

Sons of Krishna and sons of Bolivar

Charismatic kinship and leadership across India and Venezuela

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Abstract: This article uses the analytical tool of divine kinship to explore political charisma across Indian and Venezuelan democratic social revolutions. In both contexts, charismatic elected political leaders build their image of strength and action on a wide repertoire of cultural and religious resources that are legitimated by divine kinship. The juxtaposition of the Indian and Venezuelan political ethnographies shows how charismatic kinship inflects *lived* understandings of popular sovereignty and opens up spaces for holding personality politics accountable.

Keywords: Catholic Christianity, charisma, leadership, masculinity, political representation, popular Hinduism

Over the past 100 years, mass politics and anti-poverty development agendas have connected the language of democracy with the rhetorics of “hope” and “aspirations”. Participation, empowerment, and capacity building (cf. Appadurai 2007) have become popular catchall developmentalist concepts. There is, however, no careful anthropological examination of how this vocabulary and rhetorics have been used by a number of charismatic political leaders as a means to refound their nations and socialist programs. Here I juxtapose the ways in which political leaders with “socialist” agendas in India and Venezuela construct their appeal and their emotional connections with the masses (the *Bahujan* in India and *el pueblo* in Venezuela). In both contexts, leaders build their image of strength and action on a wide repertoire of cultural and religious resources that help to create a legitimate muscular socialist charisma.

This type of charisma is seen as a quality inherited from hero-gods and sanctified by anti-colonialist (and anti-imperialist) figures, and enhanced by achievements in leading contemporary democratic social revolutions. Likewise, national leaders are venerated as gods by their supporters and rarely contested or criticized in public. Finally, in similar ways, local people feel special and empowered through being linked by kinship (fictive and real) to their political leaders and by sharing with them “biomoral divine substances”.

Social scientists have been cautious in applying the concept of charismatic leadership in disenchanting times supposedly dominated by secular and liberal democratic environments (Zúquete 2008: 95). By the same token, a tendency to focus on individual leaders rather than on the social production and day-to-day management of their charisma has often led to ac-



counts that emphasize the dark side of charisma, and its autocratic, authoritarian, and populist potential. Here I wish to return to the Weberian religious concept of charismatic authority and explore how it shapes not only the links between “the people” and the leaders (between the represented and the representative), but also the construction of the people and their protagonist role in contemporary popular democracies. In Weber’s original argument, charisma was one of three sources underpinning a leader’s authority. Although traditional and bureaucratic leaders derived their standing from their social or legal position, charismatic leaders were seen to have the ability to break with established institutions. Charisma is thus associated with transformation and change because it denotes a “certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber [1947] 1964: 358). Charismatic individuals are indeed frequently seen as inspired or superhuman, but this neglects the role Weber assigns to the followers who attribute charisma to leaders (see Freeman 2007; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). In addition, it also neglects the role that charismatic kinship has in shaping “the people” themselves and with it *lived* understandings of popular sovereignty.

As noted in the introduction to this theme section, one of the crucial aspirations of democracy is “to make the bodies of all men and women the subjects, rather than the object of power” (Spencer 2007: 137), but democracy comes with a doubtful promise: “that rule ought to be by ordinary rather than extraordinary people” (Dunn 1992: v, quoted in Spencer 2007). Starting from this premise, the larger comparative questions that concern me here are: How does one become the embodiment of “the people” in various ethnographic contexts? How is democratic protagonism constructed? And how are ordinary people transformed into extraordinary people and how does this inflect the working of popular democracy on the ground?

I explore these questions by looking at how divine kinship shapes the ideas and practices of

political representation and local accountability in a North Indian provincial town (Mathura, Uttar Pradesh) and in a rural village in Venezuela (Chuao, Aragua). In India, fieldwork was conducted among a now politically powerful low- to middle-ranking pastoral-agricultural caste, the Yadavs. The Yadavs and their leaders had a pivotal role in shaping the rise of the lower castes in politics over the past thirty years in North India. The state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), home to 200 million people and located in the Hindi heartland, is one of the most backward in India in terms of socioeconomic conditions. However, with one-sixth of the members of parliament coming from the state, it occupies a central position in the electoral calculation of all the national political parties in India. Fieldwork in Venezuela was conducted among the Afro-Venezuelan community of Chuao. This is the site of a famous *hacienda* (estate) globally recognized as producing the best cocoa beans in the world. The village is still mostly inhabited by the descendants of former slaves who worked on the cocoa plantation during colonial times. Chuao was chosen by President Hugo Chávez as a pilot village for the socialist Bolivarian revolution and a site of a Núcleo de Desarrollo Endógeno (Center for Endogenous Development, NDE) in 2005.¹ The implementation of these centres was part of Chávez’s strategy to democratize the Venezuelan economy. Chávez’s rhetoric emphasized how *el pueblo* (the people) and in particular Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous people are *naturally* part of the struggle to liberate Venezuelan people first from “Spanish rule” and now from elites and the American neoliberal empire.

