



The Tinku

Bolivia's Bloodfest

2000 Words

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In Macha men eat fists for breakfast in early May. They start at dawn, and when I wake in the cold hovel where I'd spent the night a great din already hangs over town. A dense crowd of Indians jostles under the church tower – a sort of landmark in this small Bolivian town of adobe houses and muddy streets. The cacophony sends stray dogs scattering and makes pigeons take flight, but growing numbers of Indians rush toward the scene.

Ready for the Tinku – their day of ritual combat – the men sport improvised warriors' uniforms. One wears colorful leggings decorated with psychedelic diamond patterns over his blue jeans. Someone else has

wrapped a hand knitted waist sash around a second-hand sweater. Others don bizarre helmets – shaped like those worn by Spanish conquistadors, but made of llama leather instead of steel, and topped with a fluorescent-colored plume.

I push through the crowd and reach the center of this motley group just in time to see a fighter take a bite of another man's knuckles. His head whips around and something small goes flying in the same direction, glinting briefly under the harsh, high-altitude sun. It takes a split second for the first gush of blood to squirt from the man's mouth and for me to realize: oh . . . yes, that was a tooth. Then, before the stricken man can recover his balance, his opponent moves in and commences demolishing the man's face with blow after blow from his bare fists. The loser topples to the



An indigenous Quechua girl dressed up for the Tinku. More than just a blood-bath, the festival is also an opportunity for people to meet friends from other villages and perhaps to find a mate.

ground and lies there insensate. His rival towers over him panting, his hands dripping with blood.

It is a scene at once shocking, revolting and fascinating – and utterly incomprehensible. People say that travel promotes understanding. But spend a day watching drunk Indians viciously beating each other for custom’s sake, and come evening the point of it all will remain as impenetrable as the day you first heard that such a strange tradition exists.

*** 8:34 a.m. ***

The men pace about agitated and belligerent. Everyone is in a frenzy – shoving, swaying – drunk on alcohol and adrenaline. They gesture at one another – challenging and taunting, calling out maledictions in Quechua and heavily accented Spanish.

“Why do they fight?” I ask someone next to me – he is Bolivian, but his clothing gives him away as an outsider, someone who has come here to watch.

“It is a kind of blood sacrifice to the earth – to the Pachamama,” he tells me. “The blood of the fighters trickles down to the ground and waters the earth. It’s a way to give thanks for the year’s harvest and ensure fertility in the year to come.”

There’s barely time for me to hear this reply before a group of fighters surging between us toward the center of the crowd drives us apart. An improvised ring formed by spectators has opened up in the middle, and fighters stand there pummeling one another – winding up their arms before striking, like characters in an

animated cartoon.

Spectators crane their necks to see better – some smiling, excited and energized, others wincing at the sight of shattered faces, broken noses, eyes swollen shut, and teeth outlined red with blood.

*** 10:23 a.m. ***



High on the Bolivian altiplano, a church towers above Macha’s houses.

The man who, a few weeks prior, had tipped me off about the Macha Tinku described it as a day of ritual combat, as we sat on a bench chatting leisurely in Sucre’s stately colonial town square – a scene of strolling couples and elegantly dressed pensioners out for some fresh air.

But by mid-morning in Macha little about the fighting seems ritualistic. It is a chaotic, no-holds-barred general brawl. Men beat men. Women slap, scratch and pull each other’s hair. The young battle with the young. A special area seems reserved for bellicose grandpas. Wives chase and kick the men who have beat-up their husbands. Opposing groups of Indians gyrate to and fro, yelling something at one another. A few mad dogs circle the melee’s



A dog laps up spilled blood. Some hold that the celebration is a kind of blood offering to the earth -- in gratitude for the harvest.

fringes lapping up the spilled blood that colors the pavement. And in the midst of this a band of policemen brandishing whips patrols to keep people from killing each other. They set upon men who continue attacking those who can no longer resist. The police whip them cruelly, yelling, “enough, enough,” until others in the crowd can pull the fighters apart.

“These people are the descendants of Inca warriors who were sent here from Cusco to subdue the local tribes,” another Bolivian in the crowd tells me. “They

Opposite Above: “Tinku” means “encounter” in the Quechua language of the region’s inhabitants, and at the heart of the encounter are fierce fights among different communities. **Below:** Spilled blood at the Tinku -- a mixture of pagan blood ritual, Christian rite and harvest celebration.





For days before the commencement of the fighting in Macha, people celebrate in their village communities, dancing and making ritual offerings of Chicha, a locally brewed maize alcohol, to the earth and the cross.

fight to keep alive their martial traditions.”

hills surrounding Macha, punctuating the festivities already taking place in the Indian villages.

Suddenly, very close, a loud explosion. Instantaneously, instinctively, people panic and flee – even as the shock wave still makes its way through the crowd. Everyone is sprinting, running, radiating out in every direction away from the fighting and the explosion.

Dynamite! It’s the first thought that enters my mind. Someone has tossed a stick of dynamite into the crowd. In Bolivia it’s sold like candy at miners’ markets in towns all around the highlands – about a dollar for a stick of TNT, a bit more for the detonator. People use it not only for mining but also for protests and celebrations – like a powerful firecracker. And in the nights leading up to the Tinku, explosions constantly reverberated in the



Women taking shelter from tear gas. When the violence becomes uncontrollable the police lob tear gas grenades to disperse the crowds.

Two more explosions.

As I run, I glance back, and, strangely, feel a sense of relief to see a thick cloud of heavy white gas spreading out across the plaza, slowly rising up from the ground. It was not TNT but tear gas grenades thrown by the police to disperse the uncontrollable crowd.

The fighting has stopped.

People run by – grimacing, screaming – their cheeks wet with tears and blood. They take cover in buildings and dash for the side streets leading away from the square.



