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The Vivir Bien Rhetoric and Afro-Bolivian Women's Struggles for Recognition and Inclusive Citizenship

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Abstract: In many parts of Latin America, the concept of Living Well (Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien), which is seen to originate from Indigenous peoples' cosmovisions and encompasses such values as solidarity, inclusivity, and human and more-than-human conviviality, has been presented as an alternative life philosophy beyond individualistic, economistic, and 'Western' development. In Bolivia, the Afro-Bolivians vested many hopes and expectations in the concept of Vivir Bien, as its emphasis on community and decolonization resonated well with their African diaspora experience. However, despite such victories as their recognition in the 2009 constitution and the new legislation against racism, the specific needs and rights of the Afro-Bolivian community have not, to a large extent, been met. Based on Afro-Bolivian women's perceptions of desirable futures and experiences concerning the contradictory realities of Vivir Bien policies, the chapter discusses the gaps between romanticised Vivir Bien rhetoric, as employed by state authorities, and the concrete struggles of Afro-Bolivian women for recognition and inclusive citizenship. At the face of government neglect and multiple discrimination in public spheres, the value of, and support by, fellow Afro-Bolivian women and their autonomous organising, particularly as manifested in saya – an Afro-Bolivian dance and music genre – creates spaces for resistance and alternative visioning and practices.

Introduction

On 22 January 2024, Bolivia celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the plurinational state. Legally established in the 2009 constitution, plurinationalism signalled – in principle – the recognition of diversity and interculturalism, and a shift away from colonial, republican, and liberal state traditions (Nuñez del Prado, 2015; Postero, 2017; Radhuber, 2012).

According to some Indigenous scholars, the plurinational state would, ideally, imply 'the incorporation of Indigenous institutions and political practices to the new institutional map of the state for the self-determination and self-government [of Indigenous peoples]' (Choque Mamani, 2014, p. 14). The organising life philosophy behind the plurinational state is considered to be Vivir Bien, a notion referring to good life or living well, holistically, and in solidarity and harmony with nature and the community (Burman, 2017; Huanacuni Mamani, 2012; Kunstek, 2021). With its decolonising aims and community orientation, Vivir Bien – or Buen Vivir, its Ecuadorian equivalent – can be perceived as an example of the post-development paradigm put into (state) practice (Gudynas, 2011; Lang, 2019; Ranta, 2016a).

However, at the time of the highly publicised and televised celebrations of the plurinational day on January 22nd at the Casa Grande del Pueblo in the city of La Paz, a disturbing incident occurred, demonstrating cracks in the idyll of inclusivity. While the presidential palace turned into a site for performing Indigenous rituals and celebrating the plurality of Indigenous cultures, including close zoom-ins by TV cameras of the face, figure, and dress of an Afro-Bolivian woman amongst the audience, a video of a protest by Carmen Angola Campos, the executive director of the Afro-Bolivian National Council (Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano, CONAFRO), outside the gates of the presidential palace began to circulate in social media. In a video clip distributed by the Afro-Bolivian journalist Omar Torrez, the CONAFRO executive tried to gain access to the celebrations, fiercely criticising the decision not to invite her, even though she had been democratically elected as the supreme representative of the Afro-Bolivian people. 'We are not recognised in our own country,' she declared, and asked, disillusioned, 'What kind of plurinationality is this?' '[Politicians] exploit us all the time,' Angola Campos continued, finally asking, 'Is it because I am Black?'[1]

In this chapter, we examine the complex positionalities and perceptions of Afro-Bolivian women of their struggles for recognition and inclusive citizenship in plurinational Bolivia, which is often associated with post-development and decolonial alternatives in international scholarship. By focusing on women's own views of development and the desirable life, we discuss the gaps between romanticised Vivir Bien rhetoric, as employed by state authorities, and the concrete struggles of Afro-Bolivian women for dignified and good lives. In the face of government neglect and multiple discrimination in increasingly polarised and racist public spheres and political spaces, we demonstrate the value of, and the support by, fellow Afro-Bolivian women and their autonomous organising, particularly as manifested in saya, an Afro-Bolivian singing, dancing, and music assemblage. We conclude that saya creates spaces for resistance and alternative visioning and practices.

Due to the overwhelming dominance of Indigenous peoples in academic scholarship about Bolivia, little is yet known about the locally grounded development alternatives, life philosophies, and opportunities of the Afro-Bolivian ethnic minority. In fact, as Busdiecker

(2009, pp. 121–122) describes, Afro-Bolivians have often been invisibilised vis-a-vis indigeneity and mestizaje:

> Afro-descendants have been present in the territory that is now Bolivia for well over four hundred years, and yet they have been rendered virtually invisible by a numerically dominant Indian and Mestizo [Mixed-Race] population, by a politically and economically dominant Mestizo and White minority elite, and by popular visions of Bolivian history, society, culture, and national identity that focus on negotiating degrees and kinds of "Indianness" and distances from Indianness (for example, in "mestizoness") to the exclusion or marginalization of interrogations of other types of social identities.