Divine kinship and “muscular socialist charisma” in India and Venezuela

I will start this discussion by introducing the main protagonists of the story: Mulayam Singh Yadav and Hugo Chávez, their followers, and their patron deities, the god Krishna and a divinized Simon Bolívar.

“I believe that whenever the name of Krishna appears, it does not make any sense to avoid politics. Lord Krishna fought for the underprivileged groups like today we descendants of Krishna fight for social justice and for the social well-being of Indian backward communities.” (Mulayam Singh Yadav, Yadav Caste Association Meeting, Delhi, 1999)

“Socialist policies must be ‘endogenous,’ based on a vision of social justice that is ‘Indo-Venezuelan, home-grown, Christian, and Bolivarian.” (Hugo Chávez, Caracas, January 2006)

The first extract belongs to Mulayam Singh Yadav, who has been the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh three times over the past twenty years and is the founder of the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party. His son, Akhilesh Yadav, became chief minister in March 2012. Why the references to Krishna? Krishna is one of the most celebrated deities in the Hindu pantheon. He is a complex figure with a royal pedigree, but was brought up by low-caste cow herders. Krishna is mainly worshipped as a mischievous boy who plays tricks and as the adulterous lover of the *gopis* (female cowherds). However, Krishna the “lovable-but-untrustworthy” god has been gradually transformed into a “quasi-ideal king” by Hindu nationalist narratives (Davis 1996: 34–45). And it is precisely Krishna the warrior who has been worshipped as a humanized socialist-democratic political hero by members of the Yadav community to which Mulayam Singh Yadav belongs.

The second quotation is from Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuela and leader of the so-called socialist Bolivarian revolution, who died on 5 March 2013.² In the Venezuelan case, it is the military leader of Latin American independence, Simon Bolivar, who has been transformed into a godlike figure. Simon Bolivar was a divine inspiration for Hugo Chávez’s socialist revolution. The president cultivated the notion that he was the true heir to Bolivar and fashioned himself after Bolivar. Similarly, the nation was renamed after Bolivar, and it is now called “The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” Chávez

called his socialist experimentation a Bolivarian revolution. Most Venezuelan towns have a Bolivar statue and, importantly, a number of Venezuelans pray to Bolivar as they would a Catholic saint (Salas 1987). In addition, Bolivar occupies an important role in the popular Maria Lionza spirit cult (see Placido 2001), a syncretic religion that brings together elements of possession cults from African and indigenous traditions and Catholicism. Also known as “the Queen”, Maria Lionza reigns over a kingdom of spirits located in the center of the Venezuelan democratic state. The spirits of the Queen’s kingdom are historical and legendary characters from Venezuelan history. As well as “el Libertador”, Simon Bolivar, they include “el Negro Felipe”, a black man who is said to have fought with Simon Bolivar in the South American independence wars, and “el Indio Guai-caipuro”, who is believed to have fought against the Spanish conquerors at the time of Spanish colonization of South America.

Both in Hindu North India and in Afro-Catholic syncretic Venezuela, gods are ancestors and ancestors can become gods (see the introduction to this theme section), and I argue that the relation between humanized gods and divinized men indirectly inflects local political charismatic traditions. Let me start to explain these dynamics by looking first at the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Mulayam Singh Yadav is one of the vernacular politicians who emerged from the so-called Indian second democratic upsurge of the 1990s (Yadav 2000), which brought political leaders from some of the historically lower and more backward castes to the fore, and is associated with a pattern of electoral mobilization directed at the poorer, less well-educated, and lower caste/class people. New political parties supported mainly by marginalized groups were formed—including the above-mentioned Samajwadi Party. Their main demand is social justice. In their political propaganda, democracy is often thought of in narrow terms relating to caste/community socio-economic uplifting (cf. Khilnani 1997: 59). It follows that in states like Uttar Pradesh, politics has increasingly come to be perceived as a prof-

itable “community/caste business” and an arena where issues of self-respect and honor are fought over (Michelutti 2008). In North India, the battle for material resources is often accompanied by an equal interest in asserting self-respect and acquiring symbolic benefits. Democratic practices (such as voting, participating in election campaigns, organizing political meetings, and so on) are increasingly seen as direct or indirect ways of getting a share of state resources and as ways to obtain or maximize power in what has been described as a “patronage democracy” (Chandra 2004: 6).

