In the Christian tradition, representing the divine has often been considered both an impossible and yet necessary endeavour rooted in the human need in certain moments of weakness to visualize God. In this article, based on research findings from fieldwork carried out with urban indigenous groups in La Paz, Bolivia, I suggest that the articulation of local and Catholic representational traditions and practices has produced an understanding of the religious image not so much as an object of detached contemplation or a reference to a religious symbol but rather as an energized element which physically shapes the relationship and exchange between the material and the spiritual world. I suggest that through a study of Andean religious images we may be able to produce an alternative ontological perspective on the relationship between the spiritual, material, and living worlds.

La Paz stands on the vertiginous slopes that lead from the Andean plateau at an altitude of 12,000 feet to the bottom of a mountain canyon, and the view from both the top and the bottom is equally breathtaking. With a mixture of fear and affection, its inhabitants call La Paz la hoyada – the pit.

At the bottom of the canyon, the Choqueyapu River divides the city into two halves – a geographical division that the Spanish colony embraced and used for administrative purposes. The Choqueyapu and the Mejawira rivers became the boundaries separating the social and political centre of the colonial city, in the eastern part, from the three main indigenous barrios or ‘parishes’ – San Sebastián, San Pedro, and Santa Bárbara – to which access was prohibited at night for non-indigenous settlers. The contemporary social and ethnic divisions in the urban structure of La Paz reflect that colonial partition (cf. Gill 2000). The western slope of La Paz – known in Spanish as la ladera – maintains a strong association with the urbanized indigenous world and practices and it is clearly marked by their flair, markets, and religious celebrations.

In a context where racial demarcations remain palpable and the indigenous world is still stigmatized by its association with poverty, backwardness, and tradition, urbanized indigenous people (cholo-mestizos’) have established themselves as successful traders of
mostly imported commodities such as appliances, televisions, and computers. Firmly based on and articulated by indigenous kinship networks, this successful ‘indigenous’ economy has managed first to take over the insolvent businesses of the urban middle classes and later to control the flow of foreign capital. Cholo-mestizo traders have expanded their action well beyond national borders and simultaneously they have been able to draw on market dynamics and flows in order to strengthen and reproduce a local system based on culturally specific networks, practices of consumption, and investment.

For cholo-mestizos, urbanization and the influx of consumer goods have not necessarily coincided with a rupture with traditional socio-cultural organization or its principles and practices (Tassi 2010a), which modernist ideology views with a sense of indignity and whose overcoming it sees as necessary (Latour 1993). In fact, cholo-mestizos are referred to by urban elites as a ‘non-bourgeois middle class’ for their unwillingness – despite their economic success – to adjust to the modern canons of propriety, decency, and rationality. A symptom of this supposedly irrational behaviour and of the failure to differentiate clearly between economic rationality and spiritual practice is the Catholic Fiesta of Gran Poder, in which cholo-mestizo traders have been ‘investing’ large portions of their profits, transforming it into one of the largest religious celebrations on the continent. The ostentatious dance parades through which cholo-mestizos celebrate the Fiesta of Gran Poder generate an overlap between the display of material plenty and religious veneration, which the clergy tend to identify as either a remnant of archaic magic practices (‘popular religion’) or a distortion and misinterpretation of modern Catholicism. However, there is a clear awareness among cholo-mestizos that they have been able to generate a religious and economic ferment that neither the Church nor the state would have been capable of producing. In fact, Church control over the celebrations is diminishing in favour of the cholo-mestizo community, which has acquired the power to negotiate with the religious authorities and to insert into the ritual cycle practices that the Catholic Church is reluctant to accept (Tassi 2010b).

Catholicism and modernity
While religious images have gradually disappeared from the churches, houses, and shops of the non-indigenous half of the city, on the western slope new and old religious images have come to life in the processions and dance parades of the urban indigenous population. In the Catholic churches of middle-class neighbourhoods, the body of Christ has vanished from the cross, and church interiors, besides being increasingly bare and desolate, are no longer designed to accommodate large paintings and sculptures. Silence and introspection have become central in the Catholic liturgy. The Catholic clergy has begun to insist that at best Jesus is merely represented in the bread and that saintly piety is better epitomized in the words of scriptures and acts of charity than in distracting images (see also Muir 1997: 149-51).2

Such a substantial change in the approach to religious images was fostered by the modernization of Catholic life and practice promoted by the Second Vatican Council. As suggested by Robert Orsi (2005), a new formal and aesthetic way of seeing and knowing, premised on the absence of the thing represented, is being superimposed upon a devotional and instrumental one founded on presence. Writing about the US Catholic Church and more generally about US Catholicism, Orsi describes how, following the Second Vatican Council, a particular regime of authority attempted to foreclose the presence in sacred objects on the grounds of superstitious atavism or
popular misuse. In the US, such an iconoclastic drive, incorporated into a project of modernization and development, was sustained, accompanied, and justified by a correspondent economic development which consolidated the emerging Catholic middle classes. In the Bolivian Highlands, this modernization of Catholic life was dubbed Neo-Catholicism (Orta 2008), and if it corresponded to the strengthening and consolidation of a modernist discourse and ideology, it was supported neither by a general improvement of material conditions nor by a ‘bourgeoisization’ of the indigenous sectors. Neo-Catholicism discouraged festivals and saint-related practices, given their association with ‘excess’ linked to drinking, dancing, and ritual celebrations. It promoted the waning of the cult of saints, often associated with the worship of indigenous deities (Abercrombie 1998; Gisbert 2004; Platt 1996), and the removal of objects and implements such as medallions, statues, figurines, blessed water, and private shrines employed in their worship.

