

# ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

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## The quinoa boom and the commoditisation debate: critical reflections on the re-emergence of a peasantry in the Southern Altiplano

BY MAURICE TSCHOPP



RED QUINOA RECENTLY HARVESTED IN THE COMMUNITY OF COPACABANA, NOR  
LIPEZ(PHOTO: MAURICE TSCHOPP)

### INTRODUCTION

In the span of two decades, quinoa went from being a virtually unknown indigenous crop cultivated and consumed almost

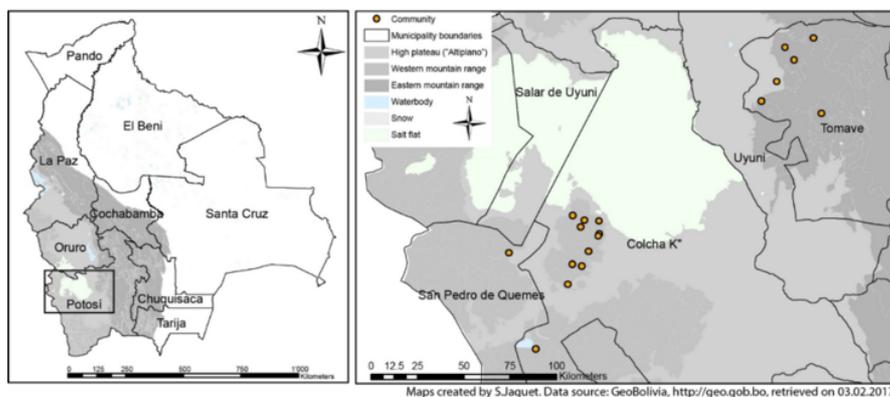
exclusively in Bolivia and Peru to being arguably the most famous “superfood” sold and cultivated all over the world (Bazile, Jacobsen, and Verniau 2016). Gourmets, vegetarians, and even scientists contributed to the success of this pseudocereal, in particular by promoting its exceptional nutritional and agronomic properties (Nuñez de Arco 2015). High demand on international markets led to rising quinoa prices, which in turn spurred an increase in the area under quinoa cultivation across Bolivia’s Southern Altiplano.[i] While the origins of the quinoa boom can be traced back to the late 2000s, it reached its peak in 2013–2014. In 2013, when international organizations promoted the “International Year of Quinoa” in Rome, prices paid to local producers reached 2,000 Bolivianos per quintal (46 kilos) – or almost 8,000 USD per ton – a price previously unimaginable to Bolivian farmers.

Several scholars have examined the impacts of the quinoa boom. Some highlight basic consequences of the boom, such as the increasing mechanization and modernization of local agriculture (Vieira 2012) or the expansion of quinoa cultivation into plains areas, and as a consequence, increasing vulnerability of quinoa crops to pests and wind erosion (Orsag et al. 2013; Felix 2008). Others emphasize the potential socio-economic impacts of the quinoa boom on outmigration and regarding so-called pluriactivity[ii] (Vassas-Toral and Vieira Pak 2010; Kerssen 2015). Jacobsen (2011) has argued that the quinoa boom led to a decrease in quinoa consumption among Bolivians; however, this analysis has been criticized as based on scant evidence (Winkel et al. 2012). Concerns surrounding the quinoa boom have also made it into the mainstream media. For example, in January 2013 an article titled “Can vegans stomach the unpalatable truth about quinoa” was published in the UK newspaper *The Guardian*. It suggested a negative reality behind the production of quinoa, constructing a narrative of Bolivian farmers as victims of “damaging North–South exchanges” (Blythman 2013).

This essay seeks to explore some of the tensions engendered by the quinoa boom. I argue that the high degree of market integration of quinoa production accelerated an economic and social restructuring of the Southern Altiplano. I discuss some of the impacts of the boom, not only in terms of socio-ecological consequences, but also in terms of counter reactions and

The image in the header is *Amér Invertida*, painted in 1943 by Joaquín Torres García, an Uruguayan artist. More information on his work can be accessed here.

adaptation of local social and political systems. My analysis suggests that some of the impacts of the boom may be usefully explained by means of the commoditization framework. As I illustrate, land and labour have been increasingly treated as commodities in the region. Yet my research also shows that the quinoa boom led to a household- and community-level restructuring that has contributed to strengthening normative and social frameworks in quinoa-producing communities. Based on my analysis of several strategies implemented by peasant communities in the Southern Altiplano, I argue that this case is illustrative of the “grey zone” that can exist between peasantry and entrepreneurial farming (van der Ploeg 2008; Kerssen 2015).



