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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Learning ignorance and illiteracy through education: reflections on highland Bolivia

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Abstract Literacy is clearly more than an ability to read or write in one language, and today we talk of multiple 'literacies'. In each case, literacy represents education, knowledge and particularly the ability to get by competently in the world we inhabit; in short, it is about being a full citizen. This article looks at literacy, knowledge and schooling in a highland Aymara village in Bolivia, not in terms of what is being learned but rather in terms of what knowledge is lost through the process of schooling. Literacy and formal education do not liberate people but actually disempower them: while giving them one kind of knowledge, they can simultaneously act to *make* people ignorant. As with other indigenous peoples around the world, literacy pushes those in this village to see the knowledge of their parents and grandparents as valueless, and certainly not as something worth acquiring.

Keywords Indigenous education · Aymara · Language change · Traditional knowledge · Culture loss

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Schulbildung als Generator von Ignoranz und Analphabetismus: Überlegungen zur Situation im bolivianischen Hochland

Zusammenfassung Schriftsprachliche Kompetenz ist eindeutig mehr als die Fähigkeit, in einer Sprache zu lesen oder zu schreiben. Heutzutage ist sogar von unterschiedlichen *literacies* die Rede. In all diesen Fällen steht Schriftsprachlichkeit für Bildung, Wissen und v. a. für die Fähigkeit, in der Welt, in der wir leben, kompetent zurechtzukommen: kurz gesagt, für die Fähigkeit, vollwertige Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu sein. Im vorliegenden Beitrag geht es um Alphabetisierung, Wissen und Schulbildung in einem Aymara-Hochlanddorf in Bolivien. Dabei geht es nicht darum, was gelernt wird, sondern im Gegenteil darum, welches Wissen durch Beschulung verloren geht. Alphabetisierung und formale Bildung befreien die Menschen nicht, sondern entmachten sie. Während sie ihnen ein bestimmtes Wissen vermitteln, können sie gleichzeitig Unwissenheit *erzeugen*. Wie bei anderen indigenen Völkern auch, führt die Alphabetisierung dazu, dass sie das Wissen ihrer Eltern und Großeltern als wertlos ansehen, als etwas, das es nicht mehr wert ist, erworben zu werden.

Schlüsselwörter Indigene Bildung · Aymara · Sprachwechsel · Traditionelles Wissen · Kulturverlust

Apprendre l'ignorance et l'analphabétisme par l'éducation: Réflexions sur la Bolivie des hauts plateaux

Résumé L'alphabétisation est clairement plus qu'une capacité à lire ou écrire dans une langue et aujourd'hui, nous parlons de "littératies" multiples. Dans tous ces cas, l'alphabétisation est synonyme d'éducation, de connaissances et surtout de capacité à se débrouiller avec compétence dans le monde dans lequel nous vivons; en bref, d'être des citoyens à part entière. Cet article examine l'alphabétisation, les connaissances et la scolarisation dans un village aymara des hauts plateaux de Bolivie, non pas sous l'angle de ce qui est appris, mais des connaissances perdues au cours du processus de scolarisation. L'alphabétisation et l'éducation formelle, plutôt que de libérer les gens, les déresponsabilisent en fait; et tout en leur donnant un certain type de connaissances, elles peuvent simultanément agir pour rendre les gens ignorants. Comme pour d'autres peuples autochtones du monde entier, l'alphabétisation les pousse à considérer le savoir de leurs parents et grands-parents comme quelque chose sans valeur, et encore moins comme quelque chose qui vaut la peine d'être acquis.

Mots-clés Éducation autochtone · Aymara · Changement de langue · Connaissances traditionnelles · Perte de culture

> Literacy is the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman, and child can realise his or her full potential. (Kofi Annan)

> My mother said I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and more intelligent than college professors. (Maya Angelou)

1 Introduction

What is literacy? It is clearly far more than the ability to read or write in one language. Today, we talk about digital literacy (Gilster 1997), economic literacy (Jappelli 2010), emotional literacy (Steiner 1984), financial literacy (Lusardi and Mitchell 2011) and a host of other 'literacies'. In its formal and more traditional sense, literacy has meant—and still means—being able to read and write, but it has never been simply a neutral descriptor: it is historically about being educated, or at least appearing to be educated; it is about being civilised; it is about getting by in an increasingly lettered—or more recently digital—world. It is not simply a skill like boatbuilding or gardening or knitting. There is no comparable word that describes lacking a skill as being 'illiterate': to be illiterate is to be uneducated, to be ignorant. It is an insult.

