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Manuscript title: *'We are all Chávez': charisma as an embodied experience*

Key words: Charisma, electoral representation, kinship, popular religion, the New
Man

‘We are all Chávez’: charisma as an embodied experience

Introduction

The late President Hugo Chávez leaves a highly contested legacy behind him. Immediately after his death the Venezuelan and international media, political analysts and academics began speculating about what would happen to *Chavismo* without Chávez, and debating questions of succession and governability. What will happen to ‘Chávez’s revolution? What is the future of the economic and social changes brought about by XXI century socialism? Can the *Chavista* model survive the death of its father? The current chaotic post-Chávez political and economic scenario affords a little certainty: Chávez is still very present in the everyday life of contemporary Venezuelans. Chávez as a martyr, as the second Bolívar, as a saint, as a spirit is entering the religious and social life of a great number of people. In short, despite being dead he continues to shape Venezuelan revolutionary selves and so this paper aims to assess the revolutionary potential of this legacy.ⁱ

On the day of Chávez’s death I was in Lucknow – a provincial town in North India – when my phone started to beep in the middle of the night. Friends and colleagues from different continents were trying to get in touch with me. I finally picked up my smart phone at 4 am. The first message I read was from Gina Maria, an informant and now friend from my village field site on the North Venezuelan coast (Aragua state). The message said: ‘Everybody is crying. But he is still alive. We are Chávez’. The message ended with the sentence: ‘Revolution or Death’ (*¡Revolución o Muerte!*). In similar fashion on the day of his state funeral mourners with tears streaming down their faces screamed, “I am Chávez! We are Chávez!” (*¡Yo soy Chávez!*, *¡Somos Chávez!*).

In my work across South Asia and Venezuela I showed how often affinities between political leaders and the voters run much deeper than casting ballots alone can capture, and reach far beyond the democratic electoral context by entering the ‘non-public’ domains of

religion, kinship and the body (see Michelutti 2008; Michelutti 2013a). It could be said that the *Chavistas* (voters/supporters of Chávez) have been ‘internalised’ or in Dumont’s language ‘encompassed’ by their President — Chávez was literally a part of those who elected and supported him and vice versa. In brief, the late President Hugo Chávez was not a representative elected to speak and act on behalf of his electorates by ‘contract’; a flimsy connector compared to the substantive bonds of kinship that he established with his supporters. This concept of representation is convincing and it is easy to see why this relational logic may be such a potent basis for political loyalties and so compelling for those who vote. This type of concept is even more compelling and relevant in the context of revolutions given that at the heart of revolutionary politics is the making of the New Man. Revolutions are *sui generis* political forms with their own ontologies which set up the coordinates within which people are made who they are (Holbraad & Pedersen 2013; Holbraad 2013). The total fusion between the people and the state through self-sacrifice is one of the tropes of socialist revolutionary projects (Guevara and Castro 2009).

Starting from this premise I shall explore what it means to say “I am Chávez!” How does one become the embodiment of a leader and vice versa? In order to answer this question I shall return to the religious Weberian concept of charismatic authority and Weber’s theory of ‘leader democracy’. 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, thus, is associated with transformation and revolutionary 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 1964: 358). Indeed, charismatic individuals are frequently seen as inspired

or superhuman, but this neglects the role Weber assigns to the followers who attribute charisma to leaders (see Freeman 2007; Green, 2008; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). Importantly it neglects the role that the religiosity and sociality of the ‘charismatic bond’ have in shaping and transforming the people themselves both personally and politically.

The mythical, epic, messianic and spectacular nature of Hugo Chávez’s discourse/propaganda has been documented in depth (Briceno Guerrero 1997; Salas 2005; Capriles, 2006; Zuquete 2008; Nahon-Serfaty 2014); however what has not been analysed and at times has gone unrecognised is that the *Chavista* mythical/messianic repertoire is also part of the religious mundane experience of the everyday life. In this paper I show how Chávez’s political experimentation explicitly revitalised popular religious cults. Processes of de-folklorisation of myths and heroic figures are central to the making of Chávez’s devotional form of socialism. Recently, Pino Iturrieta (2013: 16-17) pointed out how Chávez’s regime and his legacy had (and have) the capacity to change people’s routine through a system that strongly ‘influences private life and collective attitudes’. Thus the *Chavista* project has not only produced ‘a new communicational and symbolic ecosystem that seems to endure the physical absence of its leader Hugo Chávez’ (Nahon-Serfaty 2014) but has also left (as a legacy) citizens with transformed religious and political faiths.

I shall explore the conjunction of sacred and profane worlds by using the concept of ‘divine kinship’- a concept which Chávez himself has used implicitly to cultivate his charisma and produce a form of socialism which embraced and to a certain extent institutionalised local socio-cultural and religious practices (Michelutti 2013a). I proposed elsewhere ‘divine kinship’ - the relation between men and gods — as a crucial vernacular sphere in which to examine the relation between elected leaders and ‘the people’ cross-culturally (Forbess and Michelutti 2013). In this article I show that looking at Chávez’s leadership through the lens of *divine kinship* can provide important clues to understanding

how charisma is embodied in people and things and circulates through networks of kinship (and fictive kinship) from gods, spirit and ancestors to democratically appointed leaders and their ordinary followers – and also in reverse, from the people to their elected representatives. This charisma—spun substantially from bonds of divine kinship— produces an immediate identification between the masses and the leader. In anthropology the relation between humans and deities has been the subject of much interest for a long time – in particular in the context of studies of royal/divine power. At the beginning of the last century the famous social anthropologists James Frazer ([1890] 1993) and Arthur Maurice Hocart (1970) used the universal motif of divine kingship to compare emerging forms of political authority across the globe. Yet the spaces where such relations have been strikingly prominent in contemporary democratic politics and revolutionary contexts remain conspicuously under-analysed.