In Bolivia, Neo-Catholicism found its reason for being in amending the mistakes of a flawed colonial evangelization (see Orta 2006; Platt 1996). Similarly to what happened in the United States, this was part and parcel of a general and transnational process of transformation of Catholicism from an immature superstitious stage to a modern morality; from the polytheistic cult of the saints to a Christ-centred faith; from religious practices largely based on bodies and things to more rational and introspective forms of belief (Orsi 2005: 9).

Such a transformational process was often supported by the co-ordinated action of religious, educational, and civic institutions (Cannell 2005; Casanova 1994; Orsi 2005), encouraging forms of ‘human emancipation’ and ‘self-mastery’ (Keane 2007: 6-7) intended to eradicate illiberal traditions and false fetishes which would subtract agency from the individual. A rational, dematerialized, and unmediated form of religion that was agreeable to democracy and modernity, despite being ascribable to specific Protestant theologies developed from the Reformation (Engelke 2007: 20-2; Keane 2007), was later promoted by the Catholic clergy (Casanova 1994; Daly 1985; Orsi 2005). Its emphasis on silence, introspection, immaterial meaning, and ‘presence in spirit’ (rather than sensible presence) resonated with the necessity of modern states, economics, and science to uproot religion from secular domains, things, and practices and convert it into a discipline concerned with the individual believer (Asad 1993). The contrast between the necessity to establish an unmediated, ‘live and direct’ relationship with God and the denial of materiality and corporeality as the loci of this relationship generated a ‘problem of presence’ (Engelke 2007). Christian modernity produced the sense of an ‘anxious transcendence’ (Keane 2006) since it could never fully separate the material and the non-material (Cannell 2006; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007) as all forms of ‘spiritual’ contact require a ‘material’ instantiation.

This linear, progressive, and dematerialized narrative of modernity, and its sense of rupture with the ‘obscurity of the olden days’ (Latour 1993), clashed vigorously with the practices of cholo-mestizos with whom I did research. Material excess and ‘sensible presence’ not only remained constitutive values of cholo-mestizo religious practice, but with the booming of their economy and the consolidation of a cholo-mestizo project of ‘modernity’ their prominence increased (Barragán & Cárdenas 2009; cf. Meyer 1995). Cholo-mestizos went on appropriating and re-signifying Catholic images and public spaces for ritual representations which, at crucial moments of modern history, were left behind by urban elites under pressure from a new public morality now redefining those practices and objects as indecent (Guss 2006). Prohibited images, objects, and practices

of worship were appropriated and revitalized in clandestine locations on the western slope (Albó & Preiswerk 1986; Vilela 1948). Instead of adjusting to the new sensibility and morality, cholo-mestizos patched together their religious modernity out of the ‘waste’ and discards of modernity itself. They articulated a religious system based on values, practices, and codes sometimes incomprehensible to the middle classes. In so doing, they carved a niche of indigenous religious/political power, independence, and control despite their social and moral subordination.

**Religious images and costumes**

In the Gran Poder neighbourhood, the Catholic processions of religious images with their rich adornments and ostentatious garments today share the urban space with the captivating and elaborately decorated religious dance parades performed ‘for an image’. There is a striking aesthetic correspondence between the flashy garments and decorations of the dancer/worshipper’s costume and the attributes of the image. The most precious brocaded ribbons, European silks, Far Eastern pearls and yarns would be elegantly arranged on the saint’s sculpture and on the costume of the dance parade, as well as gold rings, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and make-up. This lavish display of precious fabrics and decorations often required the protection of bodyguards both for dancers and images when they were parading on the streets (Figs 1 and 2).

![Figure 1. Dancers accompanied by bodyguards at the Saint Francis celebrations. (This and all subsequent photos are by the author unless otherwise stated.)](image)
The most noticeable feature of these religious parades and processions was the combination of a concern for mundane things, material values, and spiritual practices. The second most noticeable aspect was that worshippers frenetically acted upon images, not only by dancing for them, looking at them, and praying to them, but also by dressing them, adding and removing decorations, fitting photographs between the canvas and the frame, donating hair, gold teeth, and garments to be fitted onto the image, or simply lighting a candle, decorating them with flowers, or offering them drink and food. Images were ‘looked after’, ‘reproached’, ‘bribed’, and ‘danced’.

In the case of cholo-mestizo religious practice, things and material plenty – rather than symbols, silence, scriptures, and immaterial meanings – become crucial in instantiating a relationship with spiritual forces. The first objective of this article is to show the historical, social, and cultural dynamics which have produced this specifically cholo-mestizo Christian modernity and its non-linear, non-dematerialized pattern of ‘faith development’. I will outline how, rather than seeking liberation from all that is physical and material in order to achieve a pure and direct contact with God, cholo-mestizos instantiate physical contact with saints and spiritual forces through a process of increasing materialization and amplification of their presence and power. In opposition to the ideology of the clergy, cholo-mestizos vindicate the necessity of materializing, reproducing, and sensing spiritual forces through matter, human actions, and bodies.
Religious images and representations of Catholic saints, which among the *cholo-mestizos* had maintained a strongly Baroque aesthetic, still carry an ambiguous connotation. Abundantly decorated images were bearers of a kind of visceral attraction and of ‘a dependence on the materiality of the medium of reflection’ (Jay 1988: 17; cf. Lezama Lima 1969) which has caused them to be neglected by academic scholarship. Their ‘impure’ quality, their epitomizing of the oppression and the power of the colony, and eventually their coarse attempt to ‘reproduce’ the world by using techniques that magnified the physical resemblance of images to living beings – at a time when ‘resemblance’ between sign and symbol had become undignified (Foucault 1989 [1966]) – made of them an intellectually less interesting genre (see Pinney 2002). Baroque’s overt aesthetic of realism, its excess of fleshiness and plumpness, its closeness between the image and beholder, and, last but not least, its shifting of the aesthetic experience from a contemplative and cognitive one to a more physical and sensorial one has gained it in the last century the status of a secondary, less valuable representational art form during a time when art constituted a ‘liberation from the material’ (Prudencio, cited in Sanjinés 2004: 87).