It is an insult because literacy, in all its forms, is, in essence, a citizenship practice. It is no coincidence that in the nineteenth century in many countries voting rights were only granted to those with a basic education, and in many countries literacy tests were imposed on immigrants as well. I am not, however, talking only about formal citizenship, but about citizenship in the sense of people's being able to participate in the social world around them. This is why the word 'literacy' is extended from the ability to read and write to the ability to manage one's finances, understand basic economics and use the internet. Without these skills, one cannot fully participate in society. To be literate in this sense is to be empowered, which is the basis of my epigraph from Kofi Annan and also why writers such as Paulo Freire (1972) have seen a profound emancipatory potential in literacy education.

The other epigraph, however, points to another side of literacy and education: literacy also has the capacity to hide ignorance; there is clearly a hierarchy of knowledge, where some skills are valued more than others. As an academic, I am a highly literate person and am assumed to have great knowledge. It has, however, long struck me that many of my colleagues do not know how to put up shelves, change a light fitting, grow vegetables, or do basic plumbing. Some do, of course, but it matters not at all to their social standing if they are ignorant of any of these things. It is Maya Angelou's understanding of literacy and illiteracy that I want to explore in this article, and specifically how literacy and formal education, rather than liberating people, actually disempower them, and while giving them a certain kind of knowledge (reading and writing), can simultaneously act to *make* people ignorant. That is, ignorance is something that is actively produced, sometimes strategically (McGoey 2019). Literacy and formal education may produce certain kinds of knowledge, but they also displace and devalue others.

I will illustrate these points through a long-term ethnography of an Aymara-speaking village in highland Bolivia, which I will call Wila Kjarka, where I have been conducting research since 1989. First, I would like to offer a brief history of literacy in Bolivia.

2 A brief history of literacy in Bolivia

Until the twentieth century, *indios,* 'indians'[1] in Bolivia were actively prohibited from gaining formal education and, in fact, illiteracy was a feature that defined who was considered an indian. Illiteracy was also a colonial tool for depriving indians of land rights and their ability to defend themselves in courts so that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, peripatetic teachers secretly taught people how to read. The most famous example of indigenous education of this period was the school in Warisata (Pérez 1992), which was founded during a period of liberalism in 1931 and closed by the national authorities in 1940. Avelino Siñani, an indigenous leader and counsellor (amauta), and Elizardo Pérez, a *mestizo*[2] teacher, together engaged in an amazing experiment which involved the whole community in the building and maintenance of the school and developed practical skills alongside book learning and fostered Aymara oratory at the same time as Spanish. Warisata is famous in Bolivia as an important instance of empowerment and resistance, but this educational model that combined traditional knowledge with Western literacy and taught practical skills alongside formal academic ones was largely lost, figuratively and in practice, until a 2010 Education Reform named after Siñani and Pérez (Bolivia, Ministerio de Educación 2011).[3] The conservative period in the 1940s was followed by a national revolution in 1952 which extended citizenship rights to all—not just the literate—and abolished the category 'indian' on the grounds that now, all were 'Bolivians': it was the role of schools to turn indians into *mestizos.* One of the most important planks of the revolutionary government was the Education Reform of 1953, which rejected the dualist model of Warisata and adopted an overwhelmingly assimilationist one (Talavera Simoni 2013, p. 38 & *passim*).

