the realization of an experiment in a laboratory, under the presence of witnesses who could testify to the "existence of something, the matter of fact, even though they do not know its real ontological nature" (Latour 1990:48). Therefore, to be considered true (in the sense of really being out there), things had to be visible and reproducible in a given set of conditions. A spiritual, invisible world clearly escapes these premises. Thus, within a modern narrative of political events, entities such as "earth-beings" (such as mountain spirits) do not exist because their status as "nature" automatically expels them from the realm of politics. These entities can only enter the political sphere as "culture."

Taking into consideration Scott's (1990) distinction between hidden and public transcripts, my aim is to compare two different public transcripts of the Maskoy struggle for land of the 1980s: that of "modern" history on the one side and that of the Maskoy on the other. In particular, I will show how only certain entities—those authorized by the modern constitution—have become part of the nonindigenous public transcript, while others only appear in the Maskoy narrative of the events. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the debate on what is considered a legitimate political praxis and what is not and the debate on how to collaborate with indigenous people in that space of encounter that a certain political engagement can generate.

The Emergence of Maskoy People's Fight for Land in the 1980s

When Carlos Casado's tannin factory was built on the western edge of the Paraguay River at the end of the 19th century, the Paraguayan Chaco was still considered a wild territory yet to be colonized. Far from being an empty land, however, it was a territory characterized by hunter-gatherer nomadic settlements, some of which had been at war with one another at various points in time. Because of the huge financial crisis that followed the War of the Triple Alliance against Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (1864–1870), the Paraguayan state began selling state-owned lands. Between 1886 and 1889 Carlos Casado del Alisal, an Argentinean banker, took advantage of the situation and, acting through dummy intermediaries, he finally managed to buy 5,625,000 hectares of land in the Chaco, about one-third of the whole Chaco territory (Dalla Corte 2007). The core of this "empire" was located in the town of Puerto Casado, 550 kilometres away from Paraguay's capital city, which in

1893 became the administrative and industrial centre of Carlos Casado's territory. The tannin factory was built there in 1887 and, from the very beginning, the workforce had an important indigenous component. An investigation by the Catholic Church (CEP 1983) states that in 1906 there were 1,000 employees working in Casado's factory, of which 400 were indigenous; thus, indigenous people represented 40 per cent of the factory workers. Moreover, apart from working in the factory, they represented the majority of the workforce on the cattle ranches that Carlos Casado established all over his territory.

Carlos Casado is mentioned in several testimonies and biographies as the man who finally developed the Chaco region. Don Heugenio Hermosa, historian of Puerto Casado and cattle ranch manager of the Casado Corporation, spoke about the "civilising mission of Casado's company, which possessed by the pioneer and conquering spirit of its founder unravelled richness from a green hell [the Chaco]" (Aguero 1985:3). After exploiting the territory's natural resources for about 100 years, the "civilising mission" came to an end. In the 1970s, with the international decline in tannin prices, the company started reducing its activity, and in 1997, the factory in Puerto Casado was definitively closed (Dalla Corte 2007:491). In 2000, bankrupt and with a huge economic debt, Casado's company sold 600,000 hectares of land, including the factory and Puerto Casado itself, to Atenil, a company associated with the Unification Church, also known as the Moonies.

With the company already in crisis, in 1975 the Episcopal Paraguayan Congress (CEP by its Spanish acronym) started negotiating with Casado S.A. to buy land for the company's indigenous workers and ex-workers. Over the years indigenous people coming from different regions of the Chaco had begun working together in the factory and on the cattle ranches, and they had settled in Puerto Casado together with their families (Figure 1). The company offered 5,000 hectares of flood-zone land in the form of a donation and 5,000 hectares of land to be sold at an advantageous rate. Due to difficulties with a parallel case, the negotiations became paralyzed until 1981. In the 1980s the negotiations reopened but this time with the official involvement of indigenous people themselves.

When the struggle began, five different ethnic groups (Guana, Sanapana, Enxet, Toba and Angaite) coexisted in the indigenous district of Puerto Casado (Pueblito Indio Livio Farina) and in the surrounding cattle ranches. Their economy was based on work in the factory and the cattle ranches (the latter being specially valorized

Figure 1: Map of Paraguay.

by the indigenous workers), even if hunting-gathering was still an option. Prior to the 1980s, the term *Maskoy* had been used in the anthropological literature to define a variety of ethnic groups from the Chaco region that shared a common linguistic root. This was a purely academic denomination. In Pueblito, for instance, despite the long-lasting efforts of the Catholic missionaries to form a "compact group of Christian Indians" (Susnik 1954), in the 1980s families were still located according to their ethnic origins (Regher 1980). On the cattle ranches, however, the different ethnic groups were settled in the territory in a more dispersed and temporary way (Delporte 1992). The adoption of a common Maskoy identity does not appear to be a spontaneous outcome of the cohabitation of different linguistic groups. On the contrary, it is the result of a strategic decision that was taken by indigenous people at the beginning of the land claim process to strengthen their political identity, and it continued to be endorsed later when people settled down in their new territory. Moreover, an additional linguistic justification for choosing that particular denomination was the presence in the term *Maskoy* of the word *mas*, which is Spanish means "more." In fact,