This paper is divided into three sections. It begins by illustrating the concept of divine kinship by highlighting how kinship ties, local theories of race, spirit possession, the body and personhood, and processes of divinisation of human beings are played out in Chávez’s charismatic revolutionary politics. Having established the potential of the analytical tool of divine kinship to explore Chávez’s devotional socialism, the second section examines the management of Chávez’s charisma through what I call ‘mini Chávez(es)’. Local politicians contributed on the ground to cultivating the idea that their national political leader was the *embodiment of the will of the poor people* by replicating Chávez’s sacred revolutionary genealogies. This material was collected during in April 2005 and January 2006, and subsequent fieldwork trips in 2008 and 2011 to a rural village and urban Caracas.ⁱⁱ The village of Chuao was chosen by President Chávez as a pilot village for the Bolivarian revolution in 2005. The site is famous for being the site of a well-known Hacienda (plantation), which is globally recognised as producing high quality cocoa beans.

The village is still mostly inhabited by Afro-Venezuelans who are descendants of former slaves that worked in the plantation during colonial times. Chávez's project openly privileged the interests of the predominantly mestizo and Afro-Venezuelan working classes over those of the largely white middle and upper classes. Thus even if the bulk of my findings concerns a particular Afro-Venezuelan community, their makeup is not at all atypical among *Chavistas*. In addition the socio-cultural and religious practices I describe are widespread across classes/communities in both rural and urban Venezuela (see Pino Iturrieta, 2010; Taussig, 1997; Placido, 2001; Salas, 1987; Ferrándiz, 2005). Available literature also suggests that Espiritismo and Santería¹ practices are on the rise across all sections of Venezuelan society (Ascensio 2012). This case study provides an excellent opportunity to study the cosmological logics at the basis of claims such as "I am Chávez" ringing out around the country. More importantly it shows how the local *Chavista* political leaders ('Mini-Chávez(es)) replicated Chávez's divine kinship rhetoric to cultivate their charismatic traits. I suggest that Nicolas Maduro can also be conceptualised as a 'mini-Chávez' who is now trying to routinise Chávez's 'divine grace'; however, the transfer of charisma is not a straightforward affair as Nicolas Maduro needs to cultivate his own 'quasi-charisma' if he wishes to succeed and simultaneously manage Chávez's posthumous presence and charismatic revolutionary legacy.

1. Human/divine kinship and charismatic leadership in a democratic revolution

One of the crucial aspirations of democracy is 'to make the bodies of all men and women the subjects rather than the objects of power' (Spencer 2007: 137). Nevertheless, this proposition is also accompanied by an improbable promise: 'that rule ought to be by ordinary rather than extraordinary people' (Dunn 1992: XX). Weber's theory of 'leader

¹ Espiritismo – Spiritualism, Santería – Way of the Saints

democracy' highlights the improbability of such a promise by stating that democratic legitimacy is always intrinsically 'quasi-charismatic' (1978: 243). Weber believed '...that twentieth-century mass democracy offered a way to manufacture a kind of leadership that, while not purely charismatic, nonetheless took on charismatic traits and could be regularised into a routine feature of the modern political landscape' (Green 2008: 189) such as universal suffrage and regular elections.

'Whatever sort of relationship 'representation' may be, how the ordinary articulates with the extraordinary (and how 'quasi-charismatic' traits are manufactured) in electoral governance is never straightforward' (Spencer 1997: 12). In a comparative ethnographic study of electoral representation and charismatic leadership across India, Nepal, Montenegro, Serbia, Russia and Venezuela I showed (with Alice Forbess) that when stripped of divine kingship and royalty, the modern 'ordinary democratic politician' can be transformed into an 'extraordinary sacred kin' seen as related to his/her electors by ties of ancestry, blood, and shared divine origin (Forbess and Michelutti 2013; Michelutti 2014). Today in many places the institution of democracy may have put an end to traditional kingship, but the divine kinship connections and leadership styles underpinning the institution persist as enchanted imaginative tropes that are part of a vibrant mundane reality; democratic politicians around the world often obtain their status through stories of past glory and the ideal of strong and fearless patron-protectors who can deliver to 'their people', by whatever means. Divine ancestors may include kings, queens and revolutionaries, deified *caudillos* (charismatic populist leaders among the people), Robin Hoods, saints and other communal patrons. Likewise their supporters feel special and empowered by being linked by kinship (fictitious and real) to their extraordinary and sacralised kin/leaders and sharing bio moral divine/heroic substances with them.

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2011a, 2011b) recently proposed the idea of kinship as ‘mutuality of being’, intended to counteract an excessive biological focus in kinship studies and explore the practices and ontologies through which others—ancestors, gods, spirits, kin—become part and parcel of a person’s makeup. We are not just isolated biological beings, but also composites of kinship. Sahlins points out that ‘the capacities of partibility and hierarchy (or the encompassment of others) are general conditions of humans in language’ (2011a: 13) - though not necessarily enacted in practice. His observations suggest a hypothesis worthy of further exploration: that the *conjunction* of divine and human kinship may be a particularly effective way of producing accretions of charisma. As he puts it, ‘because of his privileged connection to ancestral being, the Maori chief has more fellowship, more *mana*, than others. Power is, in this regard, ‘a certain unbalance of mutual being, which is also to say, of genealogical priority’ (Sahlins 2011b: 229).ⁱⁱⁱ So, how does Chávez produce *mana*? What are the mechanisms and the cosmological coordinates which allow Chávez to encompass and incorporate his followers and vice versa?