This division between Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples has been common throughout Latin America (Wade, 2010). While both Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples suffer from poverty, unemployment, and lack of social services, Indigenous peoples have mobilised politically and achieved several legislative and territorial gains, particularly during the multicultural reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Hooker, 2005). Afro-descendants, in contrast, have been generally seen as "systematically ignored, marginalised, and belittled" (Wade, 2010: 36). Research on them has often focused on race and racism, while Indigenous peoples have been studied through the prisms of ethnicity, indigeneity, and Indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples have more visibly represented the anthropological cultural Other, while Afro-descendants have often seemed mere ordinary (poor) citizens (Wade, 2005). In Bolivia, race and racism have not been the key topics in social sciences, but when racism is discussed, the literature focuses predominantly on Indigenous peoples (Loayza, 2014; Macusaya, 2022; Zegada, 2023), and not on Afro-Bolivians, with the exception of Busdiecker (2019).

According to the most recent National Census in 2012, 41 percent of the Bolivian population over the age of 15 self-identifies as being of Indigenous origin, the Aymaras (42,5 percent) and the Quechuas (45,7 percent) comprising the vast majority of them (Mamo, 2022, p. 339). Defining indigeneity in Bolivia is complex, and Indigenous peoples are usually called *pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos* (Indigenous, Native and Peasant peoples), including in the current constitution.[2] According to the 2012 census, 23,330 persons self-identified as Afro-Bolivians (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2015, p. 29). While that is only 0,58 percent of those self-identifying as Indigenous, peasants, or Afro-Bolivians, and only 0,13 percent of the total Bolivian population, Afro-Bolivians were still the seventh largest non-Hispanic population group in the country (Machaca and Ballivián, 2016, p. 37–39).

This chapter is based on focus group discussions and individual interviews with Afro-Bolivian women in the cities of Cochabamba, La Paz, and Santa Cruz. Most of the women were leaders of various Afro-Bolivian associations and councils, but their ages, educational backgrounds, and political stances varied. We conducted the first focus group discussion with seven women in November 2022. In 2023, Zenteno Lawrence conducted four in-depth interviews, and during fieldwork in January-February 2024 Ranta conducted four in-depth interviews and one focus

group discussion with three women. Additionally, Ranta interviewed four Bolivian academic scholars of racism. Finally, we conducted two focus group discussions collaboratively in February 2024. Zenteno herself belongs to the Afro-Bolivian community, which facilitated access, trust, and continuous lived reciprocity. Besides her research, she is an activist and protagonist of Afro-Bolivian affairs. In addition to having lived in Bolivia in 2001 and 2002, Ranta has conducted fieldwork there in 2008–2009, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024 on several topics, including Vivir Bien politics.[3]

We begin the chapter by exploring the complex dynamics between post-development paradigms in Bolivia. After that, we move into the empirical chapters by first focusing on the legislative and policy advances that the Vivir Bien politics have brought for Afro-Bolivian women. Second, we examine women's perceptions of key contemporary societal challenges, thus exposing the chasms between everyday lived realities and the Vivir Bien rhetoric as an arguably local alternative to 'Western' development. The final empirical section introduces the Afro-Bolivian community's own alternative visionings and organising, as manifested in the Afro-Bolivian dance and music – saya. We do not represent saya as an Afro-Bolivian alternative to mainstream development nor as an expression of Vivir Bien policies, but rather as an intrinsic component woven into women's agency, serving as a cultural medium that both reflects and shapes Afro-Bolivian belonging and social organising. We also suggest that the practice of saya has been a crucial tool for Afro-Bolivian women in their struggles for recognition and inclusive citizenship.

Post-development, Vivir Bien, and Saya

In post-development and decolonial scholarship, Bolivia has become known for its critique of 'Western' development and elaborations of locally grounded societal alternatives. Alongside Southern African Ubuntu and Indian Swaraj, the notion of Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien has become one of the most promising alternative paradigms, emerging from the Global South and circulating all over the world amidst scholars and activists. In many parts of Latin America, the concept of living well has been presented as an alternative life philosophy beyond individualistic, economistic, and 'Western' development. Academic and activist debates about Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay (a Kichwa term for 'good living') in Ecuador are the most well-known (Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015; Lalander, 2014; Radcliffe, 2012). In Bolivia, the conceptualisation of a good life as human and more-than-human conviviality is perceived to originate from, and bring together, diverse Indigenous peoples' cosmologies and life philosophies, including the Aymara Suma Qamaña ('living well') and the Guaraní Ñandereko ('harmonious life') (Farah and Vasapollo, 2011; República de Bolivia, 2008; Schavelzon, 2015). It is closely interwoven with Indigenous peoples' struggles for land rights and territories, as well

as water, forests, and other living environments (Choque Mamani, 2014; Huanacuni Mamani, 2012; Ranta, 2023a; Yampara, 2001).

Although pushed forward by Indigenous scholars and social movements, the rhetoric of Vivir Bien was popularised by the Bolivian government as an anti-neoliberal and anti-colonial policy principle (Ranta, 2016b), during the presidency of the coca union leader Evo Morales (2005–2019) and the rule of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism, MAS) party, which continues to this day. Through the symbolic figure of Evo Morales (whose indigeneity is much debated in Bolivia, as he is often seen as representing peasants rather than Indigenous peoples), Bolivia succeeded in profiling itself internationally as the proponent of radical anti-imperialist alternatives of Indigenous origin. Furthermore, it has been labelled an 'Indigenous State' (Postero, 2017).