MAP OF THE REGION

A mixed-method approach was used – combining quantitative and qualitative data – to examine the consequences of the quinoa boom in the province of Nor Lipez (municipalities of San Pedro de Quemes and Colcha K), Bolivia (Figure 1). Most of the data discussed in this article was derived from 52 interviews and focus group discussions conducted with quinoa producers, Non-governmental Organization (NGO) representatives, cooperative leaders, local public servants, and traditional authorities. In addition, data were collected in a survey of 305 households carried out in November 2015.

### THE COMMODITIZATION DEBATE

The process of commoditization[iii] is an important concept widely used in discussions over agrarian change, and more generally in Marxian sociology and human geography (Castree 2003; Friedmann 1980). Harriss (1982) has called it the most

important process driving agrarian change. According to Harriett Friedmann, commoditization may be defined as the “*process of deepening commodity relations within the cycle of reproduction. Commoditization occurs to the extent that each household is severed from direct reciprocal ties, both horizontal and vertical, for renewal of means of production and of subsistence, and comes to depend increasingly on commodity relations for reproduction*” (Friedmann 1980: 162-3). Further, Friedmann (1980) describes the process of commoditization as running counter to peasant identities, which are characterized by reciprocity links, subsistence farming, and the search for autonomy (Van der Ploeg 2010; Scott 1976). Notably, the phenomenon of commoditization echoes the concept of fictitious commodities described by Hungarian economist and philosopher Karl Polanyi. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi proposes drawing a distinction between **real and fictitious commodities** (Polanyi 1992). He defines fictitious commodities as goods that are not produced for the market but are nevertheless exchanged as commodities. In his corresponding analysis, Polanyi describes three fictitious commodities – *land, labour, and money* – and highlights how land and labour are treated as commodities in contemporary European societies. However, Polanyi emphasizes that treating such natural elements as commodities is perilous. He stresses that applying a rationale of self-regulating markets to land and labour is doomed to fail because their supply and demand do not follow the same logic as commodities. As a result, these fictitious commodities can and do trigger economic instabilities, necessitating state intervention. Finally, Polanyi applies moral arguments in his critique, referring in particular to the concept of alienability – regarded as one of the key aspects of capitalist commoditization according to Marxian scholars (Castree 2003).

#### LAND AND LABOUR: TWO ASPECTS OF THE COMMODITIZATION PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QUINOA BOOM

In Nor Lipez, commoditization of land has been gradually occurring in recent decades, even though the existing legal system technically places significant constraints on the extent to which land may be treated as a commodity. In this province, the most important official land designation is *Territorio Indigena Originario Campesinons* (Native Community Land, TIOC)[iv]. TIOC lands belong to the community, such that it cannot be sold or transferred to anyone outside of the community. Traditional

authorities govern access to land through community norms that are formulated in village assemblies.

There are two major types of land within the communities: pasture land and agricultural land – the latter for quinoa production. Pasture land is held and used in common. By contrast, agricultural land is used privately for quinoa cultivation and users' rights are transmitted within the same family over generations. Traditionally, a family could acquire additional agricultural land by converting a section of community pasture land, but the conversion required a lot of personal labour and typically took several months (Vieira 2012). The quinoa boom has posed major challenges to community norms governing access to land, however, with massive conversion of pasture land occurring in response to rising prices (Tschopp 2017; Winkel et al. 2016). Mechanization made it possible to convert important areas of pasture land into quinoa fields much faster than in the past. Our 2015 survey showed that, on average, quinoa producers increased the size of land they used for quinoa cultivation by over a third (from 15.3 to 20.8 hectares, including fallow lands) [v].