The second objective of this article is to outline a culturally specific way of conceptualizing and relating to religious images. By using the relationship between images and costumes as a thread throughout this article, I will highlight the ways in which, in the Andean understanding of religious images, medium and meaning, the material and spiritual seem to overlap and intersect,4 generating ‘pathways’ of access to and exchange with the divine where physical contact becomes paramount.

Besides privileging the sense of seeing, modern ‘ocularcentrism’ has also fostered a perception of the world as a kind of picture to be looked at rather than experienced with all the senses (Buck-Morss 1992; Meyer 2006), inducing a mode of knowing through a distant, objectifying gaze. Members of the clergy perceived religious images as objects to be ‘contemplated’ and whose vision was ultimately intended to transcend the object of contemplation (see also Latour 1998; Meskell 2005). Similarly, social scientists – in line with some Protestant reformers (Morgan 1993) – have often envisioned images as either receptacles for human categories and meanings or objective forces manipulating humans (see Latour 1993: 52-3).

The work of Alfred Gell (1998) particularly has attempted to reformulate such a semiotic understanding of images and objects by reconceptualizing art objects as ‘social agents’ in themselves able to produce and affect social relations. Art objects are neither vehicles for symbols nor representations; they carry agency and intentions (of the author) and produce effects – they act upon other people and they stimulate them to act and respond. In relation to images, Gell’s theory had identified their role as ‘channels of access’ to divinities, not as copies in lieu of the original. They might be both containers – bodies which ‘wrap’ the mind – and contained – as objectifications of the mind. Shortcomings of Gell’s theory have been identified in the idea that it is always an individual agency which is mediated by objects and that this individual agency is always the imposition of subjectivity upon an inert material world (Leach 2007: 174).

I will argue that among *cholo-mestizos*, ‘images’ are ‘corporeal agents’ (cf. Buck-Morss 1992; Morphy 1996: 258; Pinney 2001) that transcend their status as ‘mere objects’ and actively participate in the experience, exchange, and reproduction of the ‘spiritual’ (see also Holbraad 2007). They hold agency and desires of their own and they generate

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Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 18, 285-310
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offspring, without these being features derived or projected from individual human subjectivity or extending human agency. Besides producing socially relevant meanings and statements, images in their specific patterns and practices become tools that sensually engage people and spirits and ‘attract’ them into relationships and exchange. As we shall see, on the western slope, costumes and images of saints participate in collective performances of abundance which, as well as transcending the agency and intentions of the individual actors, also come to affect the ‘original’ quite physically (Taussig 1993).

The garment of God: indigenous ideas about the image in the early colonial period

From the very beginning of Spanish colonial rule, the Andes were the area most affected by the clash with European representational devices (Cummins 1994). This clash was dramatized not only by the absence of phonetic writing, but also by the lack of a figurative system, present in pre-Columbian Mexico, which was based on an immediate figurative/visual correspondence between the image and the referent. In contrast to the detailed figurative representations of Palenque, where artistic value and beauty appeared more immediately to the European visitor, the fascination for the Inca world was constructed more upon its sophisticated and technologically superb masonry, its organization of territory, and elaborate mathematical skills (Pasztory 2005). However, the indigenous receptiveness towards Christian images was surprising, to say the least. In part, this may be a consequence of the indigenous custom of bringing back gods from their military raids. Also the association of the colonial image with local religious concepts may have given it particular effectiveness. In the case of the Christian religious image, there were at least two Andean conceptual categories which were useful for facing, understanding, and coming to terms with Catholic iconography: quillca and huaca.

The Quechua word quillca refers to a physical and performative form of inscription where the power of the represented is embodied in the inscription itself. After the arrival of the Conquistadores, quillca was given multiple translations in colonial dictionaries. Roció Quispe-Agnoli includes in the definition of quillca actions like painting, drawing, sculpting, recording, writing, embroidering, and costume-making, as well as objects such as feathers, embroidered costumes, and letters, and agents like painters, writers, bureaucrats, and costume-makers (2005: 271). This identification of the object, action, and actor under the same conceptual category emphasizes a loosening of conceptual boundaries and a fluid, ongoing cross-reference.

Joanne Rappaport and Tom Cummins (1998) refer to the seal of the king of Spain as the ‘quillca of the king’ and the religious images used in the process of Christianization as ‘quillcas of God’, both implying that the power materialized by that representation in the form of a royal document or an image becomes immediate and real. When the seal of the king entered colonial towns, parades, pageants, and processions were organized to receive and display the seal as if embodying the presence of the king, whose authority was perceived to incorporate political and spiritual powers (Bridikhina 2007). According to Rappaport and Cummins, the quillca is not about the natural transcription or rendering of something. In the quillca,
media and genre intersect in unexpected ways. Not only do they refer to each other in intertextual series, but they socially overlap in the rituals of colonial religion and administration. Quillcas become things in the colonial world that operate at a variety of levels, and in so doing are both transformed and transforming. This would give colonial documents [and images] a certain agency or efficacy that exceeds the intentions of their authors (Rappaport & Cummins 1998: 24).

The other concept that remains crucial in understanding both the mismatch and the translation of Catholic religious images into a cultural referent of the Andean world is the concept of *huaca*. Despite the systematic destruction of the major Andean temples and tombs – *huacas* – perpetrated by the Spaniards in the early colonial period, in the seventeenth century the concept of *huaca* was revitalized as a vehicle for integrating Andean practices and beliefs into Christianity. The *mestizo* chronicler Inca Garcilaso de la Vega denounced its common misunderstanding by Spaniards on several occasions.