Politicians in this political environment often choose to project an image of themselves as men of action who can “get things done for people”. A reputation for being strong and muscular often complements this image and projects the effectiveness of a political leader. Mulayam Singh Yadav, a self-made politician who began his career as a wrestler, exemplifies well what I mean by socialist muscular charisma, a charisma that is socially and culturally constructed and is partly grounded in the religious and epic-historical world of Mulayam’s main caste supporters, the Yadavs. At the core of the Yadav community lies a specific folk theory of descent according to which all Indian pastoral castes are said to descend from the Yadu dynasty (hence the label Yadav), to which the god Krishna (a cow herder, and supposedly a Kshatriya [warrior]) belonged. The main goal of the theory of religious descent sponsored by the All India Yadav Mahasabha (the most important Yadav caste association) is to promote the creation of a numerically strong Yadav community by including more and more castes, clans, and lineages into the Yadav category or, as their rhetoric says, into “the Yadav race.”

A folk understanding of democracy accompanied the process of Yadav community formation. Yadav political rhetoric portrays “democracy” as a primordial phenomenon passed via blood from the democratic ancestor-god Krishna to the contemporary Yadavs. In this sense contemporary Yadavs are seen as heirs to a democratic tradition, and Yadav political leaders are also seen as later incarnations of Krishna. In Yadav political rhetoric Krishna is depicted as a

democratic-socialist politician and as “the first fighter for social justice”—72 percent of Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh support the Samajwadi Party (CSDS 2012 State Election Survey).

Contemporary Yadav politicians are thus attributed, and attribute themselves, via explicit links to deified caste heroes and Krishna, particular qualities and statecraft abilities. This phenomenon is neither altogether new nor specific to Yadavs and has usually been associated with the contemporary reworking of Hindu models of divine kingship (see Price 1989; on the transmission of “biomoral” substance, see Marriott 1976). However, in the Yadav case such a phenomenon is reinforced by continuous references, both by ordinary people and political leaders, to inherited substance as the basis of gaining political skills. Such an understanding of knowledge transmission needs to be conceptualized within the ideological framework of the caste system, in which skills, or at least a predisposition to acquire them, are believed to be passed on “in the blood” to the next generation. This folk understanding of knowledge transmission is linked to the strong patrilineal ideology that moulds the Yadav kinship system and to their conception of the relation between humans and gods and sanctified heroes. In Hindu cosmology, in theory, any person can become a “deified hero”. However, in North India the members of particular communities, such as the Yadavs, are considered to be more prone to become hero-gods than members of other castes. The Yadavs are said to have “heroic substance” (Coccaro 1989: 260), and their hero-gods (*kuldevtas*) are often glorified cow herders who defended the herd of the community and the community itself from the exploitation of higher castes or Muslims. Contemporary Yadav politicians and local leaders, as shown below, often maintain and cultivate this “heroic” and revolutionary heritage.

For Hugo Chávez, “the first fighter for social justice” was not Lord Krishna but Christ, followed by the sanctified Simon Bolivar. As in India, the 1990s also witnessed a profound political change in the Venezuelan context, but whereas in India this political transformation was labelled a “silent revolution” (Jaffrelot

2003), Venezuela's was a much more vocal type of democratic revolution. The demise of traditional political parties and subsequent rise of former coup leader Hugo Chávez changed the political landscape of Venezuela and patterns of participation among the downtrodden. Commentators and scholars have underlined how, while Venezuelan society has always been divided along class and race lines, at present for the first time in Venezuelan history the classes (and races) are also divided along clear ideological lines, particularly around the figure of Hugo Chávez (Heath 2009). Chávez's combative rhetoric and emphasis on participatory democracy (in the form of referenda, popular assemblies, and voluntary work in civilian-military programs) estranged and troubled the country's traditional business and political elite. In contrast, Chávez was enthusiastically supported by the low social strata of society, who viewed their democratic leader and the radical participatory democracy that he promoted as a way of gaining power, social justice, and socioeconomic well-being. The following excerpts beautifully capture the devotion for Chávez and his revolutionary project.

Our Chávez who art in prison
 Hallowed be thy name
 Thy people come
 Thy will be done
 Here
 As in your army
 Give us today the lost confidence
 And never forgive the traitors
 As we ourselves will never forgive them
 Who betrayed us
 Save us from corruption
 And liberate us from the President
 Amen.
 (quoted in Taussig 1997: 108)

For me, Bolívar was like a God who was sent to liberate us slaves ... only another Bolivar can save us from poverty, and Chávez is the new Bolivar. (Rosa, 44 years old, Chuao)

The first quotation is a prayer that circulated in the streets of Caracas soon after Chávez's

failed military coup in 1992, which paved the way for his political career; the second excerpt is from one of my informants, Rosa, a woman in her forties who lives in the village of Chuao. Past and present are here collapsed through divine kinship and contribute to create a revolutionary message and powerful form of "democratic millennialism" (Michelutti 2013). Hugo Chávez and Mulayam Singh Yadav are both, in different ways and contexts, the protagonists of "social democratic revolutions"; they share similar rural roots and humble social and economic backgrounds and, importantly, an agenda to create a more socially and economically equal society through a "socialism" directed explicitly at the needs and sociocultural contexts of their own countries and societies. They are both controversial figures loved by the poor masses and feared by the upper classes in Venezuela and by the forward castes in India. Mulayam Singh Yadav's hold over Uttar Pradesh has often been labelled a goonda (criminal/gangster) government. Equally, Chávez's Bolivarian social spending through social missions was often described as a way of buying support and votes or as being monopolized by local elites who control resources without downward accountability.