[1] The word 'indian' is undoubtedly problematic and its Spanish version *indio* is almost always pejorative in a contemporary context. It originated, as is well known, in a misidentification of the inhabitants of the Americas with the people of India. In naming the inhabitants of this New World 'indians', Europeans reduced them all to a new and oppressive colonial identity. When considering populations in an explicitly colonial context I indicate this through the term 'indian'. When talking about people in a non-colonial context, I use the word 'indigenous'. For a more detailed discussion, see Canessa (2012). In Latin America, 'indian' is an ethnic, not a national term, and I therefore follow the usage of writing this word in lower case in the same way as other such categories, e.g., *mestizo*, black, mulatto (see Wade 1997, p. 121).

[2] *Mestizo* formally refers to someone who is of 'mixed' race, but historically it has referred to someone who is considered neither white nor indian. Mestizos may very well be the children of two indigenous parents who are (often due to education) no longer considered to be indian. A key diagnostic of being a mestizo has long been the ability to speak Spanish, as well as to read and write it. In other words, literacy has historically been an ethnic and racial signifier in the Andes.

[3] La ley de educación "Avelino Siñani y Elizardo Pérez" (2010) (Bolivia, Ministerio de Educación 2011), see also Talavera (2013).

In the next two decades, a school was built in virtually every indigenous community and education policies were explicitly directed at transforming indians into Bolivians (Choque et al. 1992; Malverde and Canessa 1995; Patzi 1999), with Spanish as the only official medium of instruction. *Mestizo* teachers were dispatched to rural communities, where they often held a very social high position and frequently considered themselves the communities' leaders. These teachers clearly reproduced a hegemonic racist ideology that elevated *mestizos* above indians and equated Bolivian identity with being *mestizo*.

Schools, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, p. 128) note, are institutions for the reproduction of 'legitimate culture'. In the years succeeding the revolution, this culture had been very narrowly defined. Consequently, the inclusive nationalism it articulated was at the expense of any kind of indigenous cultural identity, particularly since national culture was so sharply racialised. These assimilationist policies were shared with other countries with significant indigenous populations. For much of the twentieth century, there was a wide expectation that the demise of contemporary indigenous populations through natural population decline or assimilation was simply a matter of time. Since the closing decades of the twentieth century, the public profile of indigenous peoples in Latin America has become ever more prominent, giving the lie to the belief that history would see their disappearance. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, indigenous peoples from Mexico to Argentina have mobilised, made successful land claims, been recognised in national constitutions, and become generally more prominent in national and international arenas.

This explicitly assimilationist education remained dominant until the Education Reform of 1994, when Vice President Victor Hugo Cárdenas urged indigenous youth to 'study, study, study'. The 1994 Reform mandated bilingual education during the first three years of school and met considerable resistance from teachers, many of whom refused to use the glossy textbooks in indigenous languages.[4] One feature of bilingual education was the production of textbooks in Aymara, which inevitably involved a homogenisation of the various dialects of Aymara and also the creation of new words in Aymara to replace century-old Spanish loan words (such as those for 'school', 'book' and 'pencil'). One consequence of this was that among the first things children learned at school was that they were not only ignorant of Spanish but did not speak Aymara 'properly' either. Although it offered something of a nod to the Warisata experiment and makes clear references to intercultural education, the 1994 Reform clearly aimed to help monolingual indigenous children learn Spanish more quickly by first acquiring literacy in their native tongue. There was no real recognition in theory, and even less in practice, of indigenous knowledges: as Talavera Simoni (2013, p. 42) points out, the intercultural element of the reform remained firmly on the level of discourse rather than practice. Félix Patzi (1999) goes even further by arguing that bilingual education served as a means through which the dominant *mestizo* society could inculcate indigenous youth with its val-

[4] One—but by no means the only—reason for this is that although the reform mandated the employment of indigenous teachers in indigenous communities, in many cases these spoke a different (indigenous) language from that of the community to which they were posted.

ues—presented as the only legitimate ones—through their own native tongue. He refers to the process by which the state consumes its indigenous populations through assimilation as 'state ethnophagy': 'In this process of state ethnophagy, the incorporation of figures of indigenous origin into the foreground of national life is very important. However, this does not necessarily mean that they assume the interests of the nations they come from, but rather that they are there to endorse and legitimise their own liquidation and exclusion as a national project' (Patzi 1999, p. 537).