*[Huaca]* means idol ... Besides this first and main connotation it also has many more that we will proceed to exemplify to make them clearer ... It means sacred thing, as in all those through which the Devil spoke [to the indios]: the idols, the hills, the big rocks, the tree the Devil got into to make them believe it was God. They also call *huaca* those things they offer to the sun, like figures of men, birds and animals made of gold, silver, wood, or any other offering which, as it had been received by the sun and therefore belonged to him, was held in great veneration. They also call *huaca* every small or big temple and the tombs in the country (Garcilaso de la Vega 2001 [1609]: 163, my translation).

Such multiplicity of the *huaca* presupposed not only different figurative representations for God but also a lack of a fixed essence of divine forces independent of the material world. As illustrated by several ethno-historians (e.g. Astvaldsson 2004; Classen 1993; MacCormack 1991; Rostworowski 1983), the Andean concept of the sacred presumed an immanent and palpable manifestation and lacked a fully abstract, impersonal idea of God. In general, Andean religion presupposed an understanding of sacred forces as members and/or components of their social and natural world. This somehow clashed with the Franciscan friars’ idea of the colonial image as the copy of an original to which, guided by resemblance, it points.

More recent ethnographic works have suggested that the Andean worldview not only presupposes the inseparability of mind and matter embodied by a shared matrix of animated substance, but also attributes animation of some kind to all materials (Allen 1997: 75) and assumes an overlapping of human, spiritual, and material characteristics. Scholars such as Tristan Platt (1996) and Thomas Abercrombie (1998) have suggested the existence of pathways (*thaki* in Aymara) which regulate this fluid and reciprocal interchange of substance as well as communication across human, material, and spiritual domains. Generally, these relations and exchanges have been held to function according to physiological processes (Tassi in press).

The historian Constance Classen (1993) describes Inca cosmology as structured around a system of reciprocity reproduced by the sensorial relations and interchange of perceptions between the human body, the *huacas*, and the body of the Inca (i.e. that of the Inca king).

For the Incas, the Earth was a body that gave birth to the people, animals and plants that lived on her. The Sun was a body that fathered the Incas, and that the Incas, in the words of Garcilaso de la Vega, ‘treated as corporeally as though he were a man like them’. The huacas were bodies that not only were given food, but also whipped when their communities of origin rebelled. When the Incas observed the stars it was not only to revere them ... but also to establish a body-to-body relation, subject-to-subject relationship with them (Classen 1993: 136).
As also described in the case of the huaca Chaupi Ñamca in the Huarochirí manuscript (Salomon & Urioste 1991: 85–6), if a huaca lies or misbehaves or does not comply with the rules of reciprocity, worship and offerings can be suspended. The god/huaca was not superpartis but could be directly affected by human action and judged by human thought.5

_Huacas_ bring other entities into being, in a process known as _camay_ (Taylor 1974). _Camay_ means the energizing of extant matter, suggesting not only an initial shaping of inert matter, but also a continuous act that works upon a being or thing as long as it exists (Salomon 1991: 16). However, the power of the _huaca_ is also constantly shaped and reproduced by this ongoing interaction with humans and things.

The idea of _huacas_ as energizing matter was also extended to religious images. To my knowledge, the first explicit indigenous reference to the association between _huaca_ and image appears in the Huarochirí manuscript. This is the first manuscript ever written in Quechua and presents a collection of myths produced by local writers in a language much more sober and down-to-earth than the contemporary rhetoric of the chroniclers.

In chapter 24 of the book, two different versions of a single event are recounted sequentially. In the first version, the _huaca_ Paria Caca lent his headdress to his people so that they could ‘raise it’ and ‘dance it’ during the fiesta in order to show their power, impress the neighbours, and provoke fear and respect. After parading the hat during the fiesta and sensing fear growing in the hearts of the neighbours, Paria Caca’s people danced and sang the headdress across the plains.

In the second version, Paria Caca’s people lost the headdress while crossing a river on the way to the fiesta. After searching everywhere for the headdress, they went back to Paria Caca and asked to borrow something that represented him, a double, an image. Moved by their tenderness, Paria Caca promised that he would soon provide them with something. On the day of the fiesta, ‘a beautifully spotted wildcat’ appeared on a wall of the village. Remembering the promise of Paria Caca, his people ‘held up its skin as they danced and sang with it’ (Salomon & Urioste 1991: 119).

The image/double tends to take the shape of a skin or dress that people ‘raise’ and ‘dance’ during fiestas. In a way, the sacred image loses its spatial fixity, stability, and bi-dimensional character to become something which is lent by the _huaca_ and which, more or less metaphorically, wraps the worshippers. The image takes the semblance of a wildcat skin, enabling Paria Caca’s people who are wearing and dancing it to ‘grab’ the power and the beauty of the same _huaca_. The image constitutes an affecting presence which fills Paria Caca’s people with an aesthetic force, provoking fear and respect in the audience.

A few paragraphs later in the same book, the anonymous Quechua writer mentions a god/huaca named Namsapa who lets his face be ‘worn’ by humans to dance as if it were a mask. Also, further on in the manuscript, mention is made of the custom of cutting out the enemy’s face after a battle in order to dance with his ‘mask’ as if to make of him a member of the community.6 Religious ‘representations’ of _huacas_ are not simply objects to be seen. More than a faithful representation of the _huaca_, the image is its dress, its cut-out face, its garment to be worn, its _quillca_.

The extirpation of idolatry in the early colonial period had produced the physical elimination of _huacas_ and a consequent reformulation of Andean theological concepts (MacCormack 1991: 408-11). Without shrines and temples to make them manifest, Andeans were induced to reconceptualize their deities in more abstract terms.