Chávez was often called the last of the populist *caudillos* (strongmen/martial chief). The president not only claimed to have "revolution" in his blood, but also used his native land, Los Llanos, a territory of tough and brave cowboys, as further evidence of his toughness. Similarly, Mulayam Singh Yadav and other Yadav political leaders refer to Yadav heroes who have fought against the "imperialist" British (Michelutti 2008: chap. 6). And if Chávez drew on his "cowboy" roots, Mulayam draws on his pastoral and rural roots. Yadav politicians love to present themselves as rustic "cow herder" politicians. For example, Laloo Prasad Yadav, the former chief minister of Bihar, likes to give interviews to the national press while tending his cows and buffaloes, and describes himself as an avatar of the god Krishna. By the same token, Mulayam Singh Yadav's biographical anecdotes, published in the press or in Yadav caste literature, always portray his childhood as resembling Krishna's: he grew up among cow herders and

was a mischievous child who loved sports such as wrestling. The cow herder heritage is strategically emphasized to his political audience.

Both Mulayam Singh Yadav and Hugo Chávez are indispensable figureheads who act as principal orators, ideologues, and champions' icons for their supporters. However, any political project requires multiple levels of leadership to carry on its message. My next question is thus: how is Mulayam Singh Yadav's, and how was Hugo Chávez's charisma managed on the ground? Although Weber suggests that "charisma can only be 'awakened' and 'tested'; it cannot be 'learned' or 'taught' he nevertheless refers his reader to a chapter on 'the charismatic type of education' (ibid.) which, unfortunately, he never wrote" (quoted in DuPertuis 1986: 1). In other words, Weber recognized the use of specific methods for the cultivation of charismatic traits. In the following sections, building on this insight, I show how divine kinship helps to replicate (and routinize) the charisma of national leaders like Chávez and Mulayam through what I call "mini-Chávezs" and "mini-Mulayams", while simultaneously making their supporters ("the people") feel special and empowered. On the ground, local politicians contribute to the cultivation of the idea that their national and regional political leaders are the *embodiment of the will of the poor people* by replicating muscular socialist rhetorics and cultivating a strongman image. I will show, however, how the effects and responses to such performances are different from the ones staged by the national leaders. Ordinary people are not intimidated by local strongmen "mini-leaders". On the contrary, locally elected strongmen are made accountable through the use of the very same charismatic muscular and kinship languages that legitimate them and their national counterparts.

"Mini-Mulayams", charismatic kinship, and local accountability

Mathura town lies about 100 miles south of New Delhi, in the so-called Braj area of western Uttar Pradesh. This area is well-known as the

mythical homeland of the god Krishna. My research focused on the neighborhood of Ahir Para in Sadar Bazaar locality, where the neighborhood Yadavs mainly support the Samajwadi Party and Mulayam Singh Yadav is their leader. Local Yadavs commonly describe themselves as "a caste of politicians". Images of "wrestling", "Krishna the socialist wrestler", and contemporary "Yadav wrestler-politicians" enrich the political rhetoric developed by Yadav caste associations and political parties. The central focus of this rhetoric is to instill self-respect (*svabhimān*) among ordinary Yadavs. The fortunes of the neighborhood are said to be linked to the success of the Samajwadi Party in the state. In almost every house there is a picture of Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is generally seen as someone who works for his community and who has done things for the local Yadavs. As well as national and regional media (newspapers and TV), ordinary Mathura Yadavs are exposed to the charisma of Mulayam Singh Yadav in more direct ways. He participates in national and regional Yadav caste association meetings, at which a delegation from Mathura Yadavs is usually present, and often ends up stopping by Mathura for national and state election campaign rallies. I observed various occasions on which Mulayam Singh Yadav was present. His arrival by helicopter or jeep, surrounded by armed men, was much anticipated by the Yadav and non-Yadav audiences. At Yadav caste association meetings, even if Mulayam was not coming, he was always expected, and when he finally arrived he was venerated like a god. He often was given a *pagri* (the Kshatriya turban that is locally read as a sign of royalty and martial qualities) to wear and majestically addressed the audience in simple and direct language. During caste association or political meetings, Mulayam Singh Yadav was revered, ceremonially greeted, praised, touched, and never openly criticized or engaged in discussion about his ideological positions. But are "mini-Mulayams" treated with the same reverence, do they get criticized? Are they made accountable?

