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# Theft as “Involuntary Gifting” among the Tacana of Northern Bolivia

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*It emerges that the strongest levelling mechanisms are those that are not based on intentional, designed rules but are directly built into everyday behaviour, including discursive action. (Widlok 2005:14)*

## INTRODUCTION

In early September of 2001, I took a break from my doctoral research in the Bolivian Amazon to return to the US for the funeral of a family member. When I returned to the small, approximately 50-person Tacana *comunidad* (forest community) of Santa Rosa, my primary research site, it was to an especially warm reception. My friends in Santa Rosa had heard about the “war” in my country on the radio and had feared that I would be unable to return after the September 11 attacks. They had bad news for me, however. My hut had been broken into while I was gone and almost all its contents stolen. A solar panel and the battery it charged was all that had been left behind. I took the news *con calma* (calmly), as I had learned during my initial months of fieldwork the importance and appropriateness of emotional restraint, and did not want to be seen as childish or crazy. In addition, I found it easy to be calm because I had begun to find my belonging more trouble than they were worth, for reasons that will become apparent below.

This was not the first time I had been the victim of theft, although this was by far the largest theft I had yet suffered. Nor was I the only victim of theft in Santa Rosa; indeed, I was told that theft was quite common. Doña Esmeralda told me that her coca plants had been robbed and ruined by one neighbor, a pen stolen by another. “Muy gallinas este gente,” she told me. (“Chickens, that’s what these people are.”) Doña Consuela reported plastic bowls and other small items stolen at one time or another. Don Pedro talked about a canoe that had been stolen but which had thankfully been recovered, abandoned, downstream. Everyone had past thefts, large

and small, to report. “La gente son muy gallina,” I was told all over Santa Rosa; that is, people are like chickens, pecking (and picking up) all over.<sup>1</sup> Stuff was bound to disappear; it was just how things worked.

Widespread theft could be partially attributed to physical characteristics that made theft easy to commit and thieves hard to catch. Typical of the sparsely populated *tierras bajas*, the lowlands subject to annual flooding, the small community of Santa Rosa was built as a long line of family compounds sprinkled along the river, with a walk of 3-10 minutes from one to the next. One consequence of isolating compounds in this way was the ease of theft of items left at or in the dwellings. Since typical house construction was of lightweight poles tied together with strips of fiber, to enter a locked house one simply needed to cut the fibers with a machete or knife and to then throw the freed poles on the ground. This is, perhaps, why such houses were rarely locked and some even lacked doors. Rather than spending scarce resources on the purchase of a padlock, most people simply tied a door shut or put something in front of it to block easy access. Further, the fact that the region’s population was highly mobile, traveling to hunt, fish, and visit relatives and changing residence with ease, made catching suspected thieves a challenge.

The most common and effective way to avoid theft of personal belongings was to leave a family member at home when others departed to hunt, fish, tend crops, or visit neighbors and relatives. Children or the elderly often stayed home to fulfill this function. Hiding objects of value and trying to prevent others from learning of the possession of such objects was another way to minimize theft. (I was often instructed to hide my things when outsiders visited Santa Rosa for precisely this reason.) Dogs, useful in hunting, were also depended upon to discourage *maleantes*, people with bad intentions towards people and property. However, the effectiveness of these preventive practices was limited and petty theft was common. Forest gardens, where surveillance of crops was difficult due to their isolation, were another site where theft was reportedly common.

To return to the incident described above: the blaming began the day after I arrived home to my emptied hut. Liliana wondered that that my solar panel and battery were not taken, suspicious since I had promised to give both items to the community of Santa Rosa as a contribution and thank you for hosting me. Don Luciano, after spending the afternoon drinking, confided that he believed the thief to be a particular neighbor with whom there had been mounting conflict for some time; the same neighbor was also widely believed to be responsible for the previous theft of a boat. When I responded that evidence was needed before blame could be assigned, his mother-in-law shot me an approving look. The next

evening, such evidence was offered. After dark, one of her grandchildren came to call me from my hut. “We’re going to find out who stole your things,” I was assured when I arrived at my candlelit destination. On a small piece of paper, one of her sons wrote the names of the adult members of the community in a rough circle, along with the words “otra persona” (other person). As he placed the paper over a candle, his wife assured me that we’d soon know the culprit, that the candle would burn the name of the guilty party, but that I shouldn’t reveal where I got the information as this man’s ability to divine in this way was a secret. Soon, a scorched hole had replaced the words “otra person.” “No one in Santa Rosa stole your things,” they said, with apparent relief. “It had been an outsider.” But who?

While I was more interested in maintaining strong relations in the community and collecting data on clandestine divining rituals than in identifying the thief, my neighbors gossiped on about who could have been responsible. “We were worried that you’d get mad, pack up, and leave when you found your things gone,” I was told. “We’re glad you’re staying.” Over the next few days, I was repeatedly told to go to Riberalta, the nearest city, to see a former neighbor and well-known *curandera* (traditional healer) currently living there. This *curandera* would definitely be able to tell me who the thief had been. Several weeks later, I was led to this *curandera*’s home where she used coca, tobacco, alcohol, and two small stones in a ritual that placed the blame firmly on the shoulders of Santa Rosa’s former schoolteacher. The teacher was not a well-liked man in Santa Rosa, perhaps in part due to the bossy and condescending manner he had used with adults as well as children. Back in Santa Rosa, when asked if and when I was going to confront the teacher who had been identified as the thief, I made excuses. “Yes,” my neighbors agreed, “he would have already gotten rid of the loot, so it’s hardly worth a trip to his new home just to stir up trouble.” I was glad that I did not see the man again, as I would have been expected to treat him as the *mala persona* (bad person) that he had been shown to be.

Some months later, I noticed a neighbor wearing a pair of pants identical to one of my stolen pairs. I made no attempt to identify their source. By that time, it was clear that life in Santa Rosa was much easier without my REI tent, medical kit, trade goods, and other miscellaneous items. I was much intrigued by what I was learning about life in Santa Rosa now that I had lost most of my belongings. In Santa Rosa, where sharing obligations between kin and friends were extensive, wealth could be onerous, something I had learned in the field in 2001. After my return in early 2002 to my all-but-empty hut, I learned another set of lessons.