While such conceptualisations as Sumak Kawsay/Suma Qamaña have been intimately tied to Indigenous peoples' cosmologies, land relations, and territories (Alonso González and Macías Vázquez, 2015; Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015; Yampara, 2001), some conceptualisations similar to Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir have also recently emerged in Latin America among Afro-descendant populations. Such is the case with the discourse of Vivir Sabroso ('living joyfully') in Colombia, pushed forward by the Afro-Colombian Vice-President Francia Márguez, who is an award-winning environmental activist and Afro-Colombian rights advocate (Caicedo Sarralde, 2023). In Bolivia, the Afro-Bolivian ethnic minority held high hopes and expectations for the concept of Vivir Bien, as pushed forward by their own social movements, most particularly The Cultural Movement of Afro-Bolivian Saya (Movimiento Cultural Saya Afroboliviana, MOCUSABOL) and the Bolivian Center for Integral Development (Centro Boliviano para el Desarrollo Integral, CADIC). The Vivir Bien rhetoric about the importance of community and decolonisation resonated well with their African diaspora experience and long-term struggles for recognition and rights. However, according to Afro-Bolivian scholars, Vivir Bien is first and foremost an Indigenous peoples' concept, and there is no direct Afro-Bolivian equivalent to it (Ballivian, 2012, p. 271). In Bolivia, it was mostly the Aymara intellectuals, NGOs, and politicians, as well as Quechua organisations, who propagated the notion of Suma Qamaña (Burman, 2017; Yampara 2001), while in Ecuador it was the Sarayaku Indigenous communities and anthropologists that elaborated the idea of Sumak Kawsay (Alonso González and Macías Vázquez, 2015; Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015).

Afro-Bolivians' own organising and cultural and political mobilisation has revolved around saya. Saya is an Afro-Bolivian dance, music, and singing assemblage, which is often perceived as 'the supreme manifestation of the Afro-Bolivian cultural expression' (Angola Maconde, 2010, p. 196). As Ponce Vargas, Ballivian, and Ballivian (2014, p. 216) put it: '[A]s a cultural manifestation, as a demand, [and] as a mechanism of resistance and visibility, [saya] is the means through which Afro-Bolivians express their feelings, denounce their oppression, claim their

rights'. According to Rey Gutierrez (1998), the term saya derives from the Central African Kikongo word *nsaya*, which refers to collaborative work in which all members of the community work and sing together under the direction of a lead singer. In saya, both men and women participate in singing verses and choruses. Traditionally, only men played percussion instruments, such as drums, metal bells, and bamboo sticks as part of the dance, but recently women have also started to do so. The choreography of the performance is led by women and accompanied in the background by the musicians. While saya dance has always been part of Afro-Bolivian life, our interlocutors observed that it has been revitalised over the last 30 years within the Afro-Bolivian communities both in rural and urban areas. Many noted that saya songs have lyrics that relate to their identities and socio-political issues in their everyday lives.

Afro-Bolivians are predominantly descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Potosí silver mines during the 16th century by the Spanish colonialists (Crespo, 1995). The approximately 10,000 Spanish men who conquered Upper Perú, as Bolivia was called at the time, were accompanied by a nearly equal number of enslaved Africans (Klein, 2003, p. 47). When the silver economy collapsed during the 18th century, the agricultural large estates (*hacienda*) in the Yungas valleys became the sites for further enslavement of the Black population (Angola Maconde, 2010). They also laboured in gold mining and coca leaf cultivation (Ballivian, 2012, p. 64). It was at the haciendas where the saya was articulated 'as resistance to the system of oppression' (Ballivian, 2012, p. 87). When the patrons held celebrations for the Catholic saints, saya offered spaces for autonomous social and cultural expressions and a temporary sense of 'liberation from the sufferings' (ibid.).

Due to the histories of slavery, enslaved Afro-Bolivian populations have experienced 'territorial uprooting' and 'deterritorialisation' (Tejerina Vargas, 2014, p. 36), which makes their historical and contemporary experience different from those of many Indigenous peoples, who can claim guardianship of lands and territories on the basis of their indigeneity.[4] While slavery was officially abolished in 1851, in practice the Afro population continued to work at the haciendas in the form of forced labour, called *ponguaje* and *mitanaje*, as they had no land nor alternative means of making a living: men worked in agriculture (*pongos*) and women in domestic labour (*mitana*) (Bridikhina, 1997; Machaca Benito and Ballivián Vásquez, 2016, pp. 20–21). When the 1952 nationalist revolution and the 1953 agrarian reform finally abolished the forced labour system, many Afro-Bolivians stayed in Los Yungas as small-scale farmers (peasants). Until the nationalist revolution, Black Bolivians were not allowed to attend schools, and therefore those belonging to the oldest generations are nearly illiterate even today (Sessarego, 2009, p. 109). This changed from the mid-1950s onward with the expansion of rural education. After the nationalist revolution, when Afro-Bolivian families gained some access to land, they started to practice patrilineal land ownership and heritage practices. As women moved to the houses and communities of their husbands, investing in girls' education was often seen as a waste of money (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 114). Outside of saya events, women's and girls' spheres were

restricted to homes, domestic chores, and raising children. They did not have economic or political autonomy, and they were vulnerable to multiple abuse and violence. Today the school attendance of the Afro-Bolivian population is a bit lower than the country average, but in terms of higher education, their numbers are higher than those of minority Indigenous groups (Machaca Benito and Ballivián Vásquez, 2016, pp. 75–76). Apart from primary education, there is still a significant gender gap in education (ibid., p. 74).