In 2010, there was yet another reform in education. The Ley 'Avelino Siñani y Elizardo Pérez', whose name explicitly invoked the principles of education of the great Warisata experiment, sought to decolonise education by adding a more clearly embedded intercultural framework to the provision for bilingual provision education. This new model of education 'promote[s] the community-school-community relationship, seeks the revaluation and reaffirmation of the plurinational unity of the country, with cultural identity; and the decolonisation of social and productive practices; the historical processes of the original indigenous peoples and popular urban sectors that make up the social power' (Bolivia, Ministerio de Educación 2011, p. 10). As part of this reform, students are supposed to be taught, at least in part, through agricultural activities in school gardens. This is, however, met with a certain doubt, if not outright hostility, on the part of the parents, who send their children to school precisely to avoid the rigours and privations of rural life (Talavera Simoni 2013, p. 36). As Talavera Simoni points out (*op. cit.*, p. 38), 'public education was reorganised against the grain of the society on which its development depended'. That is, by the present century, attitudes in favour of schooling and against peasant agricultural knowledges had already been deeply embedded.

3 School and schooling in Wila Kjarka

When I first arrived in Wila Kjarka in 1989, there was a one-room schoolhouse and a single teacher for the first three years of schooling, so all children were taught together. No adults in the community (apart from the schoolteacher) had had more than three years of schooling (children were only just beginning to continue their education in a neighbouring village) and very few people were functionally literate. Most women and older people were monolingual in Aymara. There was no road to the village until 2011, and agricultural activities like growing crops and herding animals occupied most people, most days, most of the time. Children learned from their parents by working with them, and three years of schooling did not have much impact on their learning of agricultural skills or on their labour. Adolescents were largely engaged in herding.

By my most recent visit to Wila Kjarka in 2019, there was a splendid multi-room school with hot water showers (electricity arrived around the same time as the road). While in 1989 some children did not attend school at all, in 2019 every child did, and most also completed their secondary school education and thus obtained the qualifications they needed to be full citizens in the plurinational state of Bolivia. Mario Yapu (2013) notes that in 2012, 94.98% of the population of Bolivia was registered as literate, a 15% increase since 1992 (20% for women), and the World

Bank reports a 100% literacy rate for youths 15–24 in 2020 (https://data.worldbank.org/country/bolivia). In a formal sense, the population of Wila Kjarka has gone from being predominantly illiterate and monolingual in Aymara to being overwhelmingly literate and fluent in Spanish.

Nevertheless, I maintain that this literacy has produced very high rates of ignorance on several levels. The first, and most obvious, is ignorance of Aymara. In 2019, adolescents spoke to each other in Aymara outside school, but many smaller children could not speak it at all and many children did not share a language with their grandparents who lived in the same village. Rather than Aymara orality being celebrated as in Warisata, in Wila Kjarka the language is very rapidly being displaced.

But there are whole other areas of life that have been displaced by literacy and school education. Children no longer farm or tend to animals. Whereas in the 1990s and 2010s, adolescents were the primary herders of livestock, now they are all in school and the number of livestock has dramatically dropped: adults must tend to the crops without the labour of their children and certainly do not have the time to spend all day herding. Boys do not learn how to plough, and girls do not learn how to weave, tasks that were central to the performance of gender roles that were the foundation of the rural household. When I spoke to adolescents in Aymara in 2019, they did not know about natural fertilisers and natural pest control, or even about some quite basic skills of taking care of livestock. I simply had to give up on trying to speak to small children in Aymara since they almost always replied in Spanish. On my trip to Wila Kjarka in 2019, I was accompanied by my daughter and son. Friends chided me for not having taught them Aymara but seem to have altogether missed the irony that their own grandchildren also spoke no Aymara. It is of interest and value for a European anthropologist (and potentially his children) to speak Aymara because his racial status, as it were, is secure. For such a person to speak Aymara indicates knowledge, but an indigenous person speaking Aymara might be taken for an *indio*. To be an indian is to not be a citizen,[5] and the primary way one becomes a citizen is through formal education.