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Initially, the new material support the *huacas* found was the very body of the natives. Through a dance, cult and movement – *Taqui Oncoy* – which spread across the territory of the empire in reaction to the extirpation of idolatry (Castro-Klarén 1993), they declared themselves to be possessed by *huacas* who had ‘detached from mountains and shrines’ (Gisbert 2001: 46). It is exactly in this moment of ‘detachment’ that ‘masks’ and ‘garments’ of *huacas* become crucial ritual objects (MacCormack 1991: 409-10), and in their dancing the exchange and the direct physical relationship with the divine is rearticulated (Castro-Klarén 1993; MacCormack 1991; Salomon & Urioste 1991: 119).

In the Huarochirí manuscript, the Andean gods are the ones who lend their images, doubles, faces, and garments to their worshippers, who consequentially acquire the same captivating beauty and power to bewitch the beholders. In the *Taqui Oncoy*, it is the worshipper who lends his or her body to the *huaca*. If the human body becomes the means through which the divinity speaks (Castro-Klarén 1993), the process of lending the body to a *huaca* was equally empowering for the worshippers, to the point where these rituals of possession turned into real revolts against the colonial authority.

The Baroque and the intersection of Catholic and Andean iconographic regimes

During the colonial period, the Catholic religious image was a crucial domain through which Andean people began to understand and internalize repressive projects of civilization and evangelization. However, some indigenous artists and artisans became active voices in this process of cultural translation, in the same way that Catholic religious festivals, images, and processions had become for Andean communities crucial elements and institutions in which local social memory came to be inscribed (Abercrombie 1998: 301).

From the seventeenth century onwards, the ‘war of images’ that the iconoclasts and the priests had led against the ‘Indians’ at the time of the Conquest was softened as the increasingly urbanized colonial society required a use of the image that was more integrative than evangelizing (Gruzinski 2001: 160). The imposition of a foreign visual order as instigated by the iconoclasts was now considered an accomplished objective. The two main strategies that the new Baroque iconographic regime employed were the explicit substitution and/or identification of Andean deities with the Christian Holy Family and saints (Abercrombie 1998; Gisbert 2001; 2004) and, as Serge Gruzinski suggests, a new ‘emphasis on the elements of the prototype, the divine essence ... the replica harboured’ (2001: 159). This was the moment when Andean *huacas* became explicitly ‘embodied’ into Catholic religious images.

The emblematic example of this new attitude in the Andean Baroque was *La Virgen cerro* (Fig. 3), an anonymous work that is now conserved in the Casa de la Moneda in Potosí. The canvas depicts the Virgin Mary incorporated into the *Cerro Rico* of Potosí and proposes the interpenetration and coexistence of Andean and Catholic symbols and institutions. On the upper part of the canvas, the Holy Trinity stands upon the symbols of the Andean religion, the moon and the sun. In the bottom part, on the right-hand side, the Pope is flanked by a bishop, and on the left-hand side, the emperor Charles V is flanked by a *cacique* (indigenous leader). At the feet of the Virgin/mountain stands the Inca as a smaller figure. This representation of the Virgin...
Mary in the shape of a mountain has remained powerfully influential in Andean iconography, to such an extent that in contemporary urban processions and celebrations, statues of the Virgin Mary are dressed in the conical shape of a mountain and her garments even feature floral and natural decorations that recall the painting of the Cerro Rico of Potosí.

An interesting way of promoting the incorporation of indigenous worship practices into the broader Catholic iconographic system was the use of European pagan representations, which resonated with the Andean polymorphous figuration of the huaca. In Figure 4, the seventeenth-century image of the Lord of Gran Poder – Holy Trinity – is represented in a manner resembling a Celto-Roman pagan figure (Gisbert 2004). The Holy Trinity is here visualized in the shape of a Christ with three faces. In such a way, the flexible representative practices of the Catholic religious iconography were stretched to incorporate Andean gods with their multiple semblances.

After the gap created between the images and the worshipper in the Renaissance and the development of a different sensibility towards images that promoted a contemplative mode of interaction, the Andean Baroque has been characterized as an epoch of re-established corporeal closeness between the human and the divine (Gisbert 2001: 221-4). The iconographic referent of the Andean Baroque was religious sculpture, which blossomed during the seventeenth century. Sacred dolls and figures existed in several Andean cultures before the Conquest, but sculptures particularly facilitated the inclusion of foreign elements and objects into the image and reproduced the
Andean anthropomorphism that tended to attach corporeal qualities to objects, natural phenomena, and forces, and even to souls. Sculptures would be provided with human hair – donated by fervent believers – glass eyes, mirrors fixed within the mouth to simulate the shimmering of saliva, as well as rich robes, jewellery, and make-up. The tradition already existed among the Incas (MacCormack 1991), whose images and *huacas* were ‘dressed’ with the best textiles belonging to the nobility and adorned with sacred stones and precious metals as a form of offering.

The inscription of the Catholic image onto Andean *huacas* could also be complemented by the physical insertion of stones and Andean sacred objects into traditional Christian images and representations. The most striking example is the portable *retablo* of Santiago (Saint James). In Figure 5, the classic representation of the saints, the *retablo*, is adorned with a spherical stone produced by the impact of thunder on a rock. Gisbert (2004: 28-9) suggests that for Aymara worshippers Santiago holds an association with the Andean God of Thunder, *Illapa*. Interestingly, the image of Santiago has been reproduced on the surface of the stone, strengthening the correspondence between the two elements.