While the nationalist revolution significantly changed Afro-Bolivians' citizenship status and labour conditions, its political agenda aimed at social, cultural, and linguistic homogenisation, through universal education and the dominance of the Spanish language (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 105). The state did not recognise Afro-Bolivians as a collective, a distinct people (Komadina and Regalsky, 2016, p. 39). Indigenous and Afro-descendant traditions, cosmologies, and cultural expressions were not allowed, and they were instead considered to signal backwardness and a hindrance to modernity. Currently, most Afro-Bolivians speak Spanish as their mother tongue, but also Indigenous languages such as Quechua (8%) and Aymara (4%) (Machaca Benito and Ballivián Vásquez, 2016, pp. 77–78). In the Yungas, the Afro-Bolivians and the Aymaras have lived side by side for centuries, facing similar practices of forced labour during the republican era and state-led peasant unionism (*sindicato*) since the revolution. Their relations often rely on interethnic conviviality, although competition over limited resources has recently risen (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 118). According to Spedding (2008), the peasant unions are peoples' main forms of political organising and mobilisation in the Yungas, even if Afro-Bolivian organising based on racial identity, and as a distinct people, has grown, particularly amidst the urban educated Afro-Bolivians.

Legislative and policy advances for Afro-Bolivians

When Bolivia transitioned from decades-long military dictatorships (1964-1982) to representative democracy during the early 1980s, the first culturally driven Afro-Bolivian movements arose around saya. During this period, many young Afro-Bolivian women started to migrate from the Yungas region to the cities of La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, among other places, in search of better economic and educational opportunities. They emerged as key advocates in revitalising the saya, transforming it into public spaces for social interaction and fostering of political engagement (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 115). The first saya group emerged in Coroico at the Guerrilleros Lanza school during the early 1980s. One of the senior Afro-Bolivian female leaders told us about the revitalisation process and its gendered dimensions in the following way:

> I became the first Afro-Bolivian woman to leave my village to study at school in Coroico, where I was not under the control of my parents. For the community it was a taboo. How could a woman go to study? The people in the community did not want me to do it. They told my father that, 'if your daughter goes out to study, she will come back pregnant'... I was also the first Afro woman who did not wear a *pollera* [long skirt typical for the Aymara women], because, for me, the skirt was imposed by the Spanish [colonialists] … In school, I understood that everyone else had culture. My [female] friend and I were the only Black people in the school. 'There is no culture for us,' we noticed. 'There is no history for us,' there was nothing that was ours. Then one of the teachers suggested, 'Why don't you dance saya?' I grinned, because at the time saya was always *tundiqui* [a Bolivian folklore dance performed by Whites and Mestizos with a blackface], but the teacher said no, 'it should be the saya that your grandfathers and grandmothers always danced'. (Interview in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024.)

The saya dancers – under the leadership of women – started to perform in different cities and to occupy public spaces with their voices, sounds, instruments, and their own traditional attire: white *pollera*. The saya dress includes a skirt (*pollera*) with a red horizontal ribbon in the middle for women, white trousers with a vertical red ribbon for men, and a multicoloured ribbon decorating the white blouse (for women) and shirt (for men). Even if the dress that Afro-Bolivian women use for the saya encounters has changed slightly over the years, it remains the same in all the regions of the country. While the dress could be perceived to have some colonial influence, it differs – and has different meanings – from the dresses used by the Aymara or the *criollo/mestizo* (White/Mixed-Race) (Ponce Vargas, Ballivian Vasquez, and Ballivian, 2014, p. 212). This is due to the attributes that are given to it, as one of the interviewed women explained:

> …the white colour represents our integrity, the red ribbon both in the skirt and trousers signifies the spilled blood of our ancestors, and… both the blouses and the shirt are adorned with ribbons of different colours, which can be interpreted as our longing for diversity and acceptance (Interview in Cochabamba, 23 September 2023).

In this sense, the saya promoted the Afro-Bolivian culture and presence in the country. It also created and reactivated connections and collaborations among Afro-Bolivians from different municipalities, cities, and towns, succeeding in promoting the formation of the MOCUSABOL in the city of La Paz, in 1988. Several other organisations followed, and currently there are more than ten Afro-based organisations in Bolivia. For women, organising around saya has had a dual meaning: it offered them the opportunity to operate outside the private sphere, while also promoting community values and ethnic belonging. As Afro-Bolivians were usually seen solely through slavery and oppression, and many expected them always to be submissive and docile, women used saya to gain leadership and active agency, as well as to promote a more cheerful image of the Afro-Bolivians (Interview in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024).

