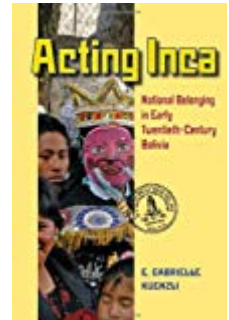


**E. Gabrielle Kuenzli.** *Acting Inca: National Belonging in Early Twentieth-Century Bolivia.* Pitt Latin American Series. Pittsburgh: University Of Pittsburgh Press, 2013. 208 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-6232-8.



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**Commissioned by** Paul Quigley (University of Edinburgh)

This fascinating study of nation building in early twentieth-century Bolivia brings indigenous people and the “Indian voice” to the center of the nation-building project in Bolivia, and, by extension, the Andes. Before the publication of *Acting Inca*, there were only a few analyses covering the intersection between the changing construction of Indian identity and nation building, both important developments in Bolivian history. *Acting Inca* by E. Gabrielle Kuenzli is an important contribution to the historiography of modern Latin American history.

The story revolves around the Bolivian Civil War (1899-1900), one of the defining moments in recent Bolivian history, in which Liberal forces, centered in the emerging business hub of Bolivia, La Paz, defeated their Conservative (Sucre-based) foes. Kuenzli skillfully, and importantly, articulates how the creole/mestizo Liberals allied with the Aymara Indians. The Liberal creoles viewed the Aymara as inheritors of the noble Inca past in order to convince the Aymara to fight against the Conservatives. Thus, the Liberal creoles har-

nessed the power of the Indian majority—while not upsetting the centuries old social hierarchy—for their own purposes. The Aymara had an incentive to “buy into” this view of themselves as inheritors of the (noble) Inca past. Indeed, some Aymara embraced this depiction of themselves and their past. Some Aymara (in particular the elite) adopted an Inca identity to avoid the stigma attached to “Indianness” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, in this way, to assert themselves as a legitimate, and thus important, part of the national community of Bolivia. These Indians contributed to a new (more multicultural) concept of national belonging that was constructed during and after the war. From the creole perspective, the Aymara who did not embrace their “Incaness” deserved to be derided, as they had been since the Spanish Conquest, as racially degenerate and thus hopelessly and forever backward. After the war, some creoles wanted to “turn the clock back” and deny that they ever viewed the Aymara as inheritors of the noble Inca tradition, and thus to strip the Indians of their



newfound status, but it was too late. The Aymara who had decided to embrace their Incaness, for their own political and social reasons, refused to stop seeing themselves as descendants of the Inca.

Kuenzli expertly shows how Aymara theatrical productions in the Altiplano today reflect the Aymaras' embracing of the noble Inca past as a way of inserting themselves into the Bolivian nation-building project. Interestingly, the Aymara, when playing ancient Inca figures in theatrical productions, bear white masks—with blue eyes. These facial features can be associated with “modern” or “progressive” movements in Latin American history. Thus, in such depictions, the Inca represent the “progressive” or “modern” side of the Aymara—that is, their potential to adopt the values/civilization of the Europeans. A white-faced Inca is an ennobling Inca, and thus the precursor to the dark-skinned Aymaras who embraced European-style progress in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Clearly, parsing the meanings of these theatrical productions yielded some interesting, and important, insights. It would have been even more interesting if Kuenzli had explored other Aymara art forms to see if the same dynamic was at work—for example, pictorial art, sculpture, and architecture.

Kuenzli's description of turn-of-the-twentieth-century events and present-day Aymara attitudes toward their past and traditions is solid and important. But she might have examined other periods of Bolivian history to see if her contributions to our understanding of the civil war can be read back into the nineteenth century, as well as forward into the middle of the twentieth century—in particular, the extremely important Bolivian Revolution of 1952. Two very important periods of recent Bolivian history, the late nineteenth century and the Bolivian Revolution, were periods in which Indians increasingly asserted themselves as part of the Bolivian national community. It would be fascinating to know if the leaders of the 1952 revolution—whose vision for Bolivia was an

updated version of nineteenth-century Liberalism in many respects—used tactics similar to their nineteenth-century forebears to build an alliance with the Aymara. I suspect that there would be some interesting historical parallels here. However, these criticisms aside, Kuenzli's book is an important contribution to the literature on Bolivian history and Native American history in South America. Both upper-level undergraduates and graduate students will benefit from reading this book.



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