The Baroque understanding of the image also produced an interesting resonance with the Andean worship of the ancestors. More or less literally, the Andean Baroque religious sculptures became the bodies where the saints/ancestors were manifested. Not only were human hair of the deceased and human objects incorporated into the sculpture, human skulls and bones were also used in its ‘skeleton’ (Gisbert 2001: 216), as in the frame of the sculpture, and in the internal body of the sculpture, known as *anima*. Therefore, the ‘image’ is no longer a surface, the external and superficial layer of the sculpture (cf. Gell 1993; Strathern 1979), but a rather more complex entity where emphasis is placed on its materials, its ‘skeleton’, ‘body’, and animation. During my fieldwork, I was insistently reminded by Don Federico Mendoza, a lay member of the religious group Pastoral, of the existence of an image whose hair was growing: ‘There is an image, I don’t remember where, whose hair is growing and every now and then they cut it. Underneath there must be a skull, a whole body actually’.

*Figure 4.* Holy Trinity or Lord of Gran Poder. (Courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz.)
Wearing the image

The incorporation of Andean *huacas* and religious objects into the Baroque images of Catholic iconography came to be opposed by the rationalist wave that swept the region from the late eighteenth century. The Bourbon reforms, aimed at optimizing production and cutting down on unproductive religious practices, affected both calendric festivals and colonial iconography. The new emphasis was on rationalization as opposed to Baroque exaggerations, which were now seen as feeding mockery and derision instead of devotion. Images, too, and their related practices needed to be reformed. The open quality of the Baroque era and its permissive and tolerant character and inclination for ‘mixes’ began to be seen as degenerate. Images were cleansed of abundant decorations and attributes emphasizing their resemblance to living beings, while an attitude of ‘contemplation’ matching the latest European fashions was again promoted.

At a popular level, however, physical proximity to divine forces, the circulation of religious relics, as well as the persistence of the Baroque iconography and its techniques (Gisbert 2001) had remained almost unaltered, although they had moved underground. Local artisans in particular, such as costume-makers (*bordadores*) and mask-makers (*mascareros*), had remained popular advocates of the Baroque iconography and sensibility. Teresa Gisbert suggests that *cholo-mestizo* dance parades constitute a domain where an Andean Baroque sensibility and aesthetics have both survived and developed (see also Barragán & Cárdenas 2009). She observes striking similarities between the form, colour, techniques, and texture of religious sculpture and paintings of the seventeenth century and contemporary mask- and costume-making for the dance parades during religious festivals in urban La Paz. Her observations point out the transference of Baroque iconography, which
suddenly came to be labelled as indecent, from official Catholic representations to popular and indigenous crafts such as the embroidery of dance costumes for religious parades.

In Figures 6 and 7, we can appreciate the correspondences existing between the Baroque representation of the Archangel Michael (Fig. 6) and a contemporary Saint Michael (Fig. 7) who, despite sporting a modern shirt and tie, presents a set of similarities to his predecessor – from the helmet, the sword, the long hair, and the footwear to the decorations of the costume. If we take, for example, the archetypal figure of the morenada dancer in Figure 9, the symbol of La Paz folklore, with his bulky costume and overwhelming decorations, and we compare it with the Baroque representation of Archangel Raphael (Fig. 8), a series of correspondences can be elucidated (Gisbert 2001).

In Figure 9, the feathers of the Moreno headwear, the floral decorations at the foot of the feathers, and the wings, which in this specific case reproduce the shape of the sacred Mount Illimani, are reminiscent of the physical features of the Archangel of Figure 8. The triangular shape of the angel’s sleeves, the flowery and bow-like decorations of the footwear, and the shape and the stratified bands of the lower gown are faithfully reproduced in the Moreno ‘suit’.

The costume of the dance parades becomes a new iconographic referent, the place where the negotiation between the iconographic tradition and new emerging figurative
elements is played out. Therefore, the sacred *huaca* Mount Illimani – represented on both shoulders of the dancer in Figure 9 and taking the shape of a white-and-blue patch – is inserted in the costume like the stone/thunder in the Santiago *retablo*. Another example is found in the tie, which is a symbol of power, elegance, and wealth worn by *cholo-mestizos* only at fiestas, and which is inserted into this new religious iconography.

When I asked an image restorer, Don Juan, about the origin of the *morenada* dance, he suggested that, given the destruction of indigenous *huacas* and the religious oppression perpetrated by Creoles, Andean people had decided to dress like their god and ‘dance him’. They had decided to lend their bodies to the god so that he could find through them a source of expression and a means for bodily enjoying life. Don Juan suggested that in this way Andean people had ingeniously transformed the attempt to alienate them from their god into an intimate proximity, since ‘we were like carrying the god on our own body’. Although historically implausible, Don Juan’s explanation reveals two important elements of *cholo-mestizo* religious sensibility: the first is the corporeal quality of the contact with the divine; and the second is the role of the costume as a ‘wrapping image’ bringing about this contact.
In today’s fiesta, after the Mass for the investiture of the new fiesta steward (pasante), a picture of the Lord is fixed around the neck of the pasante and the image is paraded and danced on his body across the neighbourhood (Fig. 10). Usually the ‘wearing’ of the image is understood as sanctioning both the social and religious power acquired by pasantes through sponsoring the fiesta.

Frank Salomon (2002) had observed a similar practice of wearing the khipu5 (Fig. 11) as the expression and legitimizing of authority. Today, the khipu is perceived as an embodiment of ancestral power, history, and knowledge which, similarly to textiles, is worn by political authorities. As suggested by Xavier Albó (2002), the wearing of these ancient objects can be interpreted as the bringing to life of ancestral memories on human bodies, thus producing a physical rejoining of past and present. This seems to be indicative of a way of relating to these objects and representational devices where contact, rather than view, is paramount. In other words, the information and power embodied in the khipu appears to be communicated and instantiated through physical contact, through wearing, as if by a transference of substance directly from and with the container of that information.