The ubiquitous “no hay” (“there isn’t any” or “I don’t have any”) was now evidently believable coming from my lips, and it quickly became apparent that in Santa Rosa, this phrase was as much about solidarity as lack. Indeed, having none when others also had none highlighted similarity of circumstance.

While the importance of the extensive sharing system in Santa Rosa was clear from early on, the emptying of my hut illuminated how the meanings and functions of *theft* in Santa Rosa fit coherently into this system of social relations, cultural values, and material conditions, as well as how theft contributed to the reproduction of this system. Specifically, theft acted as a support for egalitarianism by functioning as a leveling mechanism that discouraged the accumulation of possessions, redistributed goods, and reinforced egalitarian practices and values. I do not claim an origin for the values, beliefs, and behaviors I describe in this article. Nor am I suggesting that theft served a “higher purpose” or “ultimate cause.” What I argue is much more modest: that theft, as it occurred and was understood in Santa Rosa in the early 2000s, had consequences particular to the system in which it occurred, and that these consequences tended towards the reproduction of this system.

In the sections that follow, I first sketch the history of the Tacana and the Tacana diaspora, of which the Tacana of Santa Rosa were part. Understanding this history is important to comprehend the variety of exchange relationships utilized by the Tacana with whom I lived. It is also important for understanding the particular ways in which egalitarian practices and values among the Tacana coexisted with dramatic differences in wealth and status, which is, in turn, fundamental to the understanding of theft I propose. After attending to their history, I explore the particular form of egalitarianism active in Santa Rosa and the multiple domains that supported it and contributed to its reproduction. Of note are the ways in which specific material conditions, social relations, and cultural values and beliefs reinforced an egalitarian reality and ethic locally. Next, I address the apparent contradiction that arose from the fact that stratification did exist in Santa Rosa, to a lesser extent within the community and to a greater extent in its relations with outsiders. Thus, I turn to the ways in which conflicting egalitarian and stratified relations were reconciled culturally, socially, and materially, and argue that theft, as it occurred in Santa Rosa, functioned as a form of “involuntary gifting” consistent with and reinforcing of egalitarianism in Santa Rosa.

It is worth noting that while my primary field site was Santa Rosa, I visited other forest communities of Tacana and non-Tacana. I also spent significant time in Riberalta, where a significant number of Tacana

and Tacana descendents live. Based on probes in the city and in my travels, there is evidence to suggest that the social practices and cultural perspectives described in this article were widespread, characteristic more generally of the Tacana of the Beni and Pando, at least of those in the forest communities, and perhaps of portions of the urban population of Riberalta as well. Indeed, my argument about theft is of much more significance if what I documented in Santa Rosa can be extended to other Tacana communities in the region. Pending further research, however, uncertainty remains as to the extent to which the practices and perspectives typical of Santa Rosa were shared by Tacana throughout the region. Thus, for the sake of clarity, I confine most of my description and analysis to the community of Santa Rosa and to interactions between its inhabitants and outsiders.

## THE TACANA DIASPORA

The Tacana are indigenous to the forests of northern lowland Bolivia. When the Spanish began entering the lands of Tacana-speaking people soon after the conquest of the Inca, searching for El Dorado (Wentzel 1989:36), it was not the first time Tacana speakers encountered expanding highland states (p. 32). The Inca had also had contact with Tacana speakers living in the lowlands east of the Andes and known to them as “chunchos” (p. 35), however, the Inca were unable to bring the region’s inhabitants, including Tacana speakers, under their control, a task challenging to the Spanish, as well, who attempted to form alliances by playing on desires for metal tools without sustained success (p. 37).

Missionaries began entering “chuncho” territory in the 1590s, but not until the early 1700s did Franciscans establish the missions of Apolobamba (also known as Caupolicán) of Santísima Trinidad del Yariapu (later Tumupasa), San José de Uchupiamonas, and Ixiamas (founded in 1713, 1716, and 1721, respectively) that became the symbolic and geographic core of the Tacana. It is likely that those concentrated into these mission settlements in the tropical lowland region of Iturralde, north of the city of La Paz included a variety of bands speaking linguistic varieties within the Tacanan-language family. These people, ravaged by diseases brought by Europeans and enduring the encroachment into their lands by those seeking gold and other forest products, were most likely collapsed into one people by mission practices directed toward remaking nomadic natives into settled and “civilized” Christian Indians, regardless of ethnic affiliation. In the missions, Spaniards attempted to “civilize” and Christianize indigenous

individuals they saw as “savages.” Part of the civilizing process included exerting control over space and time in the missions, causing settlements to be built in a grid-like pattern<sup>2</sup>, enforcing nuclear family households (with minor additions such as elderly parents), requiring attendance at mass, and imposing the cultivation of a community garden to support the church. It was almost certainly during this period that Tacana-speakers became “cristianacuana” (Spanish “Christian” + Tacana plural suffix), the Tacana word for “people” that I was given in the field.

In the late 1800s, a Tacana diaspora began as some Tacana began leaving their original mission settlements because of their recruitment as rubber tappers. The Amazon was the primary supplier of world rubber until 1912 (Weinstein 1983:9), and a series of technological advances (rubber vulcanization in 1839, the pneumatic bicycle tire in 1888, and finally the emergence of the automobile industry) created increasing demand for native rubber beginning in the 1800s. It is not clear whether there were a limited number of large migrations corresponding to the major peaks in rubber extraction from the region—the late 1800s and World War II—or if migration occurred continuously throughout the century during which rubber was the most important commodity of the region, but it is clear that a notable Tacana diaspora took place as Tacana from the Iturrealde moved north and east through the Beni and Pando to work on rubber concessions in a system of debt-peonage. It is also uncertain to what extent most of the Tacana migration was voluntary or forced and how much the collection of other forest products, such as quina bark, served as a motivator of migration. However, it is clear that the rubber booms that occurred during the two World Wars contributed to large population movements in the region (Hissink and Hahn 2000:23).