A. P. Yadav is a Samajwadi Party worker and member of the state Yadav caste association. He

used to be Mulayam's local man. Many considered his personal friendship with Mulayam to be the primary source of his power and wealth. A. P. Yadav is the leading personality of one of the important Yadav factions in the neighborhood. He is 55 years old and began his political career as a child by helping his father (a former city councillor) in the elections. He inherited his father's career and began working for the Samajwadi Party from the early 1990s. His local power was strictly linked to the Samajwadi Party's electoral performance at the state level. When Mulayam was in power he became a contact to cultivate, and when Mulayam was not in power his grip on the neighborhood was weaker. He is particularly well-known for his knowledge of legal procedures and his contacts in the local court, which allow him to speed up or stop court cases. Indeed, there are other "big men" in the neighborhood and in town who have stronger reputations than A. P. Yadav, but the latter is interesting for the argument of this article because he has constructed his political career and personal reputation in Mathura through his affiliation with the Samajwadi Party and Mulayam. In his speeches and conversations, reference to Mulayam is often made. It is Mulayam's authority that legitimizes A. P. Yadav in the neighborhood. It is the magicality of "infra-power connections" (cf. Hansen and Verkaaik 2009), kin ties, and "caste heroic and muscular knowledge" that allows this local leader to have charisma power in the locality.

In the courtyard of A. P. Yadav's home, various local political meetings were regularly held in which the socialist rhetoric of the Samajwadi Party was mixed up with the "pragmatic needs" of the neighborhood. Take, for example, the meeting that took place the night before a milk strike organized by the Samajwadi Party in 1999 commenced (see Michelutti 2008). The purpose of the meeting was to organize and coordinate the protest, to be held on the outskirts of the town the following day. The aim of the protest was to stop the public dairy vans and to pour the milk into the Yamuna River. The local Samajwadi Party workers and activists and three leaders from nearby villages were present

at the gathering. Ten young Yadavs who belonged to the youth branch of the local Yadav caste association joined the meeting and enthusiastically signalled their availability to participate in the demonstrations planned for the next day. H. S. Yadav, one of their leaders, emphasized that what was at stake for him was the reputation of the Yadav community. He added that the demonstration would remind the allegedly anti-Yadav government that the Yadavs were not to be trifled with, and that the authorities should not think that Yadavs were pushovers. By moving together aggressively and displaying their militancy in public space, they wished to signal their power and strength. They felt that they had an opportunity to show off their *lathis* (sticks). This desire to fight the authorities and to take "exciting and risky actions" was accompanied by a verbally expressed commitment to defend the weaker cow herders and milk sellers from the injustices of the government and the upper-caste officers.

This muscular way of "doing politics" is associated with a "muscular" reputation that local politicians have in the neighborhood, which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Michelutti 2008). Maleness is also often publicly performed through wrestling and the politicization of wrestling. In addition, the symbolic equating of physical strength and political capacity is continuously expressed by informants through metaphors, parables, and mythic narratives. Local Yadavs emphasize that their ancestor Krishna was a skillful wrestler and a "democratic" politician and that Yadav kings were also wrestlers or patrons of wrestling tournaments (*dangal*). But what happens when the local "mini-Mulayam" is no longer loyal to the community? The ethnography of Mathura Yadavs shows that a macho political style is not only used to promote the career of local politicians, but also to make them accountable.

During the 1999 parliamentary election campaign, A. P. Yadav was publicly criticized for keeping part of the campaign budget for himself and his alleged Brahmin mistress. Locally, this money is seen as "community money" that needs to be shared. Allegedly, A. P. Yadav received a

large sum to distribute for the election campaign in 1999, but he kept it for himself, or so people suspected. The neighborhood articulated a spectacular carnivalesque protest using the language of masculinity. One morning, the inhabitants of the neighborhood woke up and found the streets covered with hundreds of leaflets. The text was written in a powerful ironic language, and portrayed the local “mini-Mulayam” as a castrated man. It described how the Samajwadi Party politician had completely lost control of his manliness and had become the puppet of his Brahmin mistress. Portraying “the politician” as a grotesque character motivated by shameful and “perverted” instincts, the community criticized the local political establishment. The critique was not only about lax sexual morality but also about the fact that the lady was a Brahmin (high caste and “an enemy”). Mulayam Singh Yadav soon learned about the episode, suspended his local man, and allegedly the money was redistributed within the community. Local people had thus managed to keep patronage and a muscular charismatic leader accountable. Next, I show how despite the differences in history, culture, and economics, very similar processes are at work on the ground in Venezuela.