During the 1990s, the United Nations launched both the decade for Indigenous peoples and the decade against racism and racial discrimination. Several Afro-Latin American and Afro-

Caribbean networks and alliances were established, and consciousness of Afro-affairs, and racism in particular, grew substantially in the region (Yañez Inofuentes, 2016, p. 13). In Bolivia, the Afro-Bolivian community started to ally more closely with fellow organisations in peer countries and participated in the UN process for the 2001 Durban Declaration to combat racism. After Durban, Afro-Bolivian leaders began to propose a movement of recognition of Afro-Bolivians *as a people*, beyond racial differences; it was not just the struggle of Black men and women but of *a people* with a common history. According to a young urban Afro-Bolivian female leader in La Paz, that was when the Afro-Bolivian movement became 'politicised'; young peoples started to gather in capacity-building sessions, to talk about identity and racism. Subsequently, a clear political agenda was formed; 'the Afro-Bolivian peoples start[ed] to have three very central and clear themes: the recognition of the Afro-Bolivian peoples by the Bolivian state, their inclusion in the population and housing censuses, and the law that penalises racism' (Interview in La Paz, 23 January 2024).

After the ascendancy of Evo Morales and the MAS to political power in the December 2005 national elections, things started to progress quickly. At the time, social inclusion and racism were widely debated in Bolivian society. The process of the constituent assembly began in 2006 with the lead of an alliance of Indigenous organisations and peasant unions, known as the Pacto de Unidad ('Unity Pact'). However, amidst the 200 assembly members, there were no representatives of the Afro-Bolivian community (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 150). This was an important political moment for the Afro-Bolivian community, and two women leaders from the MOCUSABOL started a hunger strike, in which they were joined by members of the persons with disabilities and the LGBTQIA+ community, who experienced similar forms of exclusion (Interview in La Paz, 23 January 2024). Furthermore, the Afro-Bolivian community joined forces with the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (Consejo Nacional de los Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu, CONAMAQ), which was one of the five leading organisations of the Pacto de Unidad and a promoter of Indigenous territorial rights through the notion of Suma Qamaña ('living well') (ibid.). According to the senior female leader from Yungas mentioned above, while they did not have their own assembly members, the Afro-Bolivian activists used saya drums and dance tactically to enter the assembly meetings and the parliament. As they were seen as performers of Bolivian folklore, they were allowed into the buildings and, instead of starting their performances, they used the opportunity to make their political demands (Interview in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024). Consequently, 'without saya we would have achieved nothing,' she concluded (ibid.).

In the end, the 2009 constitution recognised the status and rights of the Afro-Bolivians for the first time. Its article 3 states that Afro-Bolivians, alongside Indigenous peoples, peasants, and other Bolivians, comprise the Bolivian people (República de Bolivia, 2008, p. 13). The article 32 declares that Afro-Bolivians enjoy all the same economic, social, political, and cultural rights that the constitution recognises for Indigenous peoples and peasants. These include, among other things, self-determination, territory, recognition of ancestral knowledge, promotion of their own

language, rituals, and symbols, as well as prior consultation related to such issues as resource extraction. (República de Bolivia, 2008, pp. 22–24.)

In 2011, the first Afro-Bolivian national congress was organised, and their own national organisation CONAFRO was established. It meant a distancing from their historically close alliances with the Aymara-led CONAMAQ, where despite having achieved several leadership positions, Afro-Bolivians were not allowed to make similar claims for territories as Indigenous leaders had (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, pp. 156–157). In the 2012 census, the Afro-Bolivians were included as a population category for the first time, and the census results made them visible as a population group (Machaca Benito and Ballivián Vásquez, 2016). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education approved a specific curriculum related to the Afro-Bolivian people, called 'Curriculo regionalizado del pueblo afroboliviano', which was planned in a participatory manner with the CONAFRO (Zambrana Balladares, 2014, p. 158). A major legislative advance was also the approval of Law 045 against racism and all forms of discrimination in 2010, followed by Law 848 concerning the Decade for Bolivian People of African Descent in 2016. With regard to saya, some of Bolivia's laws and policy plans, including the Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well (Law 300), explicitly refer to dancing as part of maintaining harmonious and spiritual relationships with the Mother Earth and community. In our analysis, however, we do not perceive saya as an expression of Vivir Bien policies, but rather as emic to Afro-Bolivians' lives. In everyday lives, many challenges remain in implementation, creating gaps between the rhetoric of Vivir Bien and women's experiences, to which we will turn next.

Persistent challenges: Afro-Bolivian women's experiences of racism and exclusion

Consequently, the Afro-Bolivian people have achieved many of their long-term political, social, and cultural demands, including recognition by the plurinational state and legal tools to eliminate racism and discrimination. However, the Afro-Bolivian interlocutors interviewed for this chapter argued that, despite the progress, the national and departmental regulations and institutional arrangements are not yet enforced, and Afro-Bolivian issues still remain largely invisible. One of the women commented about the recognition:

> Despite the recognition, one of the great challenges continues to be the invisibilisation of the Afro-Bolivian people. The treatment we receive is as if we were an Indigenous people and not from our particularities as an Afro-Bolivian people. That leads to a series of difficulties. No policy in the country is specifically designed to address the needs of Afro-Bolivians. (Interview in La Paz, 23 January 2024.)