"more people" (i.e., people of different origins) were gathered under a unique denomination (Angel Martinez, Maskoy leader, personal communication, September 2004). In the National Census of 2002, they appear as "Toba Maskoy," and they are included in the "Lengua Maskoy" linguistic group together with the Lengua (or Enxet, as they are otherwise called), Sanapana, Guana, Toba and Angaite ethnic groups (DGEEC 2003). The total number of individuals is given at 756; however, I believe that, because of the confusion created by the word "Toba" in the denomination "Toba Maksoy," many of the people decided not to define themselves as such.

The 1980s Struggle for Land: Modern Narratives

In this section, I narrate the history of the land claim process using different kinds of documents, including Horst's (2007) important book on the history of resistance in Paraguay and several documents produced by representatives of the Catholic Church. They include a book published by the CEP (Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya) in 1986, an article published in the local anthropological review and several letters and reports currently held in a small archive in the Puerto Casado parish.

The importance of the Catholic Church is clear if we consider that it was the main ally of Maskoy people in the conflict. In 1975, members of the Marandu Project sponsored by the Catholic University of Asuncion—probably influenced by the mandate of the Barbados Declaration of 1971 to overcome "colonial relationships"—visited the indigenous neighbourhood of Puerto Casado for 15 days to provide them with information about their legal rights (Renshaw 1996), and immediately afterward the indigenous workers were incorporated into the factory trade union. It was precisely because of this episode that, in 1975, Parguay's dictator General Stroessner imprisoned and tortured some of the leading members of Marandu Project—Miguel Chase-Sardi, one of the signatories of the Barbados Declaration, among them (Susnik and Chase-Sardi 1995:329).

In a 1981 article published in the anthropological review of the Catholic University in Paraguay, Bishop (1981) stated that, to save Maskoy people from their "poor, defenceless and hopeless" condition, the only solution was to obtain land: to help the Indians recover their ethnic identity; to help them develop as people; to help them overcome their vices and recover their physical strength; to help them be Christians and human, they need land[9] (Obelar 1981:14).

Sheltered by the new Law 904/81, which, by way of compensation, granted 100 hectares of land per indigenous family in the Chaco, the CEP decided to reformulate the fight in terms of expropriation and hired a lawyer, Mirna Vasquez, and a sociologist, Gladys Casaccia, to support the Maskoy people in the process. The legal dimension of the struggle was very important from the beginning; it involved the presence of the state as the mediator between the Maskoy and Casado S.A. It may be worth noting that the power of the company had already declined because of the collapse in the international demand of tannin, and there was an ongoing tension between Casado S.A. and the state. Despite this, the government seemed to support the Casado company much more than the Maskoy. The main reason behind this posture has to be found in the 100 years worth of favours exchanged between the company and state members (CEP 1983). Moreover, the Catholic Church accused the state of defending private property and foreign investments: in 1981, the Apostolic Vicariate again negotiated with the company, indicating that,

> since the beginning the case of indigenous people in Puerto Casado hasn't been a commercial but rather a humanitarian case ... taking into account the indisposition of the Company to donate 3% of its land as a compensation for the harm inflicted to the indigenous population, we can only think about Carlos Casado S.A. as a "capitalist" company in the worst sense of the word. [CEP 1983:25]

And also, "What is more violent, an expropriation of land or 300 indigenous families dying, without a piece of land to cultivate?" (Archbishop Press Office 1987).

In 1986, when the outcome of the struggle was still uncertain, CEP published a book that summarized the situation up to that moment. In the introduction to the book (CEP 1986), both indigenous people and the church are described as external to the logic of the "economy of money," which is seen as corrupting contemporary society. Two discourses, that of a nationalist resistance against an Argentinean company and that of a moral resistance against the alienation of capitalism, along with the defeat of communism, are the axes around which justification of the fight is built. Indigenous people are described essentially as victims—of the liberal system of economic exploitation, of a secular discrimination, of the despoliation of their traditional territories.

The legal battle against the company and the state was accompanied by periodical trips of the Maskoy leaders to the capital city. Both the North American historian Harder Horst, author of one of the most relevant books

about the recent history of Paraguay, and the CEP describe these trips as crucial moments in the process. According to Horst, for instance, the leaders' travels were aimed at "pressing" political authorities (Horst 2007:113), while the CEP underlined how the visits contributed visibility to the struggle in the national and international press. As will become clearer later on, both interpretations miss aspects that were crucial from the point of view of the Maskoy.