Bearing their community's cross, half-dancing, half-trotting, people proceed from their village to the town of Macha.

I stop in one of the alleys, wiping my eyes and gasping for air.

together some more. He checks the inside again, and finally satisfied, pulls it back on his head and walks off.

*** 11:04 a.m. ***

Through my tears I notice a stocky, very muscular Indian – a killer with a hard, grizzled, expressionless face. I had seen him fighting, deconstructing the faces of his opponents without receiving so much as a scratch. Now he stands there weeping like an injured child. Sobbing, he slides off the Andean knit hat on his head and begins gingerly patting his eyes and his cheeks. Then holding the hat with both hands he pulls it open, raises it up and vigorously blows his nose inside. He draws it open again, checks his product, and still holding it with two hands energetically rubs the two sides together to work the snot deep into the fabric. He pulls it apart again to see how it looks and then rubs the hat



A trained monkey watches as a community of Indians parades around Macha's square playing their pan flutes.

As wind disperses the tear gas the plaza comes to life with dancing, not fighting.

Arriving from the countryside, long processions of Indians pour into town – a different group from each village. At the head of each crew a man lugs large wooden cross topped with a miniature plumed leather helmet, like the ones worn by some of the fighters.

And behind this cross-bearer, people stomp and shuffle along to the beat of their heavy footfalls and the melody of pan flutes and charangos – small, twelve string guitars. As they march, the women call out a repetitive chant in a squeaky, high voice. The men



After the air clears of tear gas people return to Macha's main square to play music, dance and drink chicha -- a maize beer:

respond something in a gruff bass. Trotting like tribal warriors heading off to battle, the dancers make their way around the plaza, pausing occasionally to form a circle and dance in place before continuing on.

An irregular character catches my eye. There amongst the short, dark-skinned Indians, a tall, lanky and very pale middle-aged white man, dressed in full tribal garb, prances around playing a pan flute. Intrigued, I seek him out when he's no longer dancing.

It turns out he's Henry Stobart, a British ethnographer and musicologist who has spent years living with a community of Quechua people near Macha to study their music. "I have never heard anyone who fights say that they are fighting to make a blood offering to the pachamama," he tells me. "They fight to show that they're tough. People here re-

spect the hard, the brave and the strong, and for a man to have a broken nose is a sign of status."

More villagers arrive, and by noon dancers pack the plaza, singing and trotting, colliding with each other as they clomp around the square.



Blood flows freely, and on many occasions people die at the Tinku.

before people had been dancing together peacefully. The cycle commences anew. Indians slugging. Police whipping. The violence and chaos intensifying until, having reached a crescendo, the tear gas grenades start to fly. People run and cry. For a few moments a calm

What caused the fighting to break out again, I never deciphered. Was there a provocation? Did someone encounter his nemesis in an ancient tribal feud? Did the presence of wound-up warriors on the plaza just reach critical mass? Whatever the cause, a free-for-all erupts where just a moment



Bloodied faces and knockouts at the Tinku.

settles on the town. And then the air clears and the dancing resumes.

*** 2:31 p.m. ***

After several doses, I feel I've had enough tear gas for the day. So I distance myself from the bloodletting and wander over to a row of shops where people – many already as drunk as soldiers celebrating the end of the war – gather to sing and to guzzle king-size quantities of beer and chicha, a traditional booze made from maize. Those looking to really impress with their toughness knock back shots of 96 percent alcohol – the same that I had seen people using to clean their windows.

They pause their revelry as I walk by. “Gringo,” they yell at me, “buy me a chicha!” “Gringo! Buy me some beer.” “Gringo! Give me five Bolivianos.” I smile and ignore their requests. The charango player starts up a tune, and, quickly forgetting me, they carry on with the party. But other drunks drift over in my direction –

challenging me to a fight, pestering me for a drink, for some money.

Tired of fending them off, I walk over to sit near the church entrance – thinking that there I'll be safe from bother. I follow with my eyes a liquored-up old timer as he stumbles by, prodded along like a cow by his stick-wielding wife. He weaves over to me and feebly punches me in the chest. His wife rushes up, pulls him back by his shirt, sticks him hard with the prod right in his kidneys, shoves him away from me – and head bowed, like an obedient animal, he again plods on toward their home

Not far away rages another rumble. Suddenly, right in front of me, several rocks sail by. I scramble inside the church to seek shelter and stand in the doorway gazing out at the panic and screaming as people run to get away from the rock fight. A couple minutes of pandemonium, and then I hear the familiar explosions of gas grenades.

In the church, where mass is in progress, solemn Indi-





For those who survive the fighting and avoid passing out from the booze, the drinking, music and celebration continues all day and through the night.

ans stand holding the large crosses that they had previously paraded around the plaza. A priest sonorously chants something in Quechua. Meanwhile, just outside the church, a crazed crowd stampedes to escape from the gas.

“The rock throwing is how most people die,” says a woman standing beside me. “Some years there are ten, twelve dead,” she tells me. “Last year just three.” “The authorities clear away the stones from the plaza and the surrounding streets, but people bring stones,” she laments, shaking her head.

The churchgoers are singing some hymn. “They’re celebrating the imposition of Christianity on the natives by the conquistadors. That’s what the Tinku is all about,” the woman explains, pointing to the crosses.

“But what happens with the killers?” I interrupt her. “What happens with someone who throws the rock that kills a person?”

She looks up at me and shrugs her shoulders. “Nothing happens,” she answers. “It’s just part of the culture.”

*Opposite Above: Whether they fight or not, everyone at the Tinku consumes prodigious quantities of chicha, beer and 96% pure alcohol.
Below: Passed Out – the end of the Tinku for some.*