Schooling is the point at which the nation state enters the village space in many rural communities. Schooling in Bolivia is much less about the teaching of literacy and numeracy than about the teaching of citizenship and engendering a sense of national consciousness (Illich 1971, p. 31; Luykx 1999; Yapu 1999). Ironically, Warisata—which is still a very small town—is now the site of a teacher training college (*escuela normal*) that was the subject of a fascinating ethnographic study by Aurolyn Luykx in the 1990s (Luykx 1999). There, she observed almost a parody of what the 1930s Warisata experiment had *rejected*: an unrelentingly assimilationist ethos and both implicit and explicit denigration of indigenous culture.

Schoolteachers remain very important figures in the community. Whereas in the past they were whites and *mestizo*s, these days they mostly come from highland Aymara-speaking communities. These men (and in small, remote communities such as Wila Kjarka they were almost always men until the road came through in 2011)

[5] Sometimes people express this with remarkable directness. One *mestizo* told me quite simply that the indigenous people living in nearby villages 'did not have citizenship', in other words, they were indians.

are far from being multiculturalists but are great proponents of the Bolivian Dream in which with hard work and study, one can 'whiten', 'progress' and become a *mestizo* (see Patzi 1999). Sometimes, they effect this change in ethnic status for themselves by marking their difference from indians, like a Wila Kjarka teacher who permed his hair (as straight hair indicates 'indianness'). This upward social mobility is thus not simply one of class progression but of ethnicity as well. As such, we may consider that schoolteachers, rather than being proponents of cultural pride, are in fact exercising their rights to be Bolivian citizens and to not be considered indian, the subjects of an enduring colonial relationship.

Many of these men may very well have entered teaching because it was the only profession available to them as indigenous people from peasant backgrounds, rather than because of a particular desire to teach (Luykx 1999). According to Patzi (1999), one feature of the promise of education for indigenous people is that they certainly can get non-agricultural jobs but rarely rise above the level of rural schoolteacher or low-ranking policeman. Schoolteachers, in particular, face the irony that their own education and upward mobility places them in an even more 'uncivilised' and 'backward' (i.e., indian) community than the one they have left. This, not surprisingly, produces deep resentment among teachers, who are poorly paid, poorly trained and poorly motivated.

Here, the teacher and pupils are largely in agreement: the children I spoke to were quite clear that it was better to be educated at school than to have no formal education. They also broadly shared the teacher's views that one's personal success can be understood in terms of years of schooling. In Illich's words, they are 'hooked on school, that is, they are schooled in a sense of inferiority toward the better-schooled' (Illich 1971, p. 7)[6]. In Wila Kjarka, this sense of inferiority has a clear ethnic dimension and there is a suspicion that Aymara language education is yet another plot to keep indians in their place.

One of the key elements introduced by the 1994 Reform was—as has already been stated—intercultural bilingual education. There was, however, considerable resistance to the higher status given to Aymara, even by Aymara-speaking teachers. It is not to be assumed, however, that parents were any more enthusiastic about bilingual education than the teachers. To be sure, some parents regarded it positively and spoke about the importance of being able to write in Aymara, but these were definitely in the minority. Most seemed bewildered about why anyone would send their child to school to learn Aymara. When bilingual education was introduced in the 1990s, older parents (those in at least their late thirties) knew first-hand what it meant to be functionally monolingual and younger ones would certainly have learned from their parents and grandparents about the profound disadvantages of being a monolingual Aymara speaker.

[6] I am grateful to Carlos Kölbl for pointing out that the Bolivian minister of education in January 1970, Mariano Baptista Gumucio, invited Illich to present his ideas on deschooling in La Paz—before his now-famous book *Deschooling Society* was published. He gave two talks: one at the *Congreso Pedagógico Nacional* and one at the *Universidad Mayor de San Andrés*. Both talks (along with a reprint of an article he had already published in Mexico) were published in a small book edited by the Ministerio de Educación (Illich 1970). It is unclear, however, if Illich actually had any deeper influence on education policy in Bolivia.