Another strategy deployed by the Catholic Church, together with local organizations, was to send signatures to the Senate requesting the immediate expropriation of land for the Maskoy. Indeed, on 16 July 1987, while Stroessner's dictatorship was already endangered by popular protests and the lack of international support, the Catholic Church, a labour union and the AIP (Paraguayan Indigenist Association) sent 3,000 signatures to the Senate. According to Horst, this act "proved too much for the regime to bear" (2007:131), and on 30 July, the Senate finally decided for the expropriation of land.

If the pressure exercised by the press and the civil society has played a crucial role in the struggle, another detail worth mentioning is a letter by the CEP to the Senate dated the 9 June 1987. The letter made reference to the imminent visit of Pope John Paul II to Paraguay in 1988, already announced by the Vatican. Taking advantage of the event, the Catholic Church threatened to publicly denounce the bad treatment that the dictatorship had imposed on indigenous people if the Parliament refused to expropriate the Maskoy territory quickly enough:

> Let's not forget to mention the imminent visit of our Holy Father to our country. It would be extremely inconvenient if this issue [the expropriation of land in favour of the Maskoy people] was still unresolved and provoked words of reproach to our human and Christian conscience. The solution to this problem depends on you and the Senators. A solution that will give the necessary tranquillity to a suffering community and to the whole Paraguayan nation that is sharing that suffering. [CEP 1987]

On 30 July, the Senate finally expropriated 30,103 hectares of land from Casado S.A., and on 20 August, Stroessner signed the final document[2]. Horst writes, "Although securing land for the Maskoy was another attempt [on the part of the dictatorship] to dampen rising opposition, the campaign [read: struggle of the Maskoy people] still stands as a monument to indigenous organisation" (2007:131).

The protagonists of these narratives of struggle are thus the Paraguayan Episcopal Congress (CEP), the civil society, the Maskoy leaders and communities, the Pope and the dictator and his congressmen. To summarize, we could say that, according to Horst (2007), the role of the Maskoy leaders was that of giving visibility to the whole process so they could put pressure on the government and conquer public opinion on both a national and an international level. On the other hand, a further strategy adopted by the CEP was to take advantage of the Pope's visit to Paraguay, thus putting pressure on the government through his undisputed visibility. According to both, the success of the struggle was due to a combination of these factors, together with a coincidental loss of support for Stroessner's regime.[3] It is important to highlight that all the protagonists of this version of history, even if characterized by different values and political strategies, are considered legitimate political actors from the point of view of a modern narrative of the events, as they are all deemed to really exist. In the following section I will retell the same history from the point of view of the Maskoy, revealing new and unthought-of presences that cast a different light on the events.

The 1980s Fight for Land: The Maskoy Narrative

> There are powerful doctors[4] [shamans]. There still are.
> There are doctors, but they keep their silence.
> They look inoffensive.
> But if you bother them, they will rise again.
> Ojeda, personal communication, Castilla, 2007

In September 2004, I travelled to Puerto Casado to realize an independent documentary about the Maskoy struggle for land and to write an article about the same topic for an underground local newspaper (*El Yacare*). The documentary, titled *La Lucha del Pueblo Maskoy. 1983–1987*, was screened one year later inside the communities, marking the beginning of a last-longing relationship. Three years later, I was back in Territory Riacho Mosquito to conduct my Ph.D. fieldwork in the Maskoy communities, for about two years (Figure 2). The interviews mentioned below were all undertaken as part of a new documentary about the Territory Riacho Mosquito and can be considered part of a "public transcript" of the Maskoy about what happened in those troubled years.[5]

At the beginning of the 1980s, there were about 500 people living in Pueblito. But it was only in the beginning of the struggle that they decided—for logistical

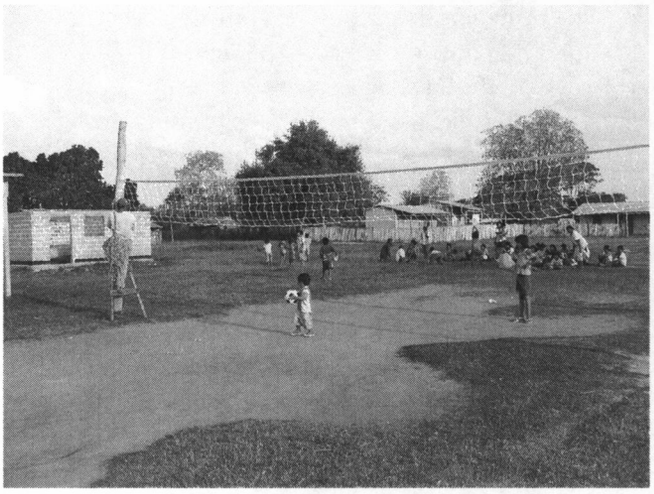

Figure 2: Maskoy community of Castilla, volleyball ground. 2008. Photo Credit: Valentina Bonifacio.