Living as a rubber tapper meant that one was under the control of the rubber baron and his employees. The most famous of these was Nicolas Suárez, the so-called “Rockefeller of the Rubber Trade,” whose Casa Suárez produced about 60% of Bolivia’s rubber and claimed about 75% of Bolivia’s Amazon Basin at its peak (Assies 1997:16). Rubber tappers were kept under control through a system of debt peonage called *habilito*. Tappers were advanced goods at inflated prices before the rubber-tapping season and the rubber they collected was never enough to pay off their debts, thus locking them into continual employment on the *barraca* (the forest concession granted to individuals for rubber extraction). Tacana rubber tappers on the *barracas* supplemented their livelihoods by selling animal skins, especially crocodile, and by hunting, gathering forest foods, raising animals, and growing crops for domestic consumption, but stories

of the rubber tapping times invariably dwell on the restrictions to liberty due to the accumulated debt.

The economic bust of 1913, caused by new plantation production of rubber elsewhere in the world until it was relieved by World War II, and the collapse of the rubber market in the late 1980s, when Brazilian price supports that had prevented a post-WWII collapse were dismantled (Assies 1997:13-15), had their effects, and former rubber tappers had to seek out new livelihoods as the system of rubber concessions collapsed. Brazil nut gathering replaced rubber tapping, but it was much less lucrative and the hold that rubber barons had over the region began to loosen. After the collapse of the rubber market, Brazil nut gathering became the most important extractive activity in the region. *Barracas* were organized exclusively for the extraction of Brazil nuts, of which Bolivia has long been a leading exporter. However, Brazil nut gathering is seasonal, and takes place during the rainy months of November through March, leaving the rest of the year for other activities. Thus, amidst weakening control of the region by the *barraqueros* (rubber barons), many of whom went bankrupt, members of the Tacana diaspora were able to secure their *patrón*'s permission to settle and farm. As small, independent communities formed and were recognized politically, former rubber tappers transitioned from governance by the *barraqueros* and the overseers they employed to governance by the Bolivian state. In these communities, former Tacana rubber tappers and their children worked out a form of communal governance and began to organize as *indígenas*, participating in the indigenous rights movement that was rapidly gaining momentum throughout Bolivia at the time (Bathurst 2005).

The collapse of the rubber market occurred precisely when indigenous organizing in lowland Bolivia was reaching a critical mass. Organizing throughout the 1980s resulted in a number of concrete achievements in the 1990s, including Bolivia's ratification of the International Labor Organization's Convention #169, which granted indigenous peoples rights to culture, language, and land; the amendment of the Bolivian constitution to officially designate Bolivia a multicultural, pluriethnic state; the election of Bolivia's first indigenous Vice President; the creation of a Viceministry that focused on indigenous affairs; and the passage of the INRA law which provided for the creation of collectively owned indigenous reserves. Thus, at the time of my field research, Tacana who had been rubber tappers and their descendants were part of the entry of indigenous people as special kinds of citizens into the Bolivian state (Postero 2006), granted special status due to their official recognition as indigenous people including

distinct indigenous rights to culture, language, and land. In 2001 collective title was granted to the Tacana and the other indigenous inhabitants living in Multiethnico 2, the indigenous reserve that included the Tacana community in which I lived. In addition, other legal reforms increased local governance and recognized a certain degree of internal, indigenous sovereignty, linked to the national, hierarchical network of indigenous organization.

## PRODUCTION AND EXCHANGE IN SANTA ROSA

My research in 1999, 2001, and 2002 was with this diaspora of Tacana living in the Beni and Pando. These Tacana were distinct from those based in and near the original mission settlements in the Iturrealde, with a separate Tacana *Capitanía* (a Bolivian name for a regional indigenous organization specific to a particular ethnic group). Santa Rosa, my primary research site, was a bilingual Tacana community of approximately 50 inhabitants located up the Beni river from Riberalta. It was built in the *tierras bajas*, the lowlands subject to annual flooding. Travel to or from Riberalta took anywhere from six hours to two days, depending on the time of year and the transportation available, but far from being an isolated, self-sufficient village, the inhabitants of Santa Rosa depended upon Riberalta as a political and trade center, traveling back and forth regularly. Typical of forest-dwelling Tacana in region, all in Santa Rosa had relatives of some sort living in Riberalta and in other Bolivian cities and communities, but those living in Santa Rosa seemed to prefer rural life. Indeed, the relative ease of life in the forest communities was often compared to city life, which was said to be full of suffering. In the city, I was told, “*Todo es por dinero.*” (Everything is through cash). There, “*sin dinero uno no es nada*” (without money, one is nothing).

The inhabitants of Santa Rosa were typical of the region’s rural Tacana communities in their practices of swidden horticulture, the raising pigs and poultry, hunting, fishing, and their collection of forest products. Their economy was mixed, combining barter, credit, cash, and gifts. The sale of plantains to river merchants the most common generator of cash. Some also collected Brazil nuts on the old *barracas* seasonally. In their 1-2 hectare forest gardens, called *chacos*, rice and maize were the dominant crops and the staples in their diets, although they grew *yucca* (sweet manioc), sugar cane, beans, watermelon, cacao, pineapple, onions, peppers, *trigo*, tobacco, and coffee, as well. Work was often done cooperatively, on an even-

exchange basis of one day of labor for one day of labor. This exchange applied equally between relations and between friends. Labor could also be hired at the standard regional rate, but this practice was not a common one. Harvesting was sometimes done *a medias*, with the owner and a non-owner harvester each taking half. As Wentzel pointed out, this practice functioned to redistribute forest products within the community (1989:163). In Santa Rosa, *chacos* (forest gardens) were located on communal land. Men were usually in charge of the *chacos* while their wives owned and controlled the animals—typically pigs, ducks, and chickens.