Due to their history of enslavement, many Afro-Bolivians do not own much property. While some own small parcels of land, particularly in the Yungas, Afro-Bolivians do not enjoy collective rights to land and territories as many minority Indigenous groups do. Among those interviewed, not everyone knew about the Vivir Bien policies. Those women with the highest levels of education or those who were aligned with the MAS party were more aware of them than others. The MAS supporter mentioned earlier explained her criticism:

> Despite having a political affinity with the MAS, I maintain my criticism that none of this has been thought from an Afro-Bolivian perspective. All this has been thought from a very Andean, Aymara, Quechua logic... A capitalist logic, a neoliberal logic, also continues to persist. That's my criticism... All the [Latin American] countries that proposed Vivir Bien have not been able to escape capitalist logic. Vivir Bien [policies] continue to focus on the Anthropocene, on extractivism, on the development model that goes against the [interests of the] population. In the practice of governments, the logic of Vivir Bien equals capitalist logic... No [government] planned Vivir Bien that was outside the world system... Beyond the discursive and the very nice conceptualisation of what Vivir Bien is, it was never a real thing; it is neither political praxis nor has it ever permeated politics and decision-making in [Latin American] countries. (Interview in La Paz, 23 January 2024.)

According to her, 'without a doubt, poverty, job insertion, remuneration... and specific policies for Afro-Bolivians are the greatest challenges that the country still faces' (Interview in La Paz, 23 January 2024). The need for better educational and income-generating opportunities were often mentioned in the interviews when future goals were discussed. Social exclusion in terms of poverty, difficulty in labour market insertion, and lack of education and social services affect both Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America (Hooker, 2005). In Bolivia, however, the interviewed Afro-Bolivian women felt that the state transformation process during the rule of the MAS had significantly improved Indigenous peoples' political and economic opportunities. Yet, while Indigenous and peasant political inclusion has increased (Htun, 2013) and poverty levels have decreased, a fierce criticism has emerged that the peasant rule within the MAS has overshadowed Indigenous concerns, and the accelerated extraction of natural resources has led to severe violations of Indigenous territorial rights (Anthias and López, 2023; López Flores and Ranta, forthcoming; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2013). Therefore, some Indigenous and peasant peoples may have benefitted; others, not so much.

Regarding discrimination, the interviewed Afro-Bolivian women made two main distinctions: external and internal situations that intersect between each other and at different levels. The internal issues – which we do not discuss in this chapter – relate to family, kin, and patrilineality, while external situations relate to the attitudes and actions of public servants, politicians, teachers, and other fellow Bolivians, as well as economic and state structures. There are still public instances and social organisations that do not recognise Afro-Bolivian culture and rights, especially when women are concerned, and consequently Afro-Bolivian women still suffer from

multiple aspects of vulnerability (Yañez, 2016). Intersectional inequalities that Afro-women experience based on their gender, class, and race have been widely discussed in the US (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991) and throughout Latin America (Roth, 2019; Viveros Vigoya and Gregorio Gill, 2014; Wade, 2009).

Even though law 045 was considered a clear victory for the Afro-Bolivians by all the interlocutors, its practical implications for everyday life were seen to be minimal. Some of the women interviewed questioned whether the legal penalisation of racism (instead of education and awareness raising) is the best way to go in the first place. Others were more hopeful in trying to use legal means to combat racism and discrimination, even if their efforts had fallen short. One of the female leaders told us about her experiences of law 045 in a focus group discussion urging for the more effective implementation of the law:

> Everyone mobilised for law 045 [against racism] but when here in Cochabamba we have seen racist actions, I personally went to complain with a group of brothers, the [police officers] told us 'the law is not yet in force; if it were a public servant, you could do something but as the [racist] person was just a private individual, nothing can be done'. Unfortunately, we had another case with a public servant from the Mayor's Office of Quillacollo who offended an Afro-descendant person, and nothing was done either. So, I think that law 045 should be activated or else, just bury it, right, because it does not work. It may work for a few, but, for me, even dogs have greater justice than us. (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022.)

Thus, while the interlocutor had maintained a certain hope in the law, the focus group excerpt also shows a deep distrust in the government's treatment of Afro-Bolivian community as a whole, and also a suspicion that some Afro-Bolivians might be benefitting from the government policies and revenues, while others are not. Another female leader from the same focus group event explained these dynamics:

> Obviously, this government has given us the opportunity to have the first Afro-Bolivian deputy, the first supranational deputy, the first vice minister, assembly member, yes, there has been that. Why? Obviously because when you want to win over the mother-in-law, you must bring her the cake, flowers, gifts for the children, a bone for the dog, I mean, obviously you must do that. But when you have already married her daughter, if you see [the mother-in-law's] dog, you would rather kick it and continue your way, because she is already in your way. So, I consider that we are seen that way by the government. (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022.)

Clearly, she recognised that the Afro-Bolivian community has enjoyed increased inclusion of Afro-Bolivian representatives in national politics during the MAS rule. However, she also implied that the MAS had used the Afro-Bolivian community's support to gain political power, after which their concerns had been largely abandoned. A similar view of the instrumental use of

the Afro-Bolivian community by politicians was reflected in Carmen Angola Campos's example at the beginning of the chapter: an MAS-promoting Afro-Bolivian person had been invited to the celebrations of the plurinational state, providing the government a public image of inclusivity and diversity, while the legitimate representative of the CONAFRO was left outside the gates.