Even those teachers who are committed to the implementation of bilingual education find considerable difficulties in doing so, as the materials used are often inappropriate. One issue is the standardisation of Aymara: children may not understand the particular dialect reproduced in their textbooks or neologisms used to replace words of Spanish origin (Arnold et al. 1999; Arnold and Yapita 2000, pp. 120–122). As a result, the 'Aymara' in the books is very difficult to understand and causes great confusion, not least because children are berated for 'not even speaking Aymara properly'. Children learn that they are not only incompetent in Spanish, but also in their native tongue. One could summarise schooling thus: it is where indigenous children learn that they are indians.

Another issue is that schooling in the Andes is produced with crass disregard for indigenous cultural practices and forms of knowledge: in fact, 'knowledge' is increasingly defined as what is learned in school. Indeed, the amount of time spent in school means that many children are failing to acquire the traditional knowledge of crafts, skills and accompanying rituals which make rural life meaningful and sustainable. In contrast, the way rural life is presented at school is at some remove from children's own experience: the new materials dedicated to intercultural education present indigenous culture as rural and colourful and *mestizo* culture as urban and quotidian. The stylised images of houses, fields and mountains contrast with the much more realistic images of urban life. Indigenous culture is once again reduced to folkloric representation rather than a lived reality.

Perhaps more important is that intercultural bilingual education in Bolivia has only ever been directed at indigenous communities, an experience shared by Peru (García 2005, p. 81). In Ecuador, which has also experimented with indigenous schooling that seeks to valorise indigenous culture, leaders of indigenous movements send their children to the best schools they can—Spanish language schools (Martínez Novo & de la Torre 2010); unsurprisingly, indigenous activists in Peru also send their children to the Alliance Française or the North American Institute in Cuzco (García 2005, p. 99). Bilingual intercultural education may seem like a good idea, but if it is only directed at indigenous people then it is unsurprising that many see it simply as a way of keeping indigenous people down (García 2005, p. 87 and *passim*).

It is hard not to conclude that until the state mandates that children in private schools in the capital city, La Paz, for example, learn Aymara, or those in the city of Cochabamba learn Quechua, will there be truly intercultural bilingual education in Bolivia. The parents of children at expensive schools in La Paz do not want their children learning Aymara, but then again neither do parents of children in Wila Kjarka: they share the view that what their children need is fluency and competence in Spanish and that their second language should be English. The big difference between the two is that the first group do acquire competence in Spanish and some English and the second do not.

It is quite clear that rural public education does not deliver the cultural capital for children to participate in metropolitan *mestizo* culture on anything like a level

playing field (Patzi 1999). In fact, one Wila Kjarkeño, Herculiano[7], saw the situation quite clearly:

> If a person learns to read and write at school, s/he will not have learned well. We don't realise that if we continue with [this kind of education] we'll stay behind, just like these schools.
> We won't even receive any useful qualifications because the education we receive is so poor that we can't even read. There's no justice: how can one of us, after having received this education, come out as an engineer, as an agronomist or even a teacher? It's very difficult.

The frustration he is expressing clearly illustrates what Illich (1971, p. 3) has called the modernisation of poverty, 'which combines the lack of power over circumstances with a loss of personal potency'. This poverty and loss of personal potency is evidenced in many areas. Whereas in the recent past people would weave their own cloth using the visually sophisticated language of Andean weaving, they now increasingly wear cheap Western-style clothing, which tears easily and is not as warm. As cultural values become undermined, people who had a rich cultural life feel increasingly marginalised. That is, children do not simply spend a lot of time in school while not learning very much, but they also spend a lot of time *not* learning about other things, as Arnold et al. (2007) cogently point out. And as Félix Patzi points out, what cultural capital rural youth do acquire through schooling can *only* be realised by leaving the community (Patzi 1999, p. 547). Those skills that are essential for their economic wellbeing (not to mention cultural reproduction) if they remain in their communities are valued less and less, while the skills that are valuable for life in urban Bolivia are highly valued. This would not matter so much if they actually were acquiring these skills, but they not only are manifestly not, but are also meanwhile taught that the ideas of their parents and grandparents are archaic and irrelevant. The rich set of rituals their parents use to make crops grow and cure animals, rituals which give people a sense of control over the vicissitudes of their lives, are becoming meaningless to young people. In the words of one young woman, '[The mountain spirits] have left us', while a young man said that they 'are not powerful anymore'.