Hunting and gathering activities were also very important in Santa Rosa. Bullets were one of the most essential regular purchases by those living in Santa Rosa, and shots were taken with care due to their expense and to reoccurring shortages of bullets caused by the lack of a community store and the fact that traveling merchants would often run out before reaching Santa Rosa. Since more game animals were out at night, night hunting using flashlights was preferred, and the limiting factor in night hunting was the availability of batteries due to their expense and short life. Fishing was less expensive but more time intensive for the amount of meat procured; they fished using hooks and lines as well as nets. Collecting fruits, nuts, medicines, and building materials made life pleasant and possible in the absence of much cash, and the ability to find forest products of all types was a matter of knowledge, skill, luck, and strong social networks. Sharing such knowledge too widely or with the wrong people could result in someone else beating one to the source, and this knowledge was sometimes closely guarded.

Exchange in Santa Rosa involved barter, credit, cash, and gifts. Those living in Santa Rosa could secure goods from several sources: merchant boats, markets or stores in the Riberalta, and from their neighbors. The most common purchases were bullets, oil, sugar, coca, clothes, flour, candy, and rice, and the primary form of trade in Santa Rosa was barter. In contrast to the type of barter where local and even individual use-values are the primary price determinants, the products traded in Santa Rosa were usually commodities with prices determined in the context of regional markets. Cash was scarce in the forest, and in their trade, commodities of a given market value (most commonly plantains and Brazil nuts) were usually offered in the place of cash. Seasonal fruits, dried meat, and live chickens are also bartered or sold for goods from the city. Pigs could be sold as well, but this was rare.

Aside from gifts, which will be addressed separately below, the most common source of goods in Santa Rosa were the merchant boats, based

in Riberalta, that traveled up and down the Beni River. Typically, one such boat would stop at Santa Rosa each week, although this varied, and weeks could pass without a visit. Usually, these boats would stop as they traveled up river and the merchant would advance goods against a delivery of forest products to be collected on their return down river. Most of these boats were operated by Aymara- or Quechua-speaking *kollas*, indigenous highlanders who had migrated to Riberalta. Trade relationships with these merchants were not purely economic; they were social relationships as well. Merchants were expected to at least partially adjust to the behavior norms of forest dwellers. The better the sense of friendship and mutual obligation that developed between merchants and community folk, the more reliable each was as trading partner. Merchants were more likely to arrive on schedule; Santa Rosans were more likely to reserve products for sale and to have them already stacked at port for the merchants' arrival.

Trade occurred outside the community as well as inside it. In addition to trade with traveling merchants, forest products could be transported to the city of Riberalta to trade. There, merchants met incoming boats at the port to purchase forest goods. Sellers would then head to city markets to spend their cash with a much wider selection of goods than that which was offered upstream. They would stay with relatives in Riberalta or at the regional indigenous organization, CIRABO, until they could catch a ride on a boat heading up river. Sporadically, someone in Santa Rosa would decide to try his or her own hand at being a *mercante* (merchant), returning from Santa Rosa with a bag of used clothing or other city goods to resell in the community.

Trade between neighbors within Santa Rosa was more commonly a social obligation than an entrepreneurial activity, however. It tended to be imposed by friends and kin when they ran out of items that they could not simply run to a store to purchase, bags of powdered milk, for example. If a consumable item was desired, neighbors would ask each other who might have a surplus of this good. "No tiene leche?" (Do you have milk?), or coca, or coffee, or cooking oil, or whatever was in lack. When someone was identified as having enough of the item to spare, it was expected that the item would be sold to the seeker at the standard price for the item from a river merchant. Payment was typically with branches of plantains, although cash was also used, though rarely. There were strong expectations that if one had a surplus, one was obligated to sell the item. If someone refused, there was much gossip about this person being a *mala persona* (bad person). The location of someone who owned a desired item, the negotiation for the sale of the item, and the transfer of ownership that might then occur were much more than a series of steps in a commercial

transaction. They were also a confirmation of a relationship, created and strengthened through reciprocity, a fact which becomes even more obvious as the extensive sharing obligations in Santa Rosa are explored in more detail below.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING

The Tacana of Santa Rosa were subject to extensive sharing obligations. They were obligated to share with friends, with relatives, and with those in need—in other words, with almost anyone they encountered in their small forest community. Looking horizontally, the strongest sharing obligations existed between kin, then friends, and finally extended to those in need, known or not. Vertically, the poor enforced sharing by the wealthy, both within the community (where wealth differences tended to be modest and were often temporary) and on outsiders that interacted with them (whether politicians, merchants, or anthropologists).

Inhabitants of Santa Rosa were expected to share anything that was possessed in abundance with those closest to them, and since all who lived in the small community could be counted as either relatives or friends, this meant, in practice, that this expectation extended to all of the other inhabitants. After a successful hunt, children would be sent to neighbors' homes to deliver hunks of raw meat or steaming plates of the day's kill served with rice and plantain, or to call friends and kin over to dine together. If one had two pencils, the likelihood was high that a friend or relative would ask, “¿Me regala uno?” (Would you give me one?) If one possessed a canoe and a friend did not, the expected answer to a request for its loan was either a “yes” or an explanation that included preexisting claims on its use. These sorts of requests, quite similar to the “demand sharing” widely practiced by Australia Aboriginals (Peterson 1993), were frequent, everyday occurrences and were regarded quite casually. It was common for friends from nearby communities to visit and make similar requests. In addition, there were general expectations that friends and relatives should share on a regular basis without having to be prompted. Commercial exchange and barter with friends and relatives did occur, as noted above, but giving between friends and relatives reflected and strengthened social ties much more than selling, which was neutral, or even damaging, to them. Thus, the majority of day-to-day exchanges within Santa Rosa were gift exchanges, general reciprocity with no careful tally kept of who had given what to whom. People did take note, however, when exchanges seemed to them to be overly one-sided.