Popular Christianity and Afro-Indian cults infuse the everyday sociality of rural and urban Venezuelans. Crucially for the argument of this article, *gods are ancestors and ancestors can become gods* in Afro-Catholic syncretic Venezuela. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are at the basis of processes of divinisation. Human beings become deified when they die in the process of defending their community, their women and children, a cause and an idea. In Judeo-Christian tradition, and others (see Hinduism for example, Michelutti 2014), divine status is often obtained through sacrifice. Exemplary actions through sacrifice are also central premises of the revolution political forms: ‘Revolution is the political act whose price is potential death by excellence.’ (Holbraad 2013: 13).

Descent from common divinised revolutionary ancestors—divine kinship—is the central trope of Chávez’s discourse. In one of his last texts, Fernando Coronil (2011)

reflected on Chávez's overproduction of 'history' through words. Chávez talked for at least 40 hours per week. Why? What did he say? Coronil suggested that what was coming out of the famous 'magical' hat in Chávez's Venezuela was not modernity (car, roads, and so forth) as in the previous 'magical' performances of the Venezuelan state (Coronil 1997) but a 'magical history' which is a history that represents the poor and breaks with the past. In the following sections I will show that rather than creating a 'magical history' what Chávez actually did was to replicate a 'sacred/heroic lived genealogy' which was available in Venezuelan popular religion and sociality. This genealogy now lives on in Chávez's cult and through Chávez's kin: 'We are all Chávez'.

Chávez managed to be simultaneously 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' by tapping into available idioms and practices of divine kinship which allowed the collapse of past and present, the conjunction of human and divine genealogies, and finally the fusion between the leader (the state) and 'the people' *a la Che Guevara*. This powerful fusion of kinship, religious and political realms was achieved by Chávez's overproduction of words which became not part of revolution but in fact produced the revolution itself as an act of political cosmogony (see Coronil 2011). It has been emphasised how in the Latin American Caribbean context kinship relations (even relations to paternity – see for example Gudeman 1976) need to be actively produced and sustained rather than merely recognised 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 I encountered in North India or the tribes and clans in Montenegro) Chávez's words (and his cult) are central to the creation of a type of charismatic bio-moral substance which functionally fills this gap. Crucially this charismatic bio-moral substance also helps to fill another important lacuna which lies at the heart of *Chavismo* - namely the lack of the 'the proto-New Man'.

The Bolivarian Revolution is not the product of a violent revolutionary struggle but rather of democratic electoral politics. *Chavistas* have not gone through the necessary initiatory process of a “real” revolution as described by Guevara. The “original sin” of alienated labour of capitalisms, and all its moral corrupting implications’ have not been purified by violent acts of self-sacrifice and death (Hernández, 2008: 251). There is no ‘vanguard organisation’ as there is in Cuba or Nicaragua, for example (see Lancaster 1988). Chávez was the only recognised New Man. It is in this context that Chávez’s obsession with divine revolutionary genealogies, the fact of ‘his saying it and his saying so repeatedly’ (cf Coronil 2011), that should be analysed. In the following section I shall address Chávez’s self-sacrifice enactments through divine kinship not just as political rhetoric or ontology but *as lived processes* that operate within networks of family and kinship relationships with humanised gods and divinised humans.

2. Charisma as a *lived process*: Sons of Bolívar

Chávez’s essential divine inspiration is Simón Bolívar. He cultivated the notion that he was the true heir to Bolívar and fashioned himself after him. Similarly the nation was renamed after Bolívar as ‘The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’. Chávez called his socialist experiment a Bolivarian revolution. Most Venezuelan towns have a statue of Bolívar and possibly more significantly a number of Venezuelans pray to Bolívar as they would to a Catholic saint. Bolívar 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 centre 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’, Simón Bolívar, they include ‘el Negro

Felipe', a black man who is said to have fought with Simón Bolívar in the Independence Wars and 'el Indio Guaicaipuro', who is believed to have fought against the Conquerors at the time of the Conquest. Multiple *cortes* (courts of spirits) run parallel to the Queen's court: the *corte India* (natives from colonial time), the *corte libertadora* (heroes from the independence war), the *corte medica* (doctors), the *corte malandra* (Robin Hood-style criminals), the *corte cubana* (Cuban), the *corte Africana* (Africans) the *corte guerrera* (guerrilleros), the *corte Vikinga* (Vikings) and some others together with related spirit cults such as the Cuban Santería and the Congolese Palería - have become popular across all classes in contemporary Venezuela. This pantheon is highly flexible and malleable and allows a continuous incorporation of spirits. Simón Bolívar and other key revolutionary figures who are part of Chávez's sacred genealogies are part of the *Corte Libertadora* and it is said that Chávez's spirit has joined this *corte* (for the cult and the incorporation of Bolívar in popular religion see Salas, 1987; Placido 1996; Pino, 2003) .