“Mini-Chávezes”, charismatic kinship, and local accountability

In 2005, the Afro-Venezuelan village of Chuao was chosen by President Chávez as a pilot village for the Bolivarian revolution. At the heart of this political experimentation is the creation of a new history and modernity that places traditionally marginalized groups at the center of the Venezuelan nation. The following are excerpts from Chávez’s conversations with local people while visiting Chuao in April 2008. These conversations show how a link of kinship was created and maintained between the president and *el pueblo*³:

Hugo Chávez: You must be related to me. Certainly, you should know that my great grand-

mother Rosa Inés Chávez, her grandmother name was Inés. Inés Chávez and she was *negra* [black] like you.

Villager (Aquilina Chávez): Really?

Hugo Chávez: Yes, she was *negra* like you, of African roots and like that my great grandmother ... I did not know her, she was the daughter of an Indian and an African. A mix of Indio with African, from there I come from, and from there we all come.

Hugo Chávez: The surname Chávez comes from Africa. In Africa there are Chávez with “s”. Chávez hence has African roots. I am African.

Here Chávez talks about the village of Chuao:

Hugo Chávez: Villages that were forgotten, villages of Afro-descendants. We are of this colour, aren’t we? The colour of the African roots ... You need to know that you are the descendants of slaves deported from Africa! Then you liberated them (as freed slaves)! And you helped Bolívar to fight for the independence.

Chávez’s rhetoric emphasizes how *el pueblo* and particularly Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous people have naturally been part of the struggle to liberate Venezuelan people first from Spanish rule and now from the elites and the United States’ neoliberal empire. Mini-Chávezes replicate similar rhetorics and narratives at the local level. Take the example of the former mayor (*alcalde*) of Chuao, Mattioni. Mattioni—a 40-year-old engineer and former entrepreneur—was Chuao’s mayor between 2005 and 2007. He belongs to a large category of self-made politicians who have gained political positions in the Chávez era. His main motto was *Gerencia Práctica* (practical leadership), and he often pointed out that he and his team were in direct line with the common people (*en línea directa con el pueblo*) and that they kept the people in direct line with the revolution (*en línea directa con la revolución*).

On 7 July 2005, Mattioni arrived in Chuao to present to the community the project for the creation of an endogenous unit for their village.

The meeting was organized in the main square in front of the statue of Simon Bolivar. Several information desks were informally arranged, each kiosk dedicated to a particular part of the project (i.e., the strengthening of cocoa production, the development of tourist infrastructures, the development of the fish industry, and so on) and run by members of the Mattioni team (engineers, technicians, lawyers, etc.). The various community leaders were present, and around 200 persons were assembled in the square. Pamphlets and T-shirts with the logo *Núcleo de Desarrollo Endógeno Chuao* were distributed. Mattioni, dressed in a red tracksuit with the logo *Chuao en línea directa con la revolución*, began his speech by saying:

“I talked with Chávez yesterday. He really took Chuao to heart. He sent his greetings. The project has been accepted and will be administrated directly by the “Mobil Presidential Cabinet”. 4,288,235,907,00 Bolívares [£4,227,053] have been given to Chuao. And this is just for the first year. It is estimated that in five years 17 billion of Bolívares will be given to Chuao. Everybody is aware that Chuao produces the best cocoa in the world and the government is prepared to repay the debt of the Hacienda. Chuao has the potentiality to become an important tourist place and to develop handicrafts. But we need to learn to organise our community. “Desarrollo endógeno” starts from the community. This is the foundation of Venezuelan participatory democracy.”

He continued praising the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the project. The crowd cheered! Music was put on and the meeting ended with the mayor dancing to *tambores* (drums) and being “native”. The crowd praised his efforts. “He is not so bad. And he is learning,” said Francisco, referring to the dancing skill of quickly moving the hips. Chuao people are said to have the “quickest maracas” on the Caribbean coast, an expression referring to the ability to move their hips (and by extension their sexual virility). Through dancing, the mayor asserted his masculinity and proved

himself to be as tough and virile as the locals. His efforts were appreciated. Dancing is considered an essential political skill and part of what people consider “natural charisma”. The local political man, Pablo, who has been president of the Junta Parochial for many years, is said to be a “natural leader”, the best dancer they can remember in the village, with 40 sons and daughters from 10 different women, as well as countless lovers. Simon Bolivar, I was often reminded, loved to dance too (see also Sanchez 2004) and, according to local myth, actually danced with some of the local women when he passed through Chuao.

Simon Bolivar is vividly present in Chuao’s memories and narratives, said to have reached the village while fighting for South America’s independence from Spain. He arrived desperate and tired, very weak and in poor spirits. “Indeed he was completely tired of fighting, and he was contemplating suicide. But then ... the freed slaves of Chuao gave him enthusiasm and new energy and helped him to fight back the colonial power” (Alina, 56 years old). “It is indeed thanks to the slaves of Chuao—but not many people know it—that Simon Bolivar has become a hero and a saint” (Alcide, 45 years old).