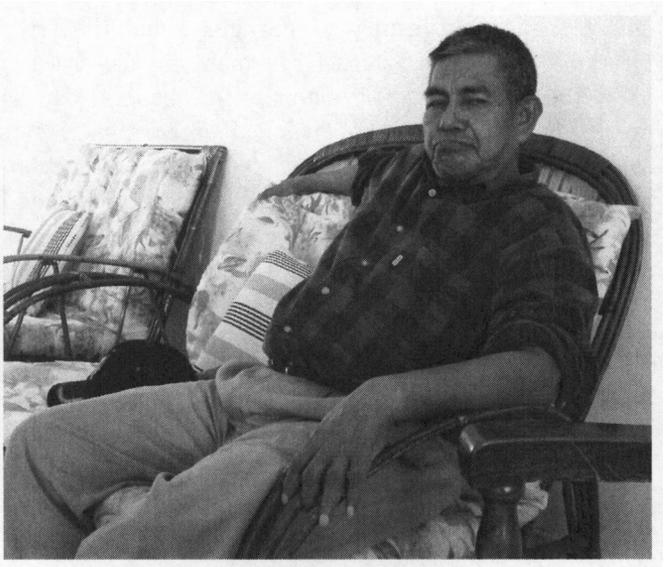

Figure 3: Rene Ramirez—ex general leader in the Maskoy fight for land of the 1980s—inside Carlos Casado's ex-house, now owned by a local cooperative. Photo credit: Valentina Bonifacio, 2008.

reasons—to elect a land-commission and a common leader for all five ethnic groups. Up to that moment, according to a report of the Catholic Church, there was a lack of leadership in Pueblito. Regher (1980:10) mentions the testimony of a Maskoy settler who said, "All our chiefs have died. We need an intelligent man to gather all the people together." Regher also points out, "Indigenous people learnt in the mission to cooperate as individuals with these institutions [the Company and the Church], and above all to obey their orders. This process of individualization debilitated their traditional sense of group cooperation and their traditional leaders" (1980:9). Despite this, the election happened quickly when the inhabitants of Pueblito decided that they needed an indigenous leader other than the missionaries. Accordingly, in 1983, Rene Ramirez (Figure 3), already a representative of the indigenous workers in the factory trade union, was elected *cacique principal* ("main leader") in the struggle for land.

As other Maskoy leaders describe him, Rene Ramirez acted, from that moment, as a lawyer for his people (personal communication with Luciano Violante, leader of Km 40, 10 September 2004). His power relied on defending, in front of the whites, the decisions taken by the common assembly. Together with Ramirez, a committee of seven to ten leaders was also elected to lead the expropriation. Their trips to the capital city were financed by a Youth Committee, composed essentially of women, who collected money by organizing bingo games and by selling homemade food.

Juan Gonzales, the youngest member of the Maskoy commission that visited the authorities in the capital city between 1983 and 1987, was pointed to me by the other leaders as one of the official narrators of the struggle. This is how Gonzales described the beginning of the process to me:

> One Thursday afternoon, Father Ballin began his catechism, in which 40 people participated. And 40 people sent a notice to Rene Ramirez, catechist and President of the Don Bosco commission, that he urgently had to travel to the capital city with five representatives of the Maskoy people in order to present a document that reclaimed the historical site called Riacho Mosquito. The following Saturday we travelled to Asuncion on a motor boat called "Panchita He." There were five of us, all of us representatives of the Maskoy people. In Asuncion we left our document in the offices of INDI (National Institute of the Indian) and IBR (Institute of Rural Welfare) and we went back to Puerto Casado. [Interview, Juan Gonzales, Km 39-Maria Auxiliadora, September 2008]

The first trip of the land commission to Asuncion, according to Gonzales, marks the beginning of the struggle. The Maskoy experienced with great enthusiasm the fact of having been received by the authorities, and they felt optimistic about the future. But the missionaries observed this enthusiasm with a critical eye:

> The Maskoy delegation was finally received by General Martinez, president of INDI, who made them the

> dangerous promise that he will try to get land for them, but less land than what they requested and in a place other than Riacho Mosquito. The indigenous representatives looked happy, but our missionary team foresees several dangers. [Father Robin 1983]

The content of the meeting does not seem to have been as important to the Maskoy delegation as the fact of having been received by the authorities. This perception of things began to change after the first meeting, however. In fact, Juan Gonzales says,

