

Bolivia: Colonialism understood as a sickness

February 27 2009

When Evo Morales, Bolivia's first president of Indian origin, was appointed in 2006 he initiated a "decolonising revolution". In a new thesis in social anthropology at the University of Gothenburg, Anders Burman examines how the Government policy for decolonization has been interwoven with the rituals and cosmology of the indigenous population.

For the indigenous population in the Bolivian Andes, colonialism was not something that was consigned to history when Bolivia was founded. Their exploitation and marginalisation simply took on new forms.

Eyebrows are sometimes raised when the indigenous population makes the claim today that their fight is a struggle for decolonization, says Anders Burman, who is defending his thesis at the School of Global Studies. He carried out his ethnographic field work among shamans and activists within the Andean indigenous people's movement.

For the people with and among whom I have been working, colonialism is something that is very much alive - in everything from the educational system to the special position of the Catholic Church. It also transpired that colonialism and decolonization are processes of existential significance for many young people of Indian origin.

'Colonialism' and 'decolonization' are themes that have been thoroughly discussed in postcolonial studies. However, according to Anders Burman, the discussions are often abstract and are rarely based on people's own life worlds. His thesis however shows that colonialism and

decolonization are experienced and explained in different ways by different actors. The Government views colonialism as something that permeates political structures and is therefore pursuing a policy to change these structures. For the activists in the indigenous movement, Bolivia is itself a colonial project and decolonization would be tantamount to demolishing Bolivia and building a new country. But for the shamans and their apprentices with whom Anders Burman has been working most intensively, colonialism and decolonization are understood differently.

I have studied how they perceive colonialism to be a 'sickness' and decolonization as the 'cure', and how, based on certain cosmological assumptions, they are working to decolonize society, the landscape, the state and 'the self'.

Anders Burman also discovered interesting parallels between activism and shamanism.

In many respects the activism and the ritual practices derive from the same interpretive cultural framework. Furthermore, both activism and shamanism have a lot to do with conduct towards that which is understood as alien, regardless of whether it is a national power elite that is perceived as foreign, or unfamiliar spirits that bring about illness.

To understand what colonialism and decolonization mean to his informants, Anders Burman was compelled to enter into the depths of the shamans' life worlds and relate them to larger political processes in the country.

Today traditional Andean cosmology is one of the cornerstones in the Government's so-called 'decolonising revolution', but I reverse the perspective and examine how colonialism and decolonization are understood with a starting point in Andean cosmology.

Source: University of Gothenburg

Citation: Bolivia: Colonialism understood as a sickness (2009, February 27) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-bolivia-colonialism-understood-sickness.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.