Popular versions of Simon Bolivar are hence *lived* through local myth and the spirits of Afro-Indio cults. Thanks to spirits and ghosts, history is fast-forwarded into life (see Taussig 1997). The day after Chávez announced on TV that Chuao was becoming an NDE, I went to work in the cocoa plantation with Lolli, who had worked in the *hacienda* for the past 20 years. We were clearing up the plantation when I heard her talking. “Are you talking with me?” I asked. “No, I am not talking with you. I am talking with a spirit, this one, always bothers me. I am telling her to go away.” “Who is she?” I asked. “She is an Indio killed by the conquistadores. She is from pueblo Quemado.” “What did she ask you?” I asked. “Ah she just wants to talk, I guess she is bored. She wants to know about *el proceso* [the revolutionary process]; she is happy that we have almost an Indio president. At last!”

Many informants said the forest in Chuao is populated by Indios, former slaves, and freed slaves. “They speak Spanish but sometimes I do not really understand what they tell me because they speak ‘Indian’ or *loango*” (which is the “slave language”). In Chuao, spirits and ghosts are social persons (see Lambek 1993; Placido 2001; Ferrándiz 2004) with whom people speak and through which history (and in particular past forms of subjugation, slavery, and the kingship idioms of colonial Venezuela) are lived in the present. Subaltern history is hence embedded not only in Chávez’s body (who claimed to be the reincarnation of Bolívar and of Indio/African origin) but also in the bodies of the people of Chuao.

A week after Mattioni’s introductory speech, President Hugo Chávez informed the nation on television about Chuao’s project. It was at this precise moment that Chuao’s people began to believe that “some real money” was coming to the village. The following day the president underlined the importance of the development of local products such as cocoa in the establishment of a Venezuelan popular economy from the weekly platform of *Aló Presidente*.

It is indeed through TV that Chávez mainly entered *directly* the lives of common people. His appeal perforated the screen, and both pro-Chávez and anti-Chávez supporters agreed that he was a “natural leader” and a tremendous political orator. His way of talking appealed to the common man. A great number of villagers felt that they had someone they could trust in the government, and that they could go directly to Chávez to tell him their problems and he would listen to them. Most importantly, they felt that if local politicians did not implement Chávez’s idea “properly”, they could go directly to him and make politicians and government officials accountable. In short, in the village there was a sincere feeling that Chávez was accessible and that *el pueblo* was indeed “in direct line with the revolution”.

On TV Chávez was shielded from negative critiques and shown as a king surrounded by adoring followers who cheered and clapped but never criticized him. I call these shows “rituals

of obedience”. However, this asymmetric model of political leadership when staged and replicated at the local level by “mini-Chávezes” is deeply transformed. Replicated by local leaders, Chávez’s charismatic style has a paradoxical transformative effect, and offers a space to criticize local political leaders and the Bolivarian state policies.

On 4 November, for the first time since the start of the project, a political meeting brought members of the local community face-to-face with local Chávista political leaders. By then Mattioni had not visited the village for three months. Rumors circulated that he was scared to visit because he was worried about the criticism he was facing. People were asking: “Where is the money?” “Why has the work in the *hacienda* not started yet?” and “Where are the houses they promised?”

For the meeting, three tables were lined up for the authorities (the mayor and members of his team, members of the Chuao parish, the administrators of the *hacienda*, and representatives of government bodies), 100 seats were arranged for the audience, and loud music was broadcast. Thus, the stage for the mayor’s political performance was arranged like Chávez’s stage during his weekly television program *Aló Presidente*. Chuao’s cultural promoter, Rolando (30 years old), was acting as facilitator, and later in the morning he finally announced, microphone in hand, Mattioni’s arrival, who was not welcomed with any special cheers or applause. The “mini-Chávez” began by greeting the audience. “Good morning compatriots. How are you?” Some people in the audience answered, “Very well, thanks,” with sarcastic and ironic smiles.

Mattioni started by defending himself, using a scapegoat, the minister of environment, but he was soon overwhelmed by the questions (and critiques) from the public. Mattioni used the same “charismatic” language as Chávez; he set up the meeting in the same seminar format as *Aló Presidente*, but the outcome of his performance was very different: the ritual of obedience transformed itself into a ritual of disobedience. The relation between “Chávez”

and *el pueblo* created by the TV media, when staged on the ground, has a different effect. People openly criticize “mini-Chávezes”, and through them they judge the execution of Chávez’s government policies, making local politicians accountable. Six months later the Chuao residents staged an impressive media campaign through the radio and local journals against the mayor. They accused him of corruption and of being a “thief” (*ladron*). By the end of 2007, through the new democratic institutions of the municipal council, they went directly to the mobile presidential cabinet and the minister of popular economy and got what they wanted: potable water and a modern sewage system. On 27 April 2008, Chávez visited Chuao to assess the development of the various projects. He promised more money and infrastructure and, importantly, emphasized how the November elections were close and the people would have the possibility to elect a real Chavista mayor. He said: “This is the start of a socialist Chuao, which is and will be an example for the nation”.