Despite the best intentions of the 1994 and 2010 education reforms, it is quite clear that schools are not imparting the cultural capital which would allow indigenous people to compete for resources and power with urban *mestizos*. Even today, children who have completed their education have very poor reading and writing skills and speak Spanish that would widely be considered ungrammatical by middle class native speakers and, as such, quickly give away their origins, whatever efforts they make to change their appearance. This is hardly surprising: not only is greater stress put on form than content, so children have the most beautiful handwriting but don't know what they are writing, but their teachers themselves make basic grammatical errors, such as using a masculine pronoun for a feminine noun.

[7] Herculiano said this to me almost exactly 20 years ago. He now lives in a provincial capital, where he makes a living as a professional shaman. I caught up with him 2019 and he proudly showed me his official, nationally recognised, guild membership card. His views on schooling have not changed.

At times, this undereducation seems entirely intentional. One of the most intelligent people I know in Wila Kjarka is Beatriz, who I once found reading a book for school. In halting Spanish, she read out loud to me from this exceptionally dull nineteenth century Bolivian novel with archaic language. It was quite clear that she had absolutely no idea what she was reading and was surprised I thought it remotely a matter of interest to *understand* what one read: she was, after all, 'reading'. Reading without comprehension has long been a feature of education in indigenous communities in many other parts of Bolivia as well (Arnold and de Dios Yapita 2000). This is unsurprising, given that comprehension in reading is also apparently not expected of teachers during their training (Luykx 1999) and they are thus not in a good position to pass it onto the children they teach. Rural education focuses on correct repetition of the form, rather than a profound understanding of content (Arnold and Yapita 2000).

4 Conclusion

When I first arrived in Wila Kjarka in 1989, there were very few people who had more than three years of formal education and most women and older people were monolingual Aymara speakers. Children grew up learning how to dig and sow, fertilise the earth with natural fertiliser, and herd and care for animals, and they were taught the complex rituals that were necessary for a communal and agricultural life.

The youth of Wila Kjarka today are well-schooled and fluent in Spanish in a way their parents were not. But the literacy skills they have acquired do not equip them for skilled jobs in the town or city. They may still migrate to Brazil to work in textile factories, for example, but for this they don't need much literacy. To be sure, they can read signs, write simple texts and have mastered many of the literacy skills needed for modern urban life. But their Spanish is still accented, they still make grammatical and orthographic errors that mark them as 'uneducated', and just as they have not acquired the skills to cultivate multiple crops at different altitudes and keep a healthy herd, they also have not acquired the literary skills to be conventionally successful in the urban 'civilised' world. They have learned to aspire to a better life and been promised an urban life that they can supposedly achieve through schooling and 'education', but they have not been equipped to meet those aspirations. They have learned that to be an indian is to be ignorant, that illiteracy *is* ignorance; that it is better to speak Spanish to their children, that an urban life is better than a rural one.

As Morelli (2023) in her deeply moving and insightful book on the Matses in Amazonia writes: 'For the Matses, as well as other hunter-gatherer and rural peoples across the world, the introduction of state schooling seems to leave children with limited skills and resources for entering the national society', even as it educates them in what they don't have. She quotes Lancy, who argues that literate education makes 'more people aware of how "poor" they [are], of how many wondrous things they [lack] the cash to purchase' (Lancy 1996, p. 199).

The same can be said for the youth of Wila Kjarka. Their literacy necessarily makes them ignorant of traditional farming practices; their literacy marks them as relatively illiterate compared to urban middle class populations; their literacy makes

them aware of how poor they are; their literacy pushes them to see the knowledge of their parents and grandparents as something of no value, much less as something worth acquiring.

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