> In the beginning we didn't encounter any difficulty but, rather, received congratulations. But after a while the same representatives travelled again to the capital city, and that's when the difficulties began to appear. Casado, in fact, presented an offer [of land] that did not coincide with the wishes of the Maskoy people and the Maskoy people didn't want to accept it. In 1984, the representatives of the Maskoy people travelled once again to Asuncion. And that's when the battle started, the fight started. [*Ya empezó como si fuera una batalla. Empezó la lucha.*] ... At that time, there were 180 families in Pueblito. Twelve [Paraguayan] people arrived in Pueblito from Asuncion, in order to meet with the Maskoy: representatives of the INDI, the IBR and Casado's company. They wanted us to accept Casado's offer. "You have to accept it," they said to the people. But the people said no. As a consequence, each representative of each community raised their hand in front of the Paraguayan representatives to say that they didn't accept Casado's offer.... In 1985, Casado presented his fourth offer, but it was rejected. [Interview with Juan Gonzales, Km 39-Maria Auxiliadora, 2008]

The fight for land is described by Gonzales as a battle between enemies. The personal will of politicians, from the Maskoy perspective, seemed to count more than any approved law. And it quickly became evident that the state was not taking the side of the Maskoy, nor was the Institute of the Indian (INDI). Just when the fight appeared to have come to an end, Juan Gonzales tells how the president of INDI himself once more betrayed the Maskoy. Gonzales, on this occasion, was the youngest member of the commission, but—according to him—the only one capable of facing the military authorities without wavering:

> In 1986 Casado presented an offer with only half of the land we had requested: 15,000 hectares. And, in October 1986, ten of us travelled to Asuncion, including: René Ramírez, Carlos López, Joaquín Cabrera, Román Villalba, Remigio, Carlos Álvarez and me. The president of INDI—although we didn't know it—had already negotiated with the company and he was convinced that we were going to accept the 15,000 hectares. The president of INDI, General Martinez, summoned us to the capital city. At four o'clock in the afternoon we got there. At the door, Coronel Carrillo was waiting for us. This Coronel Carrillo received the Indians and made them pass through the door. Mirna Vázquez and Gladys Casaccia were there with us, also a few journalists. But Carrillo let the Indians in and then closed the door. The Whites were left outside.... General Gaspar Martinez, who had five stars, held the document with the offer of 15,000 hectares in his hands. He told us that we had no choice but to sign. Rene Ramirez remained silent. And all the rest of the people remained silent because they were scared. No one knew what was going to happen. The president of INDI had lied to us.... He gave us the document and said, "This is your document. You have to sign." He gave Rene Ramirez the pen, but he refused to sign. "No!" he said, and didn't care. The president gave it to the next person. "No!" he also said. One by one they said no. And then it was my turn. I hit the table. In that moment, Rene Ramirez was startled. I hit the table in front of the General. "No, sir! We haven't come to sign this. We are not going to sign. And we'll leave. I'm going to leave. If only one of us is going to sign, his signature doesn't count." And General Martinez said, "Why don't you sign this, and in five months we will give you more?" But I said, "No!" Some of the authorities said, "They have told you to behave like this." But I said, "No, sir. Indigenous people know how they want to live. For their grandchildren they want this land." [Interview with Juan Gonzales, Km 39-Maria Auxiliadora, 2008]

And, to emphasize that it was the final battle, Gonzales concludes, "In 1987, the President of Paraguay quickly signed our request." I have included these fragments of interview in detail to show how important it is for Juan Gonzales to recall each small detail of the encounter. His storytelling of the process, in fact, consists of a list of trips marked by finely described encounters between indigenous people and state authorities, which he also describes as "battles."

Not all politicians, however, were enemies. According to Juan Gonzales the Maskoy had their allies even inside the Colorado Party, the party of the dictatorship. These allies turned out to be strategic in the last phase of the struggle:

> Fortunately, the Maskoy people had their own friend, a member of the Parliament, who fought for us a lot: Julio César Frutos of the ANR,[6] an important member of the Parliament. And also the president of the Government, Juan Ramón Chávez, supported us. At some point, we told Juan Ramón Chávez, "We

> want to become members of the Colorado Party (ANR)." But he replied, "You, indigenous people, have got nothing to do with any political membership. You don't have to become members of any political party: you are free. And I like this. Ask for the land! The land is yours. You deserve it (hay que darles nomás). You have to recover your land. You've got more rights than us over the land." In 1987, on several occasions the Maskoy met Julio Cesar Frutos and Juan Ramón Chávez. That's because in 1987, political authorities were in charge of the documents. It was their task. [Interview with Juan Gonzales, Km 39-Maria Auxiliadora, 2008]

Once again, the moments of direct confrontation with state authorities are emphasized as crucial moments of the process. The fight against Casado S.A. was, first of all, a fight against particular individuals, and it is in the context of this peculiar conceptualization of the struggle that the role of the shamans became essential. I would argue that even the term *batalla* is used by Juan Gonzales in reference to the shamanic battles that are the subject of frequent conversations in the Chaco region (see Regher 1993). As Angel Martinez, one of the Maskoy leaders once said: "The Whites have their lawyers, but we also have our lawyers: the shamans." Below, I clarify why Gonzales emphasized the encounters so much and what, exactly, was the role of shamans.