Embodying/representing the leader: The charisma of “the people”

In 2008, when I went back to Chuao, the gossip about the corrupted Mattioni was at full speed. “Lucia, you will not believe how fat he got. Now, he is certainly not able to dance *tambores* (drums) anymore,” said Lolli (30 years old). Lolli was not the only one in the village who referred to the weight increase of Mattioni and the loss of his maleness. The village seemed obsessed with his “fatness”. These comments reminded me that in India, in Mathura, Yadavs referred to “fat” Baniyas (merchant caste and traditionally politically dominant in the area) as cowards incapable of fighting. Also, Yadav boys who put on weight, or who did not enjoy wrestling or had peaceful and quiet personalities, were teased by their companions and given Bania nicknames. Attacking politicians seen both as effeminate and shameless fostered a sense of commonality within the local commu-

nities and helped to create and reinforce a socialist rhetoric simultaneously produced at national and regional levels. In both localities people felt they were quite powerful and that the politicians and government needed them more than they actually needed the politicians. Interestingly, close parallels, both chronologically and structurally, can be viewed in India, with the rise of the lower castes in politics and charismatic provincial lower-caste politicians, and in Venezuela, with the rise of marginalized groups and the charismatic leader Hugo Chávez.

In both contexts people felt they embodied their leaders’ power through real or symbolic kinship. When Mulayam Singh Yadav was appointed chief minister in 1993 and 2002, all Yadavs of Sadar Bazaar celebrated in the streets of the neighborhood by screaming, “I am Mulayam.” More recently, Yadavs celebrated the victory of Mulayam’s son, Akhilesh Yadav, screaming both “I am Akhilesh” and “I am Mulayam.” The Yadav caste associations portray the Yadav community as a natural community with natural representatives. Accordingly, as symbols of the Yadav community, Mulayam and Akhilesh embody those they represent and, simultaneously, those they represent embody them. This kind of representation can be independent from elections. Yadav representatives represent Yadavs primarily because they themselves are Yadavs, and not solely because they are elected to do so.

Similarly, in Chuao members of the local community felt they embodied parts of Chávez and that they were “in direct line with the revolution”. It has been emphasized how in the Latin American context kinship relations (even relations to paternity—see, for example, Gudeman [1976]) need to be actively produced and sustained rather than merely recognized as inherent, or objectively present. In the absence of extended families, descent groups, or other formal corporate units (such as, for example, the clans and castes we encountered in the North India context), political leaders like Chávez use political rhetoric and words to construct a form of “charismatic biomoral substance” that func-

tionally fills this gap. Coronil (2011) has pointed out how Chávez was creating a new Venezuela by reinventing its history through a permanent performance in which words are not only part of the revolution, but also produce the revolution. I would suggest that what he also managed to achieve is the creation of fictive kinship between him, the Afro-Venezuelans, and the father of the nation (Simon Bolivar) and the transcendent.⁴

These particularistic ideas of the people and ideas about how they are linked to the government/leader (through blood/kinship rather than only through electoral representation) are strengthening symbolic and economic ethnic patronage bonds. Patronage to kin (or fictive kin) is central to the way leaders project their power. And, indeed, it is the betrayal of their own community, rather than the corrupted, muscular, and populist nature of patronage, that provokes indignation at the local level. In both the Indian and Venezuelan examples, it was “the mini-leaders” who were under scrutiny. Local politicians were viewed as the medium through which power, protection, and patronage trickled to the ground. Ultimately, local people put under examination the local leaders and their “capacity to get things done” and “to deliver resources” to their community/caste. Charismatic kinship hence simultaneously legitimated and constrained top-down authority and paradoxically enabled accountability at the local level, and indirectly opened up spaces for less person-centered types of leadership.

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Notes

1. The names of the people of Mathura and Chuao discussed in this article are pseudonyms. Extracts from speeches and texts originally in Hindi or Spanish appear in the English translation.
2. This article was completed before President Hugo Chávez's death.
3. Quotations were recorded in Aló Presidente, program 309, Hacienda Cacaotera de Chuao, Municipio Santiago Mariño, estado Aragua Domingo, 27 April 2008. My translation.
4. On the day of Chávez's funeral, people attending the ritual were screaming in tears, “We are Chávez!” and “I am Chávez.” Chávistas have come to embody their president, and the president has been transformed into a god. His successor, Maduro, is portraying himself as a “mini-Chávez”. It remains to be seen if a divinized Chávez will routinize the charisma of his appointed successors or not. I am exploring more in detail Chávez's divinization process in a manuscript provisionally entitled: “In the Name

of the People: Gods and Revolutionary Politics in a Venezuelan Village.”

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