In addition to the potential instrumentalisation of Afro-Bolivian concerns, the wider political conflict and polarisation have both deepened political divisions amidst the Afro-Bolivians and increased racism towards them. During the autumn of 2019, Evo Morales' 14-year rule ended in a political conflict that some call a coup d'état and others electoral fraud (Claros and Díaz Cuéllar, 2022; Ranta, 2023b; Zegada et al., 2021). Before that, the MAS regime had merged and co-opted most social movements into its party structures and government (Ranta, 2022; Tapia, 2017), and the CONAFRO was no different. Autonomous societal organising had become difficult, as one of the women recalled in the focus group meeting: 'If you are not from the MAS, they do not listen to you; you cannot think differently' (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022). Consequently, when Morales was exiled from the country, it had repercussions for the Afro-Bolivian organising, as one of the women recalled:

> As Afro-Bolivians, we felt helpless, because everything was politicised at that time, everything was a division between the left and the right and, well, our authorities, especially our representatives, were aligned with the ruling party. Then, since the president [Evo Morales] was in trouble, everyone who followed him was also in trouble, so what happened... they disappeared, right? And as Afro-Bolivians, we had no representation, no one said anything and it was like we were abandoned, abandoned like that, it's like they had gone underground. It was incredible, at least that was what I felt and we all asked ourselves, where is our [CONAFRO] president and our executive? (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022.)

Furthermore, the 2019 conflict also increased racist attacks and racist language, while racism has also become instrumentalised in political fights between the governing regime and the opposition (Zegada and Canedo, 2023). While the Afro-Bolivian community faced multiple discrimination in increasingly polarised and racist public spheres and political spaces, they also had an opportunity to rethink their political alliances and autonomous organising, as one of the CONAFRO female leaders reassured us in an interview:

> CONAFRO … is a de facto apolitical organisation. So, the idea is to always work with whoever is in the government because what we always ask for are public policies in favour of the Afro-Bolivian people. Whoever is there to give us what really belongs to us by right. We should not have to belong to any political party to receive what is due to us. (Focus group in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024.)

To conclude, major discrepancies have emerged between the Afro-Bolivian community and the

ruling MAS party. In situations of political crisis and uncertainty, it has been saya that has offered the Afro-Bolivian community an autonomous form of organising socially, culturally, and politically, while also signifying a community-based way of being, acting, and networking within the Afro-Bolivian community. We move to discussing saya next.

Afro-Bolivian alternatives: Saya as space of resistance and alternative visioning

As already discussed earlier, the Afro-Bolivian community's own alternative visioning and organising focuses around the saya dance, music, and singing assemblage. Historically, as explained above, it provided a collective space in which resistance against slavery and enforced labour was enacted. This historical memory of resistance is still a major part of women's lives and identities, as one of the Afro-Bolivian female leaders explained: 'For me, being of African descent is the most beautiful thing there can be, because in my roots, in my blood, we carry the fight, the determination, and the construction [of the community] from very below' (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022). Another woman joined in praising the importance of solidarity and community for the Afro-Bolivians:

> I believe that a very important thing is solidarity... Due to distances, being in an urban space, we are separated but when you need to do something we are always there, we always appear. So, I believe that this spirit of solidarity of Afro-Bolivians, in a city that has Quechuas, Aymaras and everything... To me that moment of encounter – solidarity – is a very important element of Afro-Bolivian culture. (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022.)

One of the women, however, complained that the sense of community has been withering away, now that people live in different cities and municipalities, and have more individual lifestyles. She also complained that saya has become a 'mere dance', and not an encounter of resistance, solidarity, and community. For the rest of the women interviewed, though, saya meant so much more than just a dance. For one of them, 'it is not only about the dance, but also about representing culture and the whole trajectory of [Afro-Bolivian] experiences, traditions, and customs' (Interview in Cochabamba, 26 August 2023). Another woman tied it closely to her identity: 'Since the day they put the saya dress on me, until I leave this world, they will have to bury me with the saya dress on because that runs through my veins. For me, it is my identity.' (Focus group in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024.) While many criticised Vivir Bien policies for being very much centred on Indigenous peoples, Ballivian (2012, p. 271) has suggested that for Afro-Bolivians, saya could be perceived as 'living well [Vivir Bien] in joy with the community from our own cosmovision and from our being as Afro-Bolivians'.

In terms of networking and political organising, saya has played an important role in the emergence and growth of Afro-Bolivian organisations. It connects the various Afro-organisations, thus bringing people from diverse points of views, political stances, and ideologies together. While national politics tend to polarise Afro-Bolivians, saya encounters promote articulations between organisations, thus cherishing plurality and differences. Women, in particular, recognise how saya as a form of social-political organisation provided them with opportunities that they would not otherwise have had.

> Saya has always been, and will be, I think, our guiding star. Thanks to saya, we were able to open doors and gain public and political spaces in which we would not have been accepted otherwise. (Focus group in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024.)

It has provided Afro-women with spaces for political mobilisation and leadership in Bolivian society, but major changes have also happened in gender relations within saya and the Afro-Bolivian community in general. One female leader recalled:

> I was raised by my uncles, and I had never seen a woman playing drums (*tambor*). When I wanted to play with the *jaucaña* (Afro-Bolivian drumsticks), the uncles got really angry, and I didn't do it anymore. One of the first things that we gained as a people and as Afro women was that this kind of machismo was left behind; the idea that only the men can play *caja* (drums) was left behind… It is a great achievement to be able to say that we are a people and both women and men are equal and that within our people we can all do the same things. (Focus group in Santa Cruz, 3 February 2024.)