Things that were easier to get, foods such as plantains and forest fruits, for example, were less subject to enforced sharing than things that were harder to get, meat, for example. This is consistent with a high value those in Santa Rosa placed on autonomy, self-sufficiency, and hard work. *Flojo* (lazy) was considered a harsh critique. The positive generalized reciprocity practiced by these Tacana, while often characterized by one-way flows, was not supposed to support laziness nor be *aprovechado* (taken advantage of) for selfish ends. It was, however, supposed to generalize a state of well-being and of being well off. When flows were perceived to be one-way for too long, relationships weakened. For example, one elderly woman complained to me quite bitterly about a neighbor who would come regularly to request cups of her *chicha* (corn beer) but who would never bring meat, fish, or coca by for her. Occasionally the neighbor would bring her something after fishing or hunting, but she regarded these offerings as insults as they were always “puro hueso” (pure bone, with little to no meat attached). By the end of my stay in Santa Rosa, she had left the community to live elsewhere, labeling those she left behind in Santa Rosa as “bad people.”

In Santa Rosa sharing obligations were most developed where social ties were strongest (with kin and close friends), but even strangers, just passing through, warranted a minimal level of hospitality. Travelers stopping to prepare meals or rest for the night were welcome to shelter for their bedrolls and mosquito nets, cooking fires, and water. Plates, buckets, and cooking pans were also commonly loaned in such cases. Further, there was a wide-spread belief that no one should go hungry and if travelers lacked food, rice and sweet manioc or plantain were almost always offered, often after hushed speculation on the part of the hosts to determine whether or not the visitors had their own food or not, and thus whether sharing was required. With having, with wealth, in this case with the possession of staple foods, came a generalized obligation to share with fellow humans. Cases in which this obligation wasn't met would be commented upon in outraged tones: “Would you believe that when my uncle was traveling upriver last month, he stayed overnight in such and such community and the people there didn't even offer him rice? He had lost his overboard and he went to bed hungry!” The expectations of hospitality were clear<sup>3</sup>.

The sharing practices and expectations described in this section were important in contributing to a relatively egalitarian reality in Santa Rosa by redistributing surpluses within the community. However, it is important to note that these Tacana were inserted into a variety of hierarchies extra-locally, despite the generally egalitarian social relations on the local level. There were also factors locally that tended towards increased inequality.

Later, I return to this tension between egalitarianism and stratification, for both were important forces structuring life in Santa Rosa. First, however, I examine the social organization, cultural beliefs, and material conditions that supported the dominance of egalitarianism locally.

## MATERIAL SUPPORTS FOR EGALITARIANISM

In his important article on “assertively egalitarian” societies, Woodburn (1982) introduced to the anthropological literature the idea that egalitarian societies were egalitarian precisely because egalitarianism was imposed in social relations; it was not “natural.” Woodburn noted three material characteristics of special importance in supporting egalitarianism in such assertively egalitarian societies: a high degree of mobility, direct access to a means of subsistence, and direct access to a primary means of coercion<sup>4</sup>. Earlier, Sacks (1979) had linked egalitarianism to systems where people owned what they produced. Both authors point attention to characteristics of egalitarian systems that were also important in organizing Tacana life in Santa Rosa and which supported the egalitarianism found there.

### *Mobility*

The Tacana of the region of my research were highly mobile. Swidden horticultural practices ensured that entire communities generally moved every seven to fifteen years. In addition, individuals often traveled for seasonal labor collecting Brazil nuts or to visit relatives living in other communities. Marriage and better economic opportunity were two primary reasons for more permanently leaving a community. The most common reason for leaving, however, was due to conflict; avoidance (through leaving) was a primary method of conflict resolution. Indeed, the two cases where Santa Rosa residents abandoned their compounds during the course of my research were both associated with conflicts between community members. *Escapando* (escaping) was the emic term for this kind of mobility, and it was a common way to end marriages, default on loans, take a partner against the wishes of one’s family, and appropriate money or property belonging to others. The act of *escapando* was initiated by the one leaving. Some individuals would leave voluntarily because they did not like the way the rest of the community was pressuring them to act; others would flee from accusations of witchcraft, a charge linked to nonconformity with communal behavioral expectations. Community members could also be forcibly expelled by the community.

Ease in dealing with conflict and in escaping the imposition of unwanted authority through avoidance are powerful as leveling mechanisms, as Woodburn noted in the article mentioned above, because it undermines the ability of an elite few to impose their will upon others (1982:436). The particular mixed economy of Santa Rosa and other Tacana communities in the region facilitated this movement. Indeed, the negative consequence of personal property loss suffered by Tacana who utilized this escape valve was minimal, as the products of labor left behind by Tacana who changed residence were few. These could be readily and quickly replaced with minimal additional labor after arriving in the new locale, with resources easily acquired from the forest. Further, among these Tacana, mobility was not only commonly practiced but was also highly valued. It was seen as important to individual autonomy and independence, as entertainment, and as a straightforward necessity for survival.

### *Coersion*

Besides being highly mobile, the Tacana of the region all had access to a primary means of coercion. Since all males owned hunting weapons that could injure or kill people as well as animals, no one had a monopoly on violence. The importance of guns as a means of coercion could be attributed to the uneven penetration of the Bolivian state into the forest regions. In the specific case of these Tacana, the importance of and universal access to guns encouraged a general habit of cool-headed handling of potentially volatile situations because it was coupled with strong norms of conflict avoidance. Indeed, indirect means of handling conflict were preferred, and dealing with conflict directly required consensual and collective action by one's group (e.g. family, community, indigenous organization) to be considered appropriate behavior. In spite of harmony-enforcing norms, there were cases when someone was pushed too far with violent results. For example, it was reported that a man who had been found drowned, wrapped up in fishing line in a shallow piece of flooded land, had been murdered as a result of interpersonal conflict. Another example, this time of a close call, was the premature ending of a party after we heard gunshots fired by an angry father responding to unwelcome visits between his daughter and a boy from a nearby community. He claimed that he fired into the air, but since the shots had not been seen, only heard, this was impossible to confirm. After an unsuccessful search for blood in the forest pathways near his hut, many of us passed a nervous, worried night. Fortunately, the boy returned home the next day, and the conflict was resolved in a meeting between the two families where eventually permission was secured for the boy to visit

the girl and her family openly, ending the clandestine encounters.