The Role of Shamans

Angel Martinez, a contemporary Maskoy leader, explained to me that the reason why the Maskoy got their land back, unlike Paraguayan peasants,[7] was due to the role of shamans. According to him, two shamans followed the Maskoy delegation to the capital city, where they prevented political authorities from getting too nervous (*que les dieran los nervios*). Martinez remembered, for example, how Rene Ramirez was thrown out of a general's office because of a nervous attack of the latter. In his opinion, without shamans the interaction would have been impossible. To support his declaration about the presence of shamans, I point out that, in a 1984 newspaper article (CEP 1986:133), two new names appear in the Maskoy commission that was visiting the capital. Both of them are powerful shamans: one was considered to be one of the most powerful shamans in the area; the second is still a renowned shaman.

Nevertheless, the shamans didn't participate in the struggle only by travelling to the capital city. According to Rene Ramirez, one of their roles was to keep the people in Pueblito informed about what was happening in the capital, even while the shamans remained in Pueblito. Through their visions, in fact, they were able to "see at a distance" what the indigenous leaders were doing in Asuncion. Yet another, even more important role, was that of *aflojar* (literally, loosening) the military authorities during their meetings with the Maskoy representatives:

> Shamans are our lawyers. There were two old women in particular who took care of us spiritually [*siempre nos cuidaban espiritualmente*]. People used to visit them and ask for information when the leaders travelled to Asunción. Because they could see, people asked them for information. They saw [what happened in the capital city] as if they were watching a movie. "People are speaking, you have to stay silent," they said. Without them, we couldn't have won. They also said, "We are going to loosen [*aflojar*] the authorities, so that they are going to say, yes, we'll give the land." They were called Marciana and Ramona. They wanted to be buried in San Juan. It had been their valley when they were children. When the land was expropriated, they cried a lot. They were happy ... Shamans also used to travel to Asunción. They remained outside the door, to help the leaders spiritually [*espiritualmente*]; to confront the authorities, so that the clash with them wasn't too strong. [Interview with Rene Ramirez, Pueblito, 2008]

To understand what Ramirez means by "loosening," we have to look at the shamanic practice. Shamans in the Chaco learn the ability to travel in the spirit world through fasting and through the ingestion of rotten plants (Arenas 1981; Kidd 1999). They also learn, in the same way, to get in contact with the different types of spirits that are the owners (*dueños*) of different kinds of nonhuman beings: plants, animals, natural elements and objects. Each of these spirits has a particular ability, and it is "used" by the shaman in case of necessity. A shaman can learn, for example, to see at a distance thanks to the ingestion of soil. Another ability that is acquired by shamans through the ingestion of plants is to act on people's "stomach/entrails" (*wáxok*; *py'a*), which is a way of making them more or less generous toward other people. According to Kidd (1999), among the Enxet, the wáxok is the organ of the body that represents the affective and cognitive centre of the person and is the place that can be most easily invaded by malevolent spirits sent by shamans. An essential distinction is that between soft/unlocked wáxok—a precondition that allows people to behave in a loving and generous manner—and locked/hard wáxok—typical of people who behave in an egoistic manner, an attitude that is publicly condemned (1999:49). Thus, when Ramirez says that the shamans

are loosening the authorities, he implies that they are mobilizing the power of their nonhuman spirit-aids to loosen/unlock their "stomach/entrails" so that the authorities will have a helpful attitude toward the Maskoy people. The Maskoy conceptualization of the event is revealed in the Guarani/Spanish translation through the use of the verb *aflojar* (to make soft) in an unusual context. Ramirez also describes the shamanic practice by saying that they "work on" (*trabajan*) politicians. I would argue that this expression has to be understood as related to the already mentioned action of "loosening." Below, Ramirez recounts, in 2007, the last encounter with President Stroessner, when the dictator's signature was the only missing thing from the document that declared the expropriation of the Maskoy's land:

> It was the first expropriation in the history of Latin America. The first in history. It is even more amazing if you consider that Stroessner was in power. I talked to him twice. He usually kept people waiting for eight days before receiving them, but he received me on the spot. Not even twenty-four hours did I have to wait. Thanks to the shamans, because they worked on him [*trabajaron por él*]. They said, "We're going to work on him [*Vamos a trabajar por él*]." ... "Don't worry," said Stroessner, "the 30,000 hectares are yours [*Ne mba'e umia cacique, ne mba'e'*]." That's why I got calm [*me tranquilicé*]. And so I told him, "I'm calm [*tranquilo*]." "If the document gets here, I'm going to sign." said Stroessner. I think that the document was there for three days only, and then he signed. And then he immediately authorised the expropriation. [Interview with Rene Ramirez, Pueblito, 2008]

It is thus possible to recognize, in Ramirez's account of the struggle, idioms that belong to a particular world, a world where other-than-human beings are granted an agency in the political sphere. Such a world is the one that the Paraguayan Episcopal Congress, as well as historians and anthropologists, tend to leave aside in their "modern" narratives of resistance and confrontations. Other-than-human beings are the invisible presence that is mobilized in the meetings through the mediatory role of shamans. By opening the authorities' py'a, shamans contribute to reestablishing a balance between the persons and the network of relationship they are made up of.