During his life Chávez also blended the sanctified national hero Simón Bolívar with Biblical images of evangelical Protestant origins (Smilde 2003). Christ is portrayed as '*el primer socialista*' (the first socialist) in history. But it is not only Christianity, Espiritismo and Santería that are the mainstays of Chávez's socialist project, local *caudillos* (strongmen belonging to the *corte guerrera* or *africana*) who fought and died for the liberation of South America and the abolition of slavery are given priority in his discourse. For example, Chávez traced his bloodline to the Maisanta *caudillos* that fought against the Juan Vicente Gómez dictatorship in the early XX century. Chávez claimed not only to have 'revolution' in his blood but also uses his native land (Los Llanos) as further evidence of his resilience and integrity; Los Llanos is the land of tough and brave/heroic cowboys. Ultimately Chávez portrayed himself as a 'self-sacrificing son of Venezuela who sacrifices his own self-interest and wellbeing for the future of the country' (Zuquete 2008: 54). His mission in short is to

save the nation as a second Bolívar or Bolívar himself. In this way, like a juggler, the President resuscitated sacred genealogies left dormant and not understood (or recognised) by previous politicians (Salas 2005: 201).

Of course, various Venezuelan politicians and governments have used history and re-shaped religious figures and rituals in a nationalistic fashion in the past. Maria Lionza and her mestizaje (she is both the ambiguous child of a Conquistadores and a native Venezuelan and she is accompanied by the indigenous rebel Guaicapuro and the black revolutionary Negro Felipe) has been constructed as a symbol of Venezuelan nation par excellence (Taussing 1997; Barreto 1987). From the 1950s the government has promoted Catholicism and the cult of the Virgin Mary throughout the nation. As a consequence the ambiguous queen has been feminised and de-sexualised by nationalistic and myth-making discourses and has thus passed into folklore. Maria Lionza's 'violence' and 'primitive spirit' have been appeased and domesticated. In short her religious spirit and violence have been repressed and her story (as folklore) became part of the history of the Venezuelan nation (Barreto 1987).

What Chávez did – on the contrary – was to start a process of de-folklorisation of Venezuelan myth/history by revitalising popular religious cults, such as Santería and Espiritismo, by bringing back into politics the violence of sacrifice as the basis of a salvation political theology. Previous governments have focused on achieving a 'rational transformation of the (Venezuelan) physical environment' and in the process aim to 'mould and discipline the social body' (Coronil 1997: 174). I suggest that by re-naturalising the nation and the people through the de-folklorisation of myths and genealogies Chávez's socialism provided a critique of modernity. Chávez has brought back popular creativity. In such a world culture (and in particular religion, divine geologies and race) is moved from an apolitical space where the elite have confined it (Coronil 1997: 172; Guss 2000) to be at the

centre of a form of democratic millennialism.

At the heart of this process is the constructing of Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous charismatic communities. The new Venezuelan constitution (1999) recognises indigenous people as minorities. In addition, there is now an important movement which aims to also recognise Afro-Venezuelans as an official minority (Ramirez, 2009). President Chávez, whose ancestors were both African slaves and indigenous Venezuelans, embodies '*Las Tres Potencias*' namely the three races from which all Venezuelans are supposed to have descended. As in the kingdom of Maria Lionza where blood and cultures may meet but remain separate (Placido 1996) Chávez's sacred genealogies acknowledged a lived rather than ideological understanding of *mestizaje*. Chávez tapped into *lived* ideas and practices of descent which exist alongside ideas of symbolic of mixture. Peter Wade (2005: 239) showed how the ideology of mixture in Latin America has often been understood as a process of national homogenisation which hid 'racial exclusion behind a mask of inclusiveness'. He uses ethnographic examples from Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela to show how the symbolism of origins has the capacity to shape 'the formation of embodied persons' (ibid. 30). His ethnographic examples resonate with very familiar idioms of food, dance, music, and climate used by Chuao villagers to express their black, indigenous and white origins as well as skills and qualities associated with them.^{iv} In Afro-Caribbean theories of the person the body is seen as 'unfinished entity, in a permanent process of elaboration or becoming through everyday performance, an entity that not merely reflects, but also constitutes the complex of social relations in which it is located' (Wade 2005: 247). Ultimately people are thought to embody multiple racial identities and have a composite and protean nature. Chávez acknowledged these ideas and practices of personhood. As in the cult of Maria Lionza where the sacred figures and spirits should keep their racial identities and powers separated - the way in which ancestors, gods, spirits become part of Chávez's person make

up (the proto New Man) is often racialised. The following is an excerpt from Chávez's conversations with local people when visiting Chuao in April 2008, in which 'his blackness' is invoked and used to create a link of shared substance between him and the villagers^v:

Hugo Chávez: You must be related to me. You must have known my great grandmother Rosa Inés Chávez, her grandmother's name was Inés, Inés Chávez, and she was *negra* [black] like you.

Aquilina Chávez (Villager): Really?

Hugo Chávez: Yes, she was *negra* like you, of African roots and like my great grandmother ... I didn't know her, she was the daughter of an Indian and an African. A mix of Indian with African; that's where I come from, where we all come from.

Hugo Chávez: The surname Chávez comes from Africa. In Africa there are Chávezes spelt with an 's'. Chávez has African roots. I am African.

Chávez went on talking about the village of Chuao:

Hugo Chávez: Villages that were forgotten, villages of Afro-descendants. We are this colour, aren't we? The colour of our 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.

It is not only Chávez's rhetoric which constantly refers to divinised popular revolutionaries. His state-sponsored missions also contribute to the making of a sacred revolutionary theology.^{vi} For example, in 2011 the government launched the Santería Mission (Misión Santería) which was accompanied by speculations about the relation between Chávez and rituals associated with this popular cult. The exhumation of the corpse of Bolívar and his

fiancée Manuela Sáenz stepped up public debate on the africanisation of Venezuelan religious life (Pino Iturrieta, 2011). Workshops were organised across the country inviting Cuban members of the Yoruba religion. In Havana, the Yoruba Association (Asociación Yoruba) is one of the key cultural associations that sponsor religious activities under the aegis of the state, including local Cultural Houses (Casas de Cultura) and university-based centres for the study of Afro-Cuban religion (Palmié 2013).