*“With the quinoa boom, when prices were between 1,800 and 2,000 Bolivianos [per quintal[vi]], it was an uncontrollable chaos. Nothing was functioning, no community norms or anything. In order to grab some unused land, the residents [new producers] would regularly plough land during the night with a tractor. The following day, we would find it all “tractored”.[vii]*

These land conversions triggered conflicts within communities in the region. In our survey, 35% of households reported being involved in a conflict and stated that claims on land and disagreements over land boundaries were major causes. This form of “local land grabbing” is a clear manifestation of commoditization of land. Land titles do not change hands and the areas appropriated still officially remain “community land”. But the process is primarily driven by desire for financial gain through quinoa exports. In this way, the land conversions epitomize *privatization* of a common good, which is presented by Castree (2003) as the “first step” of commoditization of nature.

A COMMODITIZATION OF LABOUR?

Another interesting consequence of the quinoa boom has been the commoditization of labour on behalf of quinoa production. Previously, when quinoa was regarded as a subsistence crop, peasants mostly relied on the informal exchange of labour with neighbours and families in order to manage the harvest. These practices were called *ayni* (reciprocity) by quinoa producers, and were sometimes described as a response both to the unavailability of credit and lack of labour force in the communities (Walsh-Dilley 2013). Our results suggest that with the development of export markets and the rise in areas under quinoa cultivation, these practices became increasingly rare. Increasing financial resources enabled quinoa producers to pay hired farm workers, eventually making it common practice. About 75% of the households in our survey confirmed hiring casual labour for their agricultural activities. These workers were especially present during harvesting and sowing times, when more labour force is required.[viii] In addition, the quinoa boom resulted in significant capital accumulation in several communities. Following the spectacular increase in prices, quinoa producers invested some of their earnings in different assets – especially productive assets (tractors, agricultural machines) and vehicles (Tschopp 2018). Though the introduction of tractors in the region goes back as far as the 1970s, their use appears to have intensified along with the quinoa boom. They effectively symbolize mechanization of quinoa production in recent decades (Vieira Pak 2012; Laguna 2011), contributing to expansion of the agricultural frontier by increasing the amount of land that individual households could cultivate on former pasture land.



TRACTOR USED FOR THRESHING QUINOA GRAINS, COMMUNITY OF COPACABANA, NOR LIPEZ (PHOTO: MAURICE TSCHOPP)

A significant share of the ploughing and sowing activities are now undertaken with tractors. The few producers who own these assets can extract important benefits by renting them to other quinoa farmers. This process may also contribute to increasing wealth concentration in the hands of a few particularly successful producers. Where exchanges of labour in times of harvest or sowing were previously practised as reciprocal exchanges and manifestations of solidarity (Vieira Pak 2012), they are now increasingly commoditized.

#### RE-PEASANTIZATION AND NEW STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY QUINOA FARMERS

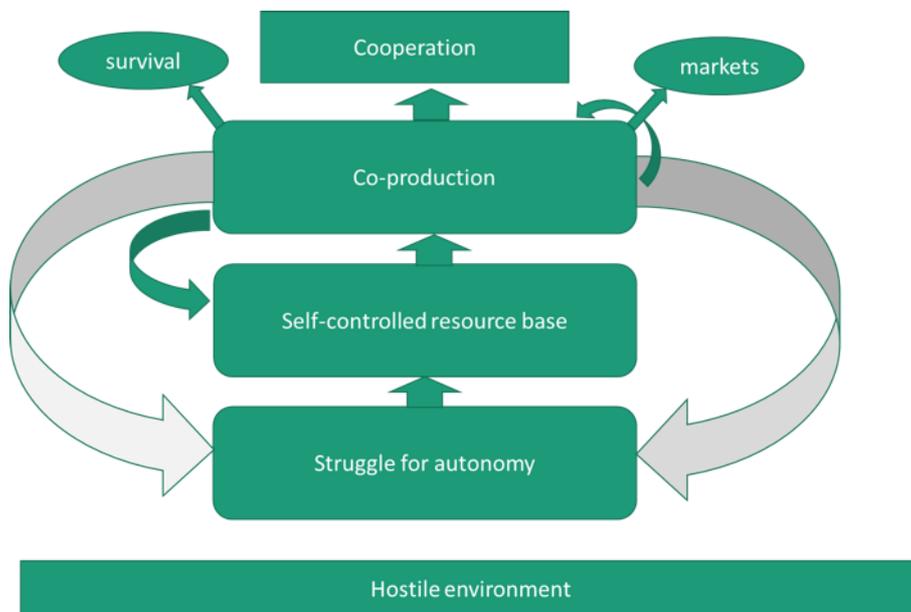
Despite the ongoing commoditization process, the quinoa boom simultaneously provided local peasant communities with more resources and capacities overall. These resources were partly used to develop new strategies of autonomy and collective control over resources. These strategies are characteristic of a *new peasantry* that is arguably emerging in the region.