In cases of murder, the Bolivian state was acknowledged to intervene. However, proving fault was difficult and the distance to the political center minimized the effectiveness of such interference except in the most clear-cut cases. Guns were possessed by all adult males in the community and were easily accessed by woman as well. This fact, combined with the weakness of the Bolivian state’s direct penetration into the lives of the inhabitants of Santa Rosa, ensured that no one person or group had a monopoly on the use of force. Nor was force a means commonly utilized to impose one’s will upon others. This stands in contrast to the rubber years, when *patrones* (rubber barons) and their overseers could use violence with impunity against their debt-bound *peones* (peons), while indigenous violence against these ruling elites was met with severe punishment, according to oral accounts collected in the field. In Santa Rosa, stories from the rubber years were used to affirm the appropriateness of the current, more autonomous order.

### *Resources*

Distributed access to guns as a means of coercion diminished the ability for one person to impose his or her will on others; easy mobility made it easy to flee from situations where someone was trying to do so. Both of these contributed to more equal relations. Perhaps the most important characteristic of Tacana life that facilitated egalitarianism as relative reality and important value, however, was their equal access to food and other subsistence resources and the related fact that those who produced these goods (through their labor) also owned them.

*El monte* (the wilds) within designated indigenous territories was not owned by individuals, but was held in common and owned collectively by the indigenous groups that occupied them. This can be seen as a continuation of indigenous ideas of property ownership that predate the creation of the reserves. *El monte* was there for the use of all<sup>5</sup>. Portions of the forest located in indigenous territories that were improved (forest gardens, the community proper, and personal compounds) were withheld from common use until they were abandoned. Labor, in other words, created usufruct rights in land as well as ownership of the goods produced by this labor. In practice, this translated to a maximum temporary “ownership” of several hectares of land per adult.

A large portion of the livelihoods of the Tacana came from *el monte*, and the inability of a few to withhold more forest resources than they and their families could directly collect, and more land than they and

their families could directly cultivate, contributed to a more equitable distribution of material goods generally. It was not only access to actual resources that was important, however; ready access to the knowledge and skills to procure them was critical as well. In Santa Rosa, every able-bodied adult was capable of acquiring the skills to support him or herself. While households with both male and female members, and an accompanying division of labor by gender were preferred, gender roles were flexible, and crossover behaviors carried little or no social stigma. The fact that men and women could, if desired, acquire the skills of the other, coupled with the limited degree of specialization more generally, had a powerful equalizing effect, so long as adequate quantities of land were available for their use.

### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR EGALITARIANISM: SOCIAL AND SUPERNATURAL

In Santa Rosa, mobility and ready access to resources and coercive tools were important in reinforcing an egalitarian ethic, but other aspects of life in Santa Rosa played a role in this process as well. Indeed, behaviors and beliefs such as those related to the supernatural realm and local leadership styles were also coherent with and reinforcing of the particular form of egalitarianism present in Santa Rosa, with sanctions against the achievement of status and wealth.

#### *Leadership and Decision-Making*

The forms of leadership and decision-making in Santa Rosa were quite egalitarian and undercut the achievement of significant status differences. Leaders in Santa Rosa were “first among equals,” and the position of community *presidente* (president) lacked any coercive power. In addition, it was considered inappropriate to want to be a leader, to desire to stand out in this way. Rather, the proper attitude of leaders was one of humility, of a servant, and this attitude was ritually performed by those selected, often in lengthy monologues where they explicitly stated precisely this belief. Consensus was the general form of communal decision-making, whether for the selection of leaders or the resolution of other issues. While voting was used occasionally to resolve issues where consensus seemed impossible, consensus was the ideal, and it was accepted that important issues might require multiple days of consultation to achieve it. The president was seen as the delegated authority to represent this consensus, the will of the group, to outsiders, and not as a decision-maker.

When consensus was not achieved, the typical expression of dissent was consistent with egalitarianism. Indeed, dissent was usually expressed by non-participation; in extreme cases, dissenters would retire permanently from the community in the ultimate form of non-participation. Non-participation as dissent was consistent with the high value placed upon personal autonomy in Santa Rosa. The underlying idea that everyone had and should have had power over his or her own life was aggressively present in all decision-making. However, in communal meetings and discussions about community affairs in Santa Rosa, it was clear that both independence and interdependence were highly prized. A certain amount of non-participation was allowed and expected as within the bounds of autonomous action, and quite likely served as a “safety valve” in this highly consensual system, but those who would not participate on a continual basis were eventually ostracized and could eventually be forcibly ejected from the community. Self-determination was a right, but cooperation was considered necessary for comfortable survival. “Sólo se frega” (alone, one is ruined), I was often told. Thus, these Tacana aggressively safe-guarded autonomy while simultaneously enforcing communal cooperation through social controls such as gossip and shaming.

Fundamental to the norms and practices organizing leadership and decision-making in Santa Rosa was the performance of commonality and community, of similarity in circumstance and in essence. Leaders only remained leaders by embracing their position of “first among equals,” and this included remaining at a similar level of status and wealth. Unlike Melanesian “big men” who regularly gave away their material wealth to gain status and prestige in elaborate ceremonies, leaders among the Tacana were considered better leaders if they projected humility. Those who could accomplish much and present these accomplishments in “we” terms, as opposed to “I” terms, were spoken of with much respect, but not with deference, an important distinction.