The Venezuelan Ministry of Culture is forging similar links and has been developing academic research and teaching in the field of African and African Diaspora Studies (Cátedra Libre África) since 2006. These initiatives are not exclusive to Venezuela and Cuba but are also part of ALBA-TCP transnational initiatives (see Michelutti 2013b). For example, the Venezuelan Bolivarian Government hosted the third meeting of the Afro-descendants of the ALBA-TCP countries (Afrodescendientes de los Países del Alba), which took place in Maracay in July 2010. A delegation from the village of Chuao participated in the event and followed workshops on the following topics: ‘Intercultural Afro-Venezuelan education’; ‘Afro spirituality and cultures of resistance in the ALBA-TCP countries’; ‘The Afro-Venezuelan social movement and the Bolivarian process’; ‘African philosophy and epistemology’; ‘The political and cultural politics of the Bolivarian government among Afro-Venezuelan communities’; and ‘The participation of indigenous and afro-descendants in the construction of Bolivarian socialism’. In various Afro-Caribbean villages on the Aragua coast the Venezuelan government is sponsoring the transformation of a number of Catholic saint cults by linking them to Santería practices.

During my fieldwork I have often been told that cults such as Espiritismo and Santería have always been widely practiced; however people tended to hide it or not talk about it in public, as these forms of worship were considered ‘unCatholic’, which all changed under Chávez. A number of studies have documented that the ‘*corte africana*’ and

the '*corte Vikinga*' are gaining popularity among Maria Lionza's devotees. A number of the African spirits are reincarnations of Orixas coming from the Cuban Santería such as Santa Bárbara, Changó, Obatalá, or the *Siete Potencias* (Seven Powers) (Ferrándiz 2004). Others belong to the category of the *Cimarrones*— slaves who liberated themselves and escaped the plantations and the control of their owners. Chávez has revitalised Venezuelan Afro and Indian roots and by so doing he also provided a critique of the myth of 'Venezuelan racial democracy' and of the elite (oligarchy)'s official historiography. In what follows I explore how Chávez's sacred revolutionary genealogies are articulated in Chuao popular history, religious milieu and sociality and how they are reflected in local revolutionary politics.

3. Bolívar, Chávez, Liberated Slaves and 'Mini-Chávez(es)' in the village

Although Weber suggests that 'charisma can only be 'awakened' and 'tested'; it cannot be 'learned' or 'taught', he refers his reader to a chapter on 'the charismatic type of education' (ibid.) which, unfortunately, he never wrote' (qtd. DuPertuis, 1987: 1). In other words Weber argued not only that democratic regimes produce always 'quasi-charismatic' leaders who are 'recognised' (rather than chosen) and kept accountable by the gaze of the masses (the ocular force of 'the people' see Green, 2010) but he also suggested the possibility of learning to be charismatic. In the following section, building on this insight, I show how 'mini-Chávez(es)' replicated (and routinised) Chávez's charisma by performing his 'divine kinship' repertoire (composed by 'words' and government programmes) at the local level. The ethnography highlights what Yolanda Salas called 'the social and political dramatisation of popular imagination' (Salas 2000: 215-217) and the importance of public performances and spectatorship as essential features of charismatic authority and contemporary democracies (Green 2010).

Take the example of the former mayor of Chuao, Mattioni (the mini-Chávez of this

story). Mattioni – a 40-year-old engineer and former entrepreneur – was the mayor of Chuao 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 Practica* (practical leadership) and he often pointed out as ‘we (the municipality) are *en línea directa con el pueblo* (in direct communication with the common people) and we keep the people *en línea directa con la revolución* (in direct communication with the revolution).^{vii}

On 7 July 2005, the mayor arrived in Chuao to present the project for the creation of an endogenous unit for their village. The meeting was organised in the main square in front of the statue of Simón Bolívar. Several information desks were informally arranged with each kiosk was 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 teams (engineers, technicians, lawyers, etc.). The various community leaders were present and around 200 persons were assembled in the square. Pamphlets, T-shirts with the logo: *Núcleo de Desarrollo Endógeno Chuao* were distributed. Mayor Mattioni, dressed in a red track suit 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 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 potential to become an important tourist destination 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 *tambores*

(drums) and being 'native'. The crowd praised his efforts. "He's not bad. And he's 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. More importantly what Mattioni was showing is spontaneity. He showed that he was not afraid of improvising and took the risk of being humbled. Being genuine and possessing 'candour' is at the heart of the Weber understanding of charismatic authority (Green 2008). 'Candour' is judged by the popular gaze.

In Chuao, dancing is considered an essential political skill and part of what people consider natural charisma. The local politician, Pablo, who has been President of the Parish Council for many years, is said to be a 'natural leader', the best dancer they could remember in the village, and he has 40 sons and daughters from 10 different women, as well as countless lovers. Simón Bolívar, 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.

Simón Bolívar is vividly present in Chuao's memories and narratives, as he is said to have reached the village while fighting for Independence. He arrived desperate and tired, very weak and in poor spirits. "He was tired of fighting and 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). "Thanks to the slaves of Chuao – and not many people know this – Simón Bolívar became a hero and a saint." (Alcide, 45 years old).