#### CHARACTERISTICS AND DEFINITIONS OF THE NEW PEASANTRY

Resistance to commoditization is often described as one of the characteristics of the peasantry and is embodied in several strategies, including farming models centred on reproduction and subsistence (Friedmann 1980). Ploeg provides several ideal-typical traits and specificities of the peasantry in comparison to entrepreneurial and capitalist farming. He stresses that the peasantry must not be understood in terms of simple oppositions (subsistence vs. market) and he acknowledges that the contemporary peasantry often evolves in a “grey zone” between entrepreneurial and subsistence farming (van der Ploeg 2008).

According to Ploeg, the new peasantry is defined by three attributes: a struggle for autonomy, a self-controlled resource base, and co-production (see Figure 3). In a context generally characterized by marginalization, deprivation, and dependence of peasant farmers worldwide, the new peasantry is actively engaged in seeking new models of autonomy that support

“creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base” (van der Ploeg 2008). Control over the resource base is the key element enabling co-production, which is defined as the productive interaction and mutual transformation of human actors and natural resources. Co-production may be seen in the complementarity of different modes of farming in traditional peasant farms (e.g. fertilization with manure from livestock; crop rotations). It is also partly embodied in the idea of multi-functionality of agriculture, or in livelihood strategies such as pluriactivity (Schneider and Niederle 2010). To achieve these aims of greater autonomy, new strategies are developed by individual farmers as well as peasant organizations. In the following section, I show how this framework can be used to explain some of the changes that have occurred in the Southern Altiplano region in the decade following the quinoa boom.



CHOREOGRAPHY OF PEASANT CONDITION (ADAPTED FROM VAN DER PLOEG 2008)

#### REINFORCEMENT OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OF A LABEL OF DENOMINATION OF ORIGIN

Several phenomena related to the quinoa boom may be seen to have created conditions enabling many producers to increase their autonomy and control over key resources in the region. With the election of Evo Morales in 2005 and the rising political hegemony of his party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement toward Socialism, MAS), the general political context became more favourable to indigenous communities. In the new Bolivian constitution, which came into effect in 2009, additional rights

were granted to indigenous and local communities. Land access rights were further developed and the right of local communities to govern territories designated TIOC was reaffirmed.

At the same time, these new rights presented new challenges for local traditional authorities. In the context of the quinoa boom, local authorities had to deal with the agricultural expansion of quinoa producers driven by higher prices (see, among other sources: Vieira 2012; Argandoña Espinoza 2016; Tschopp, Bieri, and Rist 2018). Land and community boundaries in particular were unclear, giving rise to conflict in some specific cases (Walsh-Dilley 2016). In this context, reinforcing local rules and community norms was identified as a priority. NGOs such as the Agrónomos y Veterinarios Sin Fronteras (AVSF) and the Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA) played an important role in strengthening traditional authorities through the formulation of clear community norms (Argandoña Espinoza 2016; Felix 2008). Other NGOs focused on capacity building of other organizational forms, including quinoa cooperatives and groups of llama herders.