Contemporary masks used by cholo-mestizo dancers in both morenada and diablada maintain technical characteristics and even materials very similar to those

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*Figure 8. Archangel Raphael. (Courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz.)*
used in colonial Baroque sculpture (Gisbert 2001), only partly displaced by the introduction of tin masks, which are condemned as much as they are accepted. Particularly in the crafting of masks, the *mascarero* or mask-maker tends to describe his craft as ‘taking out’ (*quitarse*) the mask from inside (see also Cánepa 1998). The process is understood not just as a creative shaping of one’s idea into an object, but also as a kind of liberating act which enables the mask-maker to remove something which may be dangerous and threatening from within. The mask appears not as an inanimate, independent object but rather as an entity that confronts the *mascarero*. In fact, the mask is often recognized as having living qualities and is believed to acquire the symptoms of a living body.

Vladi, an apprentice of the renowned Viscarra workshop, after preparing the mould and applying a chalk paste on the *morenada* mask, described the process of painting the mask as giving ‘shine’ and stressing the mask’s qualities and character. He also named the phase when a layer of incense or copal is eventually applied to the mask as the ‘giving of life to the mask’. From this moment onwards, the mask is thought to acquire an independent existence and, in fact, it begins to show the characteristics of a living entity: movement, emotions, and the emission of sounds and voices.

*Figure 9. Moreno, Gran Poder, 2004. (Photo reproduced courtesy of Juan Yupanqui.*)
The costume-maker (bordador) Jorge Quisbert told me that in some towns of the Bolivian plateau, lambs’ blood is poured onto the costumes after the end of the parade so as to free the dancers from spirit possession produced by the prolonged contact with the costume.

The objective of this action is to make the dancers rest peacefully, to sleep without the preoccupation of having to wake up and dance again. The blood takes away the insomnia. You also need to burn incense and make the smoke touch the costumes. The blood spreads across the costume and this relieves the dancer so that he can normally go to work the following day (Jorge Quisbert, in interview with the author, 13 May 2004).

My suggestion is that the dance parades had become forms of worship of the image of local saints where a level of proximity, contact, and exchange between the worshipper and the spiritual was brought about by wearing and dancing the image. The conjunction of a certain Baroque sensibility within Andean embodied representation produced this form of ‘unorthodox’ worship, connection with, and ‘representation’ of the divine. The costume/image of the dance parades constituted a new iconographic referent for the integration of different figurative and representational regimes but also highlighted a specific sensibility in the relationship with the spiritual world.

**Material abundance in cholo-mestizo dance parades**

In the previous sections, we have observed some of the characteristics of Andean representational and religious practices and emphasized the convergence and
intersection of corporeal, material, and ‘spiritual’ elements taking place in these processes. In the following paragraphs, I will further complement this analysis by focusing on the aesthetic of material abundance in images and dance costumes, a prerogative of both cholo-mestizo parades and Baroque iconography, and explain its relevance and consequences for the Andean religious cosmology.

The aesthetic of abundance ascribed to the Baroque representative regime with its images dripping with jewellery, gold, pearls, silks, and velvet and the affecting presence of Baroque religious representations produces a visceral ‘attraction’ in the beholder which seems to be amplified rather than reduced in the religious practices of cholo-mestizos. The yearly Fiesta of Gran Poder is a costumed dance parade performed in honour of the image of the Lord of Gran Poder, a representation of the Holy Trinity (see Fig. 4) which has become an extremely popular icon and the recipient of intensive worship among the cholo-mestizo community. The economic ascendance of the cholo-mestizos coupled with their maintained allegiance with the indigenous world and its beliefs and networks has fed a kind of religious practice where the aesthetic of material abundance holds a key religious significance.

In the Andes, the performance of abundance has traditionally been envisioned as a crucial element in the negotiation, articulation, and exchange between the human and the spiritual world (Allen 1988; Bastien 1985; Harris 2000; Randall 1993). In 2004,
half-way through the dance parade of Gran Poder with my four-stone costume and
mask, I grabbed the arm of my fellow dancer Juan and told him that I was going to
give up. We had been dancing for about three hours along the five-mile route under
the mid-day sun with heavy costumes and masks and the weight of the costume and
the continuous oscillations had become unbearable. Juan reached for a small bottle of
whisky and he forced me to bolt down a considerable amount. He put on a straight
face and said: ‘You can’t stop now, you must exaggerate if you want the power of the
tata’.9

The collective dance parades are material and sensorial amplifications which con-
solidate a pathway of communication between the human and the divine. These faith-
ful displays of joy, beauty, and material excess made to the spiritual world carry the
expectation that the power cholo-mestizos achieve in these events and their proximity to
spiritual forces will grant them the force to reflect back into their own lives the same,
if not more, abundance. In the case of the Fiesta del Gran Poder, material abundance
constitutes a force instantiating a contact with the saint. In fact, the saint is not only
enjoying this performance of plenty (see also Nash 1979), but also taking pride and
prestige from it, reinvigorating its power and reproducing its presence in every corner
of the city (Tassi 2010b).

Something rather similar takes place during the celebration of the novenas when
devotees take their religious images to the Sanctuary of Gran Poder. As suggested by
Catherine Allen (1997), the act of bringing images to the church during the novena
acquired the meaning of ‘recharging the batteries’ of the copies of the Lord of Gran
Poder. However, the performance of floral abundance together with the abundance of
copies seemed to generate a performance of plenty which also affected and regenerated
the original (cf. Taussig 1993). As suggested by my friend Carlos, the overflow of images
produced during the novena is like a family reunion when sons and daughters go back
to the father’s home during fiestas. During this act, the ‘father’ image (and its authority)
is ‘strengthened’, ‘spoiled’, and regenerated as if this performance of plenty enabled it to
reproduce its force and generative powers.