Popular versions of Simón Bolívar are often *lived* through local myth and the spirits

of Afro-Indian cults. In the village spirits and ghosts are used as a tool to fast-forward the past into life (see Tausig 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 on the Hacienda for the previous 20 years. We were clearing the plantation when I heard her talking. “Are you talking to me?” I asked. “No, I am not talking to you. I’m talking to a spirit, this one always bothers me. I am telling her to go away.” “Who is she?” I asked. “She’s an Indian killed by the conquistadores. She is from Pueblo Quemado”. “What did she ask you?” “Ah, she just wants to talk, I guess she’s bored. She wants to know about *el proceso* (the revolutionary process); she’s happy that we practically have an Indio president. At last!”

Many informants said the forest in Chuao is populated by Indians, former slaves, and freed slaves. “They speak Spanish but sometimes I don’t really understand what they tell me because they speak “Indian” or *loango* (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 past forms of subjugation, slavery and the kingship idioms of colonial Venezuela in particular) 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 to be of Indian/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 the project in Chuao. It was at this precise moment that the people of Chuao 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 *directly* entered the lives of common people. 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 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 the people were 'in direct communication 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 criticised 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-Chávez(es)' is deeply transformed. Replicated by local leaders, Chávez's charismatic style has a paradoxical transformative effect and offers a space to criticise 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 *Chavista* political leaders. By then Mr Mattioni had not visited the village for three months. Rumours circulated that he was scared to visit because he was worried about the criticism he was facing. People were asking: "Where is the money?" and "Why has the work on the Hacienda not started yet?" "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 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 programme *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, the arrival of

Mr Mattioni, who was not welcomed with any special cheers or applause. The ‘mini-Chávez’ began by greeting the audience “Good morning compatriots. How are you?” to which some people in the audience answered “Very well, thanks.” with a wry smile.

Mattioni started by defending himself, using the Minister of Environment as a scapegoat, but was soon overwhelmed by questions (and criticisms) 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 the people created by the TV media, when staged on the ground, has a different effect. People openly criticise ‘mini-Chávez(es)’ and through them they judged the execution of Chávez’s government policies, making local politicians accountable. Six months later the Chuao residents staged an impressive media campaign on the radio and in local newspapers against the mayor accusing him of corruption and of being a thief. 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 more importantly emphasised 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.

4. ‘Sons of Chávez’: Who is leading: Chávez or Maduro?

The previous section shows how mini-Chávez(es) often referred to Chávez in their performances and how they replicated his sacred revolutionary genealogies. It was Chávez’s charismatic authority that legitimised them in the village. It was the magicity of ‘infra-

power connections' (cf. Hansen and Verakaaik 2009) that allowed the local leaders to have a voice in the district. Intermediate political figures delivered Chávez's message by adopting his rhetoric and political style and in so doing diffused the idea that the protagonists of today's Venezuela are the common people and that Chávez is their father and protector. However, becoming 'mini-Chávez(es)' did not bring them political authority; on the contrary the common man considers them as mere vessels of Chávez's actions and programmes. The ultimate fusion is between the maximum leader (the proto New Man) and the people. Undoubtedly the 'mini-Chávez' of this story closely resembles the political performances styled by Chávez's hand-picked successor: Nicolas Maduro. It seems to me that Chávez is now for Maduro what Bolívar was for Chávez. If Chávez was presenting himself as the son of Bolívar (Michelutti 2013b), Maduro now presents himself as 'the son of Chávez'. On his last public appearance on 8 December 2012 Chávez told the crowd, "We are all Chávez" and named his successor.^{viii} On that day Chávez staged what Weber describes as 'the designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor' (Weber, 1968: 54). Since then the two leaders have mostly appeared together in photo, banners, and election posters and in TV programmes, and the number of times Nicolas Maduro has referred to Chávez in speeches and writing is astonishingly high. There is even a website Madurodice.com which keeps count. Maduro has mentioned 'El Comandante' 7,041 times since Chávez died. 'Words' are indeed still making the revolution as Coronil (2011) suggested.

But Chávez is not only present in words, pictures, banners and other type of iconographic objects but also in *spirit*. The new President claimed that Chávez has appeared to him in the shape of a bird.^{ix} Months later, he announced on television that he had slept several nights in the mausoleum where Chávez's body is buried. A few weeks ago Maduro announced another apparition on a construction site in Caracas.^x The vitality of divine

relatedness and its cultivation are key elements of the process of charismatic succession we are witnessing. After Chávez's death the state officially erected the Saint Hugo Chávez chapel near his grave. The shrine, which also contains images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, is visited regularly by devotees who bring flowers, pray, light candles and ask Chávez's spirit for help. Chávez's cult is far from been controlled and developed by the state; on the contrary it is also developing spontaneously from the bottom up. His processes of divinisation started during his life.