MEETING OF THE COOPERATIVE SOPROQUI, COMMUNITY OF AGUAQUIZA, NOR LIPEZ  
(PHOTO: MAURICE TSCHOPP)

One important example that highlights the strengthening of local institutions is the ongoing effort to establish a denomination of origin label for quinoa from the Southern Altiplano[ix]. Those behind it seek to make the label comprehensive, covering private

producers as well as the most important quinoa cooperatives of Bolivia. The advantage of such an approach is that it is inclusive and will bind all producers of the region to a minimum set of production rules, while building trust among different categories of producers. Although the process is very inclusive, representatives of cooperatives feature prominently as leaders. The Bolivian government also supports these efforts by providing technical support and serving as a facilitator between different stakeholders[x]. While the label of origin already exists and is recognized by three South American countries (Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador), the regulatory council is currently working for the recognition of the label by the European Union. Producers participating in this process view it not only as a way to promote sustainable production practices, but also to defend and promote traditional Andean farming models.

#### CO-PRODUCTION: SELF-PROVISIONING AND PLURIACTIVITY

According to one distinct narrative found in newspapers and several scientific articles (Jacobsen 2011), the increase in exports resulting from the quinoa boom made this dietary staple too expensive for Bolivians themselves. However, other studies have revealed that quinoa consumption remained high in producing regions, though it decreased significantly in Bolivian cities (Winkel et al. 2012). Our survey, limited to rural areas, showed that quinoa consumption stayed high among quinoa farmers. Households participating in the survey indicated consuming an average of 6.8 quintals (312 kilos) of quinoa every year. In addition, quinoa farmers in the region regularly saved part of their harvest for use as seeds in subsequent years. Most of the quinoa producers interviewed also engaged actively in llama herding and used llama manure as fertilizer, a practice encouraged by the most important farmer cooperatives in the region, which are exclusively producing and exporting organic quinoa. Notably, however, several producers did not raise enough llamas to provide for adequate fertilization of fallow lands. there is a local market for shipments of manure (Kerssen 2015).

These findings illustrate the need for refined analysis of peasants' self-provisioning. As Ploeg suggests, peasants should not be characterized on one or the other side of a dual opposition of commercial vs. peasant. Indeed, my results do not support the

suggestion of Bernstein (2001) that peasants are reduced to petty commodity producers. My findings show that even in a context characterized by a high degree of integration into export markets, self-provisioning remains an important strategy for peasants; others have found similar results in other locations (Henderson 2017; Laney and Turner 2015).

Pluriactivity is also an important livelihood strategy of peasants in the region. Traditionally, the Southern Altiplano region was characterized by outmigration to important Bolivian cities or to the neighbouring countries of Chile and Argentina (Vassas Toral 2011). In our survey, 59% of households indicated being employed in activities outside of quinoa production and 40% of households had at least one family member engaged in regular or yearly activities outside of the community. At the same time, however, the quinoa boom encouraged several farmers to return to their communities, sometimes abandoning their other employment activities. As noted by Kerssen (2015), the quinoa markets have fostered a repopulation and revitalization of the region, as evidenced by population increases in several rural municipalities between the censuses of 2002 and 2012.

Over the last two years, however, fears have emerged that falling quinoa prices might retrigger massive outmigration. Interestingly, several stakeholders we surveyed emphasized their desire to take advantage of the current positive image of quinoa in order to develop new livelihood activities rooted in their local communities. The farmer cooperatives SOPROQUI and CECAOT, pioneering exporters of Bolivian quinoa, decided to sell a share of their local quinoa production through the state programme *desayuno escolar* ("school breakfast"), which encourages municipalities to rely on local food production for school meals. In addition, the cooperative SOPROQUI has expressed aims of developing agro-tourism on quinoa farms, taking advantage of the influx of tourists who visit the Salar de Uyuni region every year. Other quinoa farmers have already created community-owned hostels in the region. These examples illustrate how quinoa farmers are shifting from a logic of pluriactivity to one of multifunctionality, pursuing strategies that reinforce the social and economic fabric of local communities.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to show that the quinoa boom in Bolivia not only gave rise to effects commonly associated with commoditization, it also resulted in new means of local control and ownership of resources and reinforced local social and political institutions. As such, our findings lend support to Kerssen's observation that quinoa boom-related re-peasantization occupies a "grey zone at the interface between peasantness and entrepreneurial farming" (Kerssen 2015: 501). The commoditization process is often described as a threat to traditional modes of production of the peasantry or even to its very existence. Yet our results suggest that quinoa farmers can take advantage of the influx of resources to fashion new strategies of co-production and control over natural resources. The peasants in our study took advantage of the opportunities the quinoa boom presented to them, exemplifying a process of negotiation and hybridization (Walsh-Dilley 2013).