Discussions about the role of shamans in politics or the political role of shamans are not particularly new in the anthropological literature (see Salomon 1983; Taussig 1986; Thomas and Humphrey 1994; Whitehead and Vidal 2004; for the Chaco region, Gordillo 2003; Kidd 1995). However, the way in which shamanism is often treated runs parallel to the modernist accounts of the struggle that I discussed above; namely, shamanism may be, at best, considered a "fact" with symbolic power in the political realm, but shamanic explanations of the "facts" that happen in the political realm are hardly taken at face value. Taking up the suggestions of the political ontology framework, my aim is to restore the shamans' political role as part of a socionatural world or ontology where earth-beings do have an influence on human political action. The presence of shamans in the political sphere not only suggests the presence of a "unique cultural idiom" to talk about power (Whitehead and Vidal 2004), nor does it only add symbolic power to the Maskoy political actions, but it also opens up connections with an unthought-of spiritual world. Despite their invisibility during the fight, I would not agree that Maskoy shamans' "non-visibility to white observers deprived this strategy of the possibility of having a political impact on those in position of power" (Gordillo 2003:113). The effectiveness of the shamans' actions on Stressner's decision to sign the expropriation of land can be downplayed only by denying reality to the indigenous narrative of the events.[8] Likewise, if we confine the role of shamans to a "process whereby history is being reinvented and transformed into myth" (Kidd 1995:59), not only do we risk reducing it to "folklore," we also presuppose the existence of a "real" history happening outside indigenous ontological categories. As my purpose in this article is to emphasize the existence of alternative political practices, I will not question the veracity of the Maskoy narratives nor I will discuss the relationship between myth (and structure) and history (and event) (Sahlins 1985). By relating the Maskoy struggle for land, I focus the discussion on the political praxis and on how it is performed and theorized in relation to different political ontologies.

Of course, the Maskoy representatives were also deploying specific discourses in the confrontation with politicians. For example, they frequently emphasized their participation in the Chaco war to gain allies inside the government. But whatever the content of the communication might have been, it is important to understand that according to some of the protagonists of the struggle, shamans—and the spiritual beings with whom they were collaborating—had a crucial role in creating the correct conditions for a balanced dialogue with governmental authorities. In other words, they had a crucial role in creating the right context for the communication to happen.

Conclusion: (Dis)Locating Truth and Political Action

General Alfredo Stroessner finally signed the expropriation of land in favour of the Maskoy people on 20 August 1987. It is my contention in this article that the different political strategies displayed in the struggle were strictly linked to the ontological assumptions of their promoters and that some of these strategies openly collide with a "modern" narrative of the fight, thereby inhibiting their immediate inclusion in the nonindigenous public transcripts of the land claim process. In particular, the moments of face-to-face encounters between Maskoy representatives and Paraguayan authorities need to be rethought, as they constitute nodes where different worlds and actors mingle. These encounters raise serious questions of what is considered a legitimate political praxis by the different actors and how to facilitate the collaboration between indigenous and nonindigenous sectors of the population in specific contexts.

In her inspiring article, Marisol De la Cadena (2010) points out that contemporary Andean indigenous movements are challenging our usual way of conceiving the political sphere by exceeding it. This excess consists of the unexpected appearance of earth-beings in highly visible political contexts such as the coming forth of the *pachamama* (mother earth) in the Ecuadorian constitution, the libations to the earth before a political conversation in Bolivia or the calling into presence of sacred mountains during a public demonstration in Peru. Such appearances are regarded by politicians and activists with suspicion or are domesticated by translating them through familiar categories such as "beliefs" or "organised ethnic politics" (2010:337). Both reactions demonstrate that, while operating within the modern constitution, it is impossible to take into account the presence of sentient earth-beings in the political arena. As De la Cadena suggests, indigenous representatives do of course endorse partial translations of their practices in specific situations, but they have also shown their willingness to maintain (and take care of) the links with some earth-beings by continuing to conceive of them as political actors able to make decisions on their own and to exert an influence on the circulation of power inside the political context. In her words, we could describe the endorsement of a multiplicity of political practices on the part of the same subjects "as a complex formation, a historic-political articulation of more than one, but less than two, socionatural worlds" (2010:347).