In 2011 when I was on a follow-up field trip in Caracas people were shaving their heads in support for their leader who had been diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing surgery and chemotherapy in Cuba. Communal prayer sessions were organised across the country. The village of Chuao was not immune to this trend and prayers were organised by *la padra* (the local religious figure) on a daily basis.^{xi} Of course not all the villagers participated. Chávez has been a controversial and divisive figure in the village as well as in the rest of the country. The *Chavistas* referred to him as the second Bolívar and the anti *Chavistas* referred to him as "the devil". There is not enough space here to reflect on the figure and symbolism of the devil in Venezuelan religious culture - suffice to say that Chávez supporters and dissenters alike viewed their President as profoundly involved in matters of religiosity and assign him special religious powers. More importantly they consider him as '*Cristiano, santero and espiritista*' as they are. At the local level I encountered many families which shared different political views but nevertheless worshipped at the same altar. A picture of Chávez was often found on their altars together with María Lionza, El Negro Felipe and El Cacique Guacaipuro, the angel Gabriel, Santa Barbara, Christ and Bolívar. I am told that these pictures have now been substituted by statues which can be bought in specialist shops (*perfumerias*) in Venezuelan towns. People are now praying for Chávez's soul to rise peacefully to heaven as his spirit still cannot be

called on as a powerful and legitimate source of power. In the Maria Lionza religion spirits must wait at least ten years before being allowed to enter mediums; however there are spirits, like the '*malandros*' (thugs), who do not follow this etiquette and often appear much earlier. Ordinary people have an important role in the making of these popular cults and forms of worship – not only as followers but as actual initiators. In popular syncretic Afro-Catholic Venezuela men and women do not need 'formal' canonisation from the Church or the state to become divinities and be worshipped – 'the people' can decide who their saints, protectors and redeemers are as well as when their spirits are ready to be recalled to earth.

How will the devotion to Chávez and embodying Chávez inflect processes of political and moral formation? In a recent ethnographic exploration of *Chavista* activists in provincial Venezuela, Matt Wilde (2013) shows that the appeal of *Chavismo* lies in the fact that it also asks its adherents 'to adopt a new moral order by transforming themselves, their community and their democracy in a profound ways'. He describes how 'Bolivarianism' can be used as a 'technology of the self' in a manner that both resembles and draws from a religious doctrine. I suggest that with the emergence of the cult to Chávez and the entrance of his spirit into the 'private' worlds of Venezuelans 'Bolivarianism' does not only resemble a religious doctrine but is developing (and had partially already become) a doctrine in itself. From the political point of view this has important implications. By saying "I am Chávez" people have come to embody parts of the 'proto New Man' through 'divine kinship'. With his death Chávez has achieved a complete fusion between himself and the people. He achieved 'a mutuality of being' which does not require any more democratic mediation to be legitimised – divine mediation is enough. The *Chavistas* who supported Chávez during his life and have been part of 'the process' now feel special. They have been transformed into 'extraordinary people' with 'revolutionary' qualities. They feel like 'the chosen ones': the children of Chávez. They have become part of Chávez's sacred revolutionary genealogy.

They are the ones who have inherited (symbolically and genealogically) the revolution. In short they have become the vanguard party that was missing in Chávez's revolutionary project.

Divine kinship and the mystique that it creates became an important tool to maintain political unification despite the death of the charismatic leader. The transition from Chávez to Maduro, however, has not been smooth. If on the one hand Chávez's charisma requires only divine and kinship mediation to survive today, Maduro's 'quasi charisma' needs to be constantly tested by public performances and by periodic democratic elections. The new President is struggling to keep the vanguard party of the *Chavista* movement united. Spiralling inflation, shortages of basic goods such as sugar, flour, shampoo and toilet paper, rising levels of crime and insecurity and student anti-government protests have hit Maduro's popularity hard over the past year. Maduro's 'quasi-charisma' is unstable and struggles to survive against the twin enemies of opposition and indifference. Nevertheless, as Green's analysis of Weber's theory of 'leader democracy' shows, charisma is not at all the same as being well liked or popular. On the contrary achieving charisma is consistent with being subject to personal abuse, exposure, embarrassment and risk of failing (2008). It is the endurance of such public risks that helps to construct the claim to charismatic authority. In order to succeed, Maduro needs to cultivate his own charisma and simultaneously manage Chávez's posthumous divine leadership. This is not an easy task.

Even after his death Chavez still manages to participate in the political arena and is certainly not an 'outgoing leader'. He remains important as a legitimator to whom subsequent governments need to pay constant attention. The workings of a two-tiered form of collaborative charismatic authority is reflected in recent events. In September 2014 a party worker at the congress Socialist Party meeting begged for Chávez's help with the following re-adapted Lords' Prayer:

“Our Chavez who art in heaven, the earth, the sea and in us delegates, Hallowed be your name, may your legacy come to us every day. Lead us not into the temptation of capitalism, deliver us from the evil of the oligarchy, like the crime of contraband, because ours is the homeland, the peace and the life forever. Amen. Viva Chávez!”^{xii}

This was followed by President Maduro’s assertion that the *Chavistas* must begin a new stage in the revolution. Since then the President has been reshuffling ministers in his government and gave signals of fully supporting the hardcore *Chavista* groups. The question is: Who is leading? Chávez or Maduro? The answer is both. What we are witnessing is the development of a ‘charismatic leadership system’ which does not fit classical forms of charismatic transitions to power. The charismatic relational bond between the people and the leaders (Chávez and Maduro) need to be constantly re-enacted by ‘public’ and ‘private’ performances of ‘revolutionary’ divine kinship. However, as Weber pointed out ‘If proof and success elude the leader for long, if he appears deserted by his god or his magical or heroic powers, above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear...’ (1978: 242).

Concluding remarks

Kinship and religion do indeed facilitate daring conversions in terms of scale (Strathern 2004), by expanding the frame of reference from individual to group to nation and beyond ancestors and gods, or contracting it to render the connection intimate and immediate. The scale of the person itself can be amplified to a vast hybrid assemblage of networks and possibilities (Latour 1993; Strathern 1996). At one end of the spectrum ideas and practices of divine kinship can facilitate the

creation of charismatic leaders or ‘charismatic systems of leadership’ which allow, as in this case study, a deified dead leader to share a leadership role with his successor, at the other they create formidably powerful claims such as ‘We are Chávez’. In the process both personal and political transformations are potentially at stake.