### *Supernatural Beliefs*

By now, the importance of social norms against greed in Santa Rosa, whether for personal power or possessions, should be clear. These norms were further reinforced by supernatural beliefs. Specifically, the belief in forest *dueños* (owners) who would punish those who over-fished, over-hunted, or who collected in wasteful ways (cutting down tall trees to access their fruits, for example, when this was easier than climbing them) served this function. Illnesses and other unlucky occurrences were sometimes attributed to the punishment of greedy use of forest resources by “*el dueño*”

(the owner). Doña Elena, for example, told me about a illness that her oldest son had suffered a number of years previously. “He had loved fishing,” she told me, “and had wanted to do nothing else. Just fish and fish.” He became seriously ill, and she was worried enough about him to take him to a *curandera*. The healer told Doña Elena that the *dueño* of the fishes was angry with her son for fishing too much and too often. In addition to the healing ritual and the herbal medicines he must take, he had to stop fishing so much. After he recovered, she made him understand this, and he does not fish so much anymore, although he continues to do so in moderation. This example makes clear the role of supernatural beliefs in limiting the extraction of forest resources; indirectly these beliefs inhibit accumulation of material resources, whether collected directly from the forest or obtained by selling forest goods.

Egalitarianism was supported by the material conditions of Santa Rosa life, as well as by social practices and cultural values and beliefs. Indeed, an egalitarian ethic was even linked to domains such as leadership and decision-making as well as supernatural beliefs. However, not everything in Santa Rosa life reinforced egalitarianism. In the next section, I consider how the existence of inequality fits into the assertively egalitarian system described above

## RECONCILING EGALITARIANISM AND STRATIFICATION

Sharing norms, material conditions, and additional aspects of Santa Rosa life described in the previous section tended to reinforce an egalitarian ethic and reality in the region. Some differences in wealth and individual power did exist, however, in spite of the conditions that limited them. Some activities in Santa Rosa encouraged an unequal distribution of wealth and generated differentiation and hierarchy. One such activity was the raising of pigs and poultry. Wealthier families were more likely to have enough bullets to increase hunt success, to have canned meat as an alternate option when hunting or fishing failed, and to have excess male animals for consumption, leaving the females to be bred. Poorer families in Santa Rosa often ended up having to eat the few animals they had, thus inhibiting the growth of this form of edible wealth. Thus, animal holdings of the richer multiplied, while animal holdings of the poorer did not. In the case of animal wealth, *fiestas* were a key moment of redistribution through sharing, and pigs were of special importance to these events<sup>6</sup>. In Santa Rosa, successful accumulation of wealth created an obligation to share it.

Expectations regarding the type, amount, and frequency of redistribution increased with decreased social distance and with higher positions in the social hierarchy. In other words, intimacy, wealth, and status all increased redistributive obligations.

Thus, in Santa Rosa, those who were able to accumulate some wealth were more likely to be requested to share it. It was notable how requests of this type directed to me dropped off dramatically after the theft described above, but more interesting, perhaps, is how I then began to be included regularly in speculations about who had an abundance of food, funds, or particular scarce items. Those who had an abundance, however, did not always want their wealth redistributed through “demand sharing.” In fact, control over people’s perceptions of one’s wealth was one important component in controlling the quantity of redistribution through sharing demands. Thus, a side effect of (and testament to) the effectiveness of sharing as a leveling mechanism was the widespread practice of concealing wealth. People would often claim not to have something requested by a neighbor, only to produce the item once the neighbor was no longer present. I watched this occur with items such as sugar, coca, coffee, a pocketknife, and canned meat. Indeed, conspicuous consumption was a rare phenomenon in Santa Rosa. Aside from the fiestas described above, the most obvious case of conspicuous consumption I observed was when several members of one family returned from Riberalta wearing new clothes, when everyone in Santa Rosa purchased their clothing used. Such behaviors were the exception, however, not the rule. If one flaunted one’s wealth in Santa Rosa, by wearing new clothes for example, one tended to find wealth harder to hang on to; the price paid (both literally and figuratively) for such actions could be high. Kin and friends tended to take any evidence of prosperity, whether based on gossip or witnessed first hand, as an invitation for requests for loans, sponsorship, or the lending of possessions, and these requests were hard to turn down without damage to the relationship. Further, advertising ownership was thought to increase the likelihood of theft, a point I return to below. Thus, in Santa Rosa, importance was attached to minimizing perceptions that one was in a period of abundance<sup>7</sup>.

Wealth concealing, despite its prevalence, was not highly effective; and the people of Santa Rosa could be quite aggressive in enforcing the obligation of the wealthier to give, even when the wealthy were not community members. One example of this was during the planning of the community’s anniversary celebration in 2002. In a community-wide council meeting, it was suggested that a letter be posted at the Riberalta port captain’s office to request contributions from the traveling merchants

that regularly visited the community. The general consensus after some discussion was that if the merchants were to refuse to contribute, they should be detained in the community until they did so. While no merchants were detained, since all of them contributed willingly, it was common in the Beni and Pando region for a group to actively and collectively enforce group-determined justice of this type. Santa Rosa was not an exception case. The coercive power of the social group could be felt strongly in situations like this. If one turned down what was seen as a legitimate request without a believable and acceptable justification, social relations would degenerate and one could end up ostracized, *castigado* (publicly shamed), or after a slow degeneration of relations over time, the victim of homicide, if reports were to be believed.

The point, here, is that wealthy outsiders as well as inhabitants within Santa Rosa were expected to share their wealth with those less fortunate. It is precisely this expectation, that wealth of both *insiders* and *outsiders* is supposed to be shared, that provides the key to understanding how theft fits into this assertively egalitarian system.

### *Voluntary and Involuntary Gifting*

Sharing could create, reflect, and reinforce horizontal interpersonal bonds—intimacy. Such sharing could also be an enforced mechanism for taking material possessions (money and things) out of the hands of those who had more in order to put them into the hands of those who had less. Where differences in wealth were small and temporary, as was generally the case within Santa Rosa itself, gift flows were multidirectional and reinforced egalitarian values. However, these Tacana had long interacted systematically with non-Tacana whose wealth was more enduring and formed gift relationships that took the form of sponsorship. In the rubber years, the *patrones* of the rubber concessions were integrated into gift relationships with Tacana rubber tappers through the ritual kinship of the *compadrazgo* system, becoming, through godparenthood, *compadres* and *comadres* involved in patron-client relationships with the rubber tappers and their families living in the concession. By the early 2000's, merchants, politicians, NGO workers, and anthropologists were more likely to be recruited as godparents (*madrinas, padrinos*), not only of children passing through rites of baptism, confirmation, and marriage, but also of items. In this form of sponsorship, a *madrina de la pelota* (godmother of the ball) would buy a soccer ball needed for a soccer tournament, for example.