The encounters between Maskoy leaders and Paraguayan politicians can also be thought of as situated at a crossroads between different socionatural worlds. As nonindigenous commentators and analysts point out, the encounters were crucial because they enhanced the public visibility and bargaining power of the Maskoy leaders in a context where the announced visit of John Paul II to the Paraguayan Chaco coincided with the Stroessner regime's increasing need for international support. But the encounters also represented the only occasion for indigenous leaders to negotiate with politicians from a position of power thanks to the action of the shamans who "loosened" the authorities through the aid of their auxiliary spirits. In fact, the names of two powerful Maskoy shamans appear in the list of committee members who travelled to Asuncion in 1984. While actually "working on" politicians from Puerto Casado, they were finally incorporated in the Maskoy committee that travelled to Asuncion to deal directly with the authorities. Nevertheless, while their names did appear in the newspapers, they were not acknowledged there as shamans. This invisibility may be considered a strategic decision allowing them greater freedom of action. However, if invisibility had been a strategy in the past it is not so anymore: the role of shamans in the struggle is officially mentioned in the Maskoy public transcript of the land claim process. Through the work of shamans, meetings become crucial moments of their political praxis. Nevertheless, because their work relies on the collaboration of the other-than-human beings with whom they learn to communicate, the role of shamans can hardly be recognized as fully part of the political praxis in a "modern" narrative of the events. In the same way, even if members of the Catholic Church might have believed in God's intervention in the struggle and even if prayers might have been part of their political praxis, neither of the two is officially mentioned in their public transcript of the Maskoy land claim process.

Far from being confined to history, the role of shamans is still a valuable option in the Maskoy political praxis. In fact, while living in Riacho Mosquito in 2007 and 2008, I saw that they still had a role in negotiating with politicians inside the communities, even if politicians were completely unaware of their silent presence during the meetings. For there is a major difference here with the Andean situation: in the Paraguayan Chaco, any open reference to earth-beings is still absent from the public political sphere. What differentiates the two contexts might be of a numeric order: indigenous people in Paraguay only represent 1.7 per cent of the population (DGEEC 2003). Furthermore, even if some local nonindigenous organizations operating in the Chaco region have rethought the role of shamanism in the

political praxis (i.e., by introducing them in the parliament or by organizing interethnic ceremonies), they have not done it publicly, as this would probably harm their reputation. Instead, we could imagine a local NGO openly promoting encounters between the indigenous and the local political authorities as key moments of their political actions. Indeed, what is at stake here is not only the recognition of a different point of view on what is the political, but it is the capability of imagining alternative forms of collaboration between indigenous and nonindigenous sectors of the population through the use of a variety of political tools: from international laws to other-than-human sentient beings.

Valentina Bonifacio, Palazzo Malcanton Marcorà, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Dorsoduro 3484/D–30123 (VE), Italy.
E-mail: valentina.bonifacio@unive.it.

Notes

1 The ILO (International Labour Organization) Convention-169, adopted in 1989, "is a legally binding international instrument open to ratification, which deals specifically with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. Today, it has been ratified by 20 countries" (see http://www.ilo.org/indigenous/Conventions/no169/lang–en/index.htm).

2 Nowadays, the Maskoy people celebrate the recuperation of their land on 2 September, the day on which the news was made public in Puerto Casado.

3 In 1989, Stroessner's regime was finally overthrown by a coup planned by his own political party, the ANR (Alianza Nacional Republicana, also called the Colorado Party).

4 The word *doctor* is rarely used with reference to the local mediators between human and other-than-human beings. More frequently, the Maskoy refer to this category of specialists with the word *chamàn* (from Spanish) or *paye* (from Guarani). It might be useful to emphasize that the Maskoy have long since collectively adopted the Guarani Yopara (a mix of Guarani and Spanish), which is the language spoken by the majority of the Paraguayan population. For a discussion on the use of the word *shaman* to identify a specific category of religious specialists, see Humphrey (1994).

5 Fragments of these interviews have been incorporated in a documentary called *Casado's Legacy* (2009), which is currently distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology (UK). Translations from "Interview with Juan Gonzales, Km 39-Maria Auxiliadora, 2008" and "Interview with Rene Ramirez, Pueblito, 2008" are my own.

6 Asociación Nacional Republicana, better known as the Colorado Party. This party was in power for more than 60 years, including the period of Stroessner's dictatorship.

7 While I was doing my fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, the non-indigenous inhabitants of Puerto Casado (partially supported by the Maskoy) were reclaiming a portion of land from the Moonies.

8 According to Descola (2005:323), human beings can make sense of the world through four different "modalities of identification": animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism. In particular, while animism implies a continuity of interiorities and a discontinuity of physicality (sometimes the different beings perceive the world in heterogeneous ways), naturalism implies a discontinuity of interiorities (and especially a rupture between humans and non-humans) and a continuity of matter (physicality). Despite recognizing my way of reasoning as belonging to a "naturalist" ontological framework, I do not assume I am thinking from the point of view of a universal truth but rather from the point of view of a specific "modality of identification."

9 All translations of documents coming from the archive of the Puerto Casado parish are my own. I have also translated the quote from Alejo Obelar (1981) and the interview with Ojeda.

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