In studies of personality cults there has been a general reluctance to engage with cultural understandings of power and their implications, particularly when these blur the political/kinship/religious distinction in the realm of political liberalism. In today’s lingo charisma is mostly used to describe a ‘general likability’ and ‘attraction’ rather than to reveal quasi-religious meaning (Zuquete 2008).^{xiii} In studies of ‘populism’, another Latin American and Caribbean ethnographic category, scholars have also tended to focus on the ‘manipulation’ of the marginalised masses by ‘demagogic’ leaders and on purely utilitarian and materialistic explanations of charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders are often viewed as products of economic and institutional structures, while their religious and affective kinship dimensions are left unexplored (see Panizza, 2005: 23). As a matter of fact ‘the implicit claims for a hierarchical ordering of reality in modernity, in which the political is seen as more real than the religious, continue to create disjunctures in the range of debate’ (Cannell 2010:85). Religious phenomena are often explained ‘on the basis that they have no foundation in reality, but are epiphenomena of other ‘real’ underlying sociological, political, economic causes’ (Cannell 2006: 3). In this article through the lens of ‘divine kinship’ I hope to have shown how Chávez’s use of religious symbols (and now his developing cult) represents a break with the past. Crucially I hope to have shown how cultural and religious forms are not only a site through which a political idea is acquiring socio-cultural roots (becomes vernacularised) but religion is one of the constituting elements of Chávez’s political

project itself. Through divine kinship, the bonding process between the leader and ‘the people’ (which Laclau also described with the concept of ‘investiture’ 2005: 59-60) is producing an horizontal type of relation which onlookers within the twenty-first century Latin American radical left have also referred to as ‘a magical relationship’ (cf. Ellner 2011: 435). By explicitly de-folklorising myths and heroic figures *Chavismo* has been producing a form of messianic socialism which has the potential of intimately chaining people’s routines as well as shaping collective and individual political subjectivities.

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Notes

ⁱI have developed my ideas about leadership and charisma in democratic and revolutionary settings over the course of several projects funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) (The Vernacularisation of Democracy. Ethnographic comparisons across India and Venezuela, 2004-2008) and by a European Research Council - Starting Investigator Grant (An anthropological investigation of Muscular Politics in South Asia, 2012-2016). I am currently part of the EU funded research programme ‘Making Selves, Making Revolutions: Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics (2014-2019) led by Martin Holbraad and conducting fieldwork on Chavez’s emerging cult in particular in the context of Santería - a syncretic Caribbean religion of West African origin influenced by Roman Catholic Christianity.

ⁱⁱBeing both a participant and an observer was the main method employed to collect a political ethnography of Chuao. A special thanks to the late Yolanda Salas for her critical insights, support and guidance during my first long stretch of fieldwork between 2005 and 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱIn a similar vein Cannell (2011) has called for a religious reading of genealogies in particular in the context of the study of Christianity. She argues that recent studies of “Western kinship” have reflected an unintended secularist bias, partly owing to the influence of Schneider (1968), who dismissed religion (as well as the dead) as fundamentally irrelevant to the understanding of American kinship. She outlines a set of assumptions in the anthropology of Christianity that made anthropologists see genealogy as “not religion,” “not about ancestors” but about (attenuated) kinship and “self,” and therefore as essentially secular.

^{iv}For example, villagers often refer to my second daughter - who was conceived in the village - as ‘*un pan de leche*’ (to describe her whiteness) and simultaneously ‘*negra por dentro*’ (a black woman inside) ‘*Look she dances like a negra*’, they say. Or ‘she was ‘*hecha en Chuao*’ (Made in Chuao) and she has a ‘*corazon de negra*’ (the heart of a black woman).

^vQuotations were recorded in ALÓ PRESIDENTE, programme N° 309, Hacienda Cacaotera de Chuao, Municipio Santiago Mariño, Estado Aragua Domingo, 27 April 2008. My translation.

^{vi}See for example the role and aims of the Christ Mission (Misión Cristo), Miracle Mission (Misión Milagro), Negra Hipólita Mission (Misión Negra Hipólita), and Child and Jesus Mission (Misión Niño Jesús) and their role in the making of a messianic discourse (Zuquete 2008).

^{vii}Part of this section have been taken verbatim from Michelutti (2013a).

^{viii}Hugo Chavez’s last public speech. 8 December 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjXTrOy5t8w>

^{ix}Nicolas Maduro describing Chavez’s appearance in the form of a bird.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFTApZVmOYI>

^xhttp://www.dailymotion.com/video/x16nnr3_chavez-is-everywhere-ex-venezuelan-president-s-image-seen-in-subway_news

^{xi}Chuao’s church is run by a group of women led by a woman who acts like a priest (*la padra*). She is in charge of the Catholic education of the children, reciting the Rosario and officiating funerals. A priest comes to administrate confessions, confirmations and baptisms from the nearby centre of Choroni a couple of times a year. In Chuao the cult of San Juan is very prominent and is organised by a Brotherhood which is mainly run by women ‘*la San Juaneras*’. Now women are also increasingly holding political power. The parish elections were held at the beginning of August 2005 when a woman won for the first time.

^{xii}<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/05/lords-prayer-to-hugo-chavez-angers-catholic-church-in-venezuela>

^{xiii}Following Weber, José Pedro Zúquete (2008) reiterated the importance of ‘bringing back the analysis of religion’ in the study of ‘Chávez’s missionary political style’ – an aspect which has been largely neglected in literature.