While such exchanges contributed to a more egalitarian reality to a limited extent by redistributing some wealth, they simultaneously

reinforced hierarchical relationships and provided a subtle challenge to egalitarian values by forcing the recognition of differences in wealth and prestige, particularly in relations with non-Tacana where differences in wealth were more obvious and long term. Sponsorship, as a form of “voluntary gifting,” carried with it the recognition that one party in the exchange relationship had enough of a surplus to gift with ease. In the case of these Tacana, sponsorship requests utilized a rhetoric of respect for the desired sponsor combined with an expression of humility on the part of the one requesting the gift that ritually performed status and hierarchy.

It is notable that theft, in contrast to sponsorship, succeeded in redistributing material possessions from the rich to the poor without undermining egalitarian values. This is because theft redistributed wealth without granting status in exchange. Indeed, one could consider theft a form of “involuntary gifting.” Like sponsorship, theft incorporated outsiders, who might not consider themselves part of the assertively egalitarian system of Santa Rosa, into that system. Much more effectively than sponsorship, theft did so by functioning as a leveling mechanism, by putting hoarded goods back in circulation, and by discouraging the accumulation of wealth in the wider region. Unlike sponsorship, it served as an implicit commentary upon inappropriate differences in wealth and simultaneously worked to redress them. Because it was so commonplace, theft redistributed the property of the wealthy and made it very difficult to maintain these differences in wealth. In the assertively egalitarian value system dominant in Santa Rosa, wealth and status differences were inappropriate, thus, those who had notable wealth were not fulfilling their perceived social obligations to share their wealth through sanctioned means. Further, it was not only the thieves that benefited from theft, since stolen property quickly entered the highly developed, positively sanctioned system of reciprocal sharing obligations, in Santa Rosa and beyond, either right away or after being sold at a greatly discounted price. Whether or not the neighbor I saw wearing my pants was implicated in their theft, she was a recipient of my redistributed property and benefited from it.

## CONCLUSION

Theft in Santa Rosa should be understood as coherent with Santa Rosa’s assertively egalitarian system of material conditions, social relations, and cultural values. Further, theft can be seen as functioning to support and reproduce this assertively egalitarian system by leveling differences in wealth through the redistribution of goods and discouraging the

accumulation of possessions, albeit imperfectly. Indeed, theft was both indicative of the social cleavages that resulted when the system broke down and simultaneously functioned to reinstate a more egalitarian reality. Among those with temporary and small differences in wealth, gifting redistributed in a small way; but while gifting in these cases had limited redistributive function in terms of amount, it was very effective as an equalizer and deterrent to the accumulation of personal wealth. Among those with more permanent and larger differences in wealth, both voluntary and involuntary gifting mechanisms redistributed in a larger way; but while gifting had a notable redistributive function in terms of the amount of property that was passed from rich to poor, it was not an effective leveler because the rich stayed rich in spite of their property loss. In other words, gifting most contributed to an egalitarian reality among those with the least difference in wealth. Thus, there was a tension between an assertively egalitarian ethic and a non-egalitarian reality, once non-Tacana were inserted into the system. Theft, as a form of involuntary gifting, was a pragmatic and moral intervention in this reality, commenting upon and creating a reality more in keeping with an egalitarian ethic.

## NOTES

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1. Theft was not only common in forest communities; urban dwellers were also the victims of these "chickens." In fact, experiencing a relatively large robbery was something of a rite-of-passage for newly arrived foreigners coming to the city of Riberalta to work in NGOs or as researchers. In my own case, I lost more than \$1000 worth of belongings, including research equipment, to theft in the region.

The city of Riberalta showed signs of pronounced cultural influence by Tacana, and while urban Tacana and Tacana-influenced individuals are not the focus of this paper, preliminary evidence suggests that what I describe here was applicable in Riberalta as well.

2. See Foster 1960 for a discussion of the origins of the grid-plan town.

3. If hosts wanted to begin to create stronger social ties with the strangers, offerings would be amplified to include meat, *chicha*, tobacco, or coca, all of which were invested with thick social meanings concerning friendship and reciprocity.

4. Woodburn distinguished between immediate-return and delayed-return societies, with the key difference being whether return for labor was received at the time labor was performed or whether returns were delayed. This distinction was key to his 1982 article about egalitarian societies referenced here; indeed, his argument was that assertively egalitarian systems were immediate-return systems, while stratified systems were delayed-return. The three material characteristics of assertively egalitarian societies listed here, also characteristic of the Tacana of Santa Rosa, are those Woodburn argued could be found in immediate return-systems, despite the fact that these Tacana had a mixed economy as both foragers and horticulturalists, thus distributing their labor between immediate-return and delayed-return efforts. I leave deeper consideration of the implications of this fact to future work.

5. An exception to this was due to the fact that the Bolivian state had granted pockets to private parties and to communities designated “*campesino*” (peasant) and these were considered off-limits for indigenous use.

6. A large anthropological literature exists on fiestas as leveling mechanism, beginning with the work of Erik Wolf (1959), Pedro Carrasco (1961), and Frank Cancian (1965), although emphasis has tended to be placed on formal fiesta systems rather than the informal parties described here.

7. While wealth was more unequally distributed in the city of Riberalta than in Santa Rosa, some of the same practices of wealth camouflage occurred there as well. According to Rene Boot, a Dutch scientist who lived in Riberalta for years, many Riberalteños with money to invest often invested in real estate outside of Riberalta. According to Boot, there were many potential reasons for this, including a lack of confidence in the economic future of Riberalta (Boot, personal communication). An additional reason might have been to limit knowledge of their holdings and thus the potential for highly effective local redistributive mechanisms to redistribute their wealth.

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