The present essay attests to the multiple tensions and sometimes contradictory forces that characterize Bolivia's agrarian sector in the Morales era. The recent alliance between the Bolivian state and between agrarian elites in the lowlands helped in part to maintain and reinforce commercialized agriculture as opposed to new peasant models (Webber 2017). It is vitally important to account for the hybrid strategies pursued by the new peasantry in order to understand and support them in the twenty-first century (van der Ploeg 2008).

*Maurice Tschopp is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern.*

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#### ENDNOTES

[i] Currently, the number of countries producing quinoa is higher than 100, although most of the production is concentrated in Bolivia and Peru (Bazile, Jacobsen, and Verniau 2016).

[ii] The term pluriactivity designates a livelihood strategy characterized by the existence of several professional activities or income sources (Kay 2008, Urioste 2017). While agriculture plays an important role, there are several other livelihood options and

income sources available to quinoa producers. In the Southern Altiplano region, pluriactivity is an important livelihood strategy used by many quinoa producers. There are several livelihood options available, including tourism related to the Salt flats that are a major draw in South America. In addition, there are several mining facilities operating in the region, including the San Cristobal mine, which is one of the biggest in the region. In addition, labour migration to other geographical areas (e.g. the neighbouring countries of Chile and Argentina) has been common (Vassas Toral 2011) – though in recent years migration flows slowed, and even reversed in some cases, due to high prices of quinoa spurring the return of Bolivian migrants.

[iii] Different theoretical traditions apply the terms commodification and commoditization with similar meanings. Friedmann, in a Marxian tradition, speaks of commodification. We have opted to use the most current spelling applied in agrarian studies: “commoditization”.

[iv] These territories were designated *Tierra comunitarian de Origen* in the agrarian reform law that entered into force in 1996 (Ley Inra). In 2006, their status was changed to TIOC in the new Bolivian constitution. TIOC are recognized as an official territorial unit, in which autonomous forms of local government can be established. More information on this topic may be found in Fundación Tierra (2011) and Ruesgas (2017)

[v] Fallow periods are typically very long for quinoa in the Southern Altiplano because of local soil characteristics. After harvesting, a quinoa field is usually left fallow for at least two or three years – occasionally even longer than 10 years. During the fallow period, the land may be used as pasture area for llamas, a practice that helps increase the amount of organic matter in soils.

[vi] A quintal is the equivalent of 46 kilos. At the peak of the quinoa boom, the price paid to producers went as high as 8,000 dollars per ton.

[vii] Interview B13; NGO technician.

[viii] It is, of course, important to show how labour exchanges have been affected by the increasing size of areas under quinoa cultivation and the high prices of quinoa on international

markets. However, our findings do not point to the disappearance of all forms of reciprocity. Instead, our findings suggest that new strategies of reciprocity and collaboration are being developed by quinoa producers. In this way, our results echo Marygold Walsh-Dilley who observed that “*increasing integration into ‘modern’ systems and processes need not, as is often supposed, undermine the moral economy and can potentially invigorate it*”. (Walsh-Dilley 2013: 678).

[ix] More information on the denomination of origin of quinoa from the Southern Altiplano can be found at <http://www.doquinoareal.com/es/>

[x] It should be noted that this process can be complicated. The author assisted a discussion of the denomination of origin label at which cooperative members demanded the exclusion of private sector companies from the process. At the meeting, private companies were accused of buying quinoa contaminated with pesticides or even Peruvian quinoa and exporting it as *Quinua real organica*.

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The image in the header is *América Invertida*, painted in 1943 by Joaquín Torres García, an Uruguayan artist. More information on his work can be accessed [here](#).