The idea of religious images growing and producing offspring is quite common in
the city of La Paz. Christmas and the Patron Saint festivals are the moments when the
offspring of images are generated and displayed both at home and on the altars of
churches. These plaster images are referred to as niños, or children, and they can be
addressed as ‘sons/daughters of the tata’ – the father image. In representations of the
nativity, it is rather common to encounter several niños, which appear to be a referent
both to the birth of Jesus and to the reproductive power of the image-God. Therefore,
representation acquires the connotation of an act of filiation and reproduction which,
on the one hand, distributes power to the offspring and, on the other, strengthens the
social capital of the father image.

In Gran Poder, the repeated and exaggerated display of images/costumes, expen-
sive cloth, and jewellery and the parade of richly decorated costumes – as well as
the abundance of food and alcohol and the intensity of music played by large
brass bands – are elements understood to elicit ‘attraction’ (atracción), a term very
popular among cholo-mestizos. Particularly when describing the activities and
practices related to the Gran Poder festival, my informants often employed the verb
‘to attract’.

‘Attraction’ is a manifestation enabled by a concomitance of spiritual forces and
display of material abundance. ‘Attraction’ can derive from the visually rich costume

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and the powerful choreographic effect of the dance performed by an abundant number of fraternity members. In fact, this display of abundance can be a visual offering to the spiritual world which holds the capacity to consolidate a relation and instantiate an exchange of forces and power among the material, the human, and the divine.

Carlos Estrada, an active member of the Committee organizing the Gran Poder festival, describes the feeling of parading with the costume as if the tata were clinging onto the top of your body, and you were carrying him across the streets of La Paz. In the months preceding the dance parade, Carlos would take some of the components of his Moreno costume to 'listen to Mass' (see Harris 2006) and to have them blessed by the priest. At the end of the Mass, worshippers usually gathered at the edge of the churchyard holding either images of the saint or parts of the costume to be blessed.

Conclusions

In the Andes, the study of textiles and khipus has elicited a debate on embodied forms of representation (Arnold & Yapita 1998; 2000; Platt 2002), 'tactile/iconic signifiers' (Quilter & Urton 2002), and 'emotional fusion of fabric and being' (Cereceda 1986). This suggests that the sensual, acoustic, graphic, and therefore material body of representation is not split from a transcendent meaning but rather deeply intertwined with it. Denise Arnold and Juan de Dios Yapita (1998; 2000) strongly suggest the corporeal and synaesthetic quality of Andean representations and their ability to produce a transformative impact on human, natural, and supernatural elements. Andean representations are described as aesthetic performances holding a generative power, meaning the ability to 'give birth' or at least 'give life', producing living and tangible beings.

Drawing from the Andean understanding of quillca, where media and genre intersect in the production of a palpable manifestation of the power of the represented, and from an Andean Baroque sensibility which endorses material abundance as a crucial religious and cosmological force, I have proceeded to highlight the role of religious images and dance costumes in the Andes in activating a physical contact and exchange between the worldly and the supernatural. Through their history, Andean images have acquired increasingly corporeal and physiological connotations and powers. From being the skin of the huaca, since the Baroque era images have turned into proper corporeal agents provided with hair, skull and bones, and animation. These physical and living qualities have been reproduced and amplified in contemporary dance costumes and masks while religious representation has grown into an act of filial relation. Images are and have been conceptualized as objects 'affiliated' with the divine which are not supposed to be worshipped – at least in a conventional Christian way – but rather 'worn', 'put on'. This transformed the religious practice of 'looking at', 'contemplating', and 'praying at' images into the action of 'getting inside', 'dressing with', and 'dancing' them. Physical and corporeal contact becomes crucial to these interactive religious practices. If, as implied by the idea of quillca, images contained the power, the presence, and the genetic material of a spiritual force in their own fabric, they were neither static 'containers' nor fixed 'embodiments' of the divine. They worked as transitional objects regulating and instantiating flows and relations between spiritual and human domains.
The modern ideology of ‘purification’ (Latour 1993), with its aggressive compulsion to rationalize religious practices and sever spiritual from material domains, attempted to create a boundary between the object and the subject, the decent and the indecent, the spiritual and the material. What we have observed in the religious practices of cholo-mestizos is a constant effort to maximize relations, contacts, and communication among spiritual, material, and human domains. The abundant materiality of images and costumes sustains the performative efficacy of ‘attracting’ humans and deities into relations and communication and consequentially instantiating cosmological reproduction. In that sense, images and costumes do not only produce a copy or imitation, but allow for a ‘palpable and sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’ (Taussig 1993: 21). These interactive practices open up a tactile experience of the ‘Other’ where the categories of subject and object, spiritual and material are malleable and not so firm.

The ascetic and individual renunciation ‘of all that is material and physical’ as a pathway to God is paralleled by cholo-mestizos’ exaggerated, collective participation in the production of abundance. In so doing, cholo-mestizos highlight a peculiar history of religious modernity where presence and matter constantly ‘erupt into the spaces of their denial’ (Orsi 2008: 13). In this parallel history of modernity, their ‘indigenous’ beliefs and practices are not safely consigned to the past and tradition. Instead, their routes extend well into the present (Orsi 2008: 16), highlighting the limits of modern knowing and its categories. Today, cholo-mestizo images and religious festivals are the emblem of an Andean Catholic theology (Platt 1996; cf. Orta 2006) with clear political connotations. Such hybrid theology, with its displays of material abundance and denial of absence, disrupts the modern secularizing and dematerializing drive of political regimes attempting to curtail the access of despised ethnic groups to religious power. As