Consequently, it is fair to say that saya has been instrumental in the political organising and mobilisation of the Afro-Bolivian community. It has provided them an autonomous space for enacting politics from their own perspectives. This space has been particularly relevant for Afro-Bolivian women, whose educational, occupational, and political opportunities have traditionally been limited. Saya has widened women's agency within Afro-Bolivian families and communities. Furthermore, through saya – which could easily be considered as mere folklore – women have widened their spheres of action from homes and communities to constituent assemblies and associations. Another thing is whether the Bolivian society and politicians perceive saya as a tool of politics.

> We are mostly seen as either saya dancers or foreigners or, in the case of men, football players. In other words, we are only identified with these roles. As a representative of the Afro-Bolivian community here in Cochabamba, when I have had to make a request for a meeting or a hearing with a higher authority such as a governor or a mayor, what happens is that they only see us through culture or sports. I am asking to speak with the mayor because I want to request something, but they direct us directly to the section of culture because they think 'ah! they are from CONAFRO, they want to dance saya, they want to do a cultural activity'. We are classified solely as dancers and if they invite us somewhere, it is always that 'we will invite you to this activity if you could then perform saya.' (Focus group in Cochabamba, 30 November 2022.)

While identity politics has been used for ethnic recognition and rights, Afro-Bolivians seem to be reduced to that, or at least their channels of participation are limited to their culture and not to substantive citizenship. Ethnic and racial minorities face such stances in many countries. From the part of politicians and public servants, this tactic of overriding the rights of Afro-Bolivians by folkloricising them is a sign of the continuation of discrimination and racism within the plurinational state, and a hindrance to gaining inclusive citizenship.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined what state-led claims of practising alternatives to 'Western' development have meant in the lives of Afro-Bolivian women, who have – in the course of history – been severely discriminated against and excluded from Bolivian society and state. The Vivir Bien rhetoric in Bolivian legislation and public policies draws on the ideals of Indigenous peoples living a more harmonious and balanced life with their lands, territories, nature, and community. To an extent, this locally grounded conceptualisation can be viewed from the perspective of post-development. In terms of the Afro-Bolivian community, and particularly the women who were the focus of this chapter, saya – rather than Vivir Bien – has represented an autonomous form of being and living. For women, saya has improved their influence and leadership within the Afro-Bolivian community, but also opened arenas for political organising in Bolivian society. Saya has functioned as a glue that bonds diverse Afro-Bolivian groups and communities together, providing articulations in a society that is experiencing increasing polarisation and racism.

However, it is important to note here that saya complements, and is not an exclusive alternative to, women's wider calls for recognition and inclusive citizenship. While many Afro-Bolivian women find comfort in ecological lifestyles – by choice or necessity – and strongly cherish the value of the Afro-Bolivian community, many of their desires for better futures focus on fair legislation and equitable public services, as well as the abolition of discrimination and racism. Instead of mere recognition and invocation of their culture and folklore, they are demanding better accountability, better public services, and equal treatment by the plurinational state. Thus, if development is viewed from the perspective of equal opportunities, better public services, and state accountability to its citizens, the women's views did not reflect a post-development stance. One of the women interviewed tied the issue more to criticism of capitalism as a world system, and her perceptions were nearer to the post-development perceptions than those of the others. In general, however, women's perceptions of desirable development were claims of citizens who have experienced multiple discrimination and racism, as well as structural violence, from the state in various stages of history. However, they were not seeking an exemption from the state,

but rather an opportunity to combine autonomous forms of organising (often in the name of saya) with a more responsive, responsible, and truly plurinational state.

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[1] The video is from the Facebook page of the Afro-Bolivian news personality Omar Torrez. He shared the video on 22 April 2024 to his nearly 7,000 Facebook followers.

[2] Indigenous and native peoples imply pre-colonial cultural heritage, and the term peasant peoples was introduced during the Agrarian Reform in 1953. The entire (Indigenous) rural population began to be called peasants. The race-based term *Indio* (Indian) was abolished as pejorative, and the proclamation of Bolivia as the *mestizo* nation (Mixed-Race nation) relied on the idea of there being only one race (Spedding, 2013: 144). Although many peasants descend from Aymaras or Quechuas, their self-identification is not based on ethnicity or indigeneity, but rather on small-scale farming, household-based land ownership, and trade union organising. Those who are called Indigenous peoples in Bolivia are minority Indigenous groups residing mostly in the Amazonian region in Indigenous territories (more than 30 groups). Native peoples are usually those Aymaras and Quechuas residing in the mountain areas who maintain and revitalise collective landownership and territorial self-governance structures and self-identify through

ethnic and Indigenous identity rather than peasant union organising. The conjunction of the three terms – indígena originario campesino – was employed for the first time in the National Development Plan 2006-2011 and it has gained popularity through its enactment in the constitution.

[3] The chapter is part of the research project Social Justice and Raciality in Post-Utopian Latin America (2021–2026), financed by the Research Council of Finland (project number: 346411).

[4] In a few Latin American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), Afro-descendants have been able to gain territorial rights, but only in Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua do they have the exact same territorial rights as Indigenous peoples (Hooker, 2005: 286). They have gained these rights when they have portrayed themselves as a distinct ethnic group akin to Indigenous groups, instead of mobilising on the basis of racial difference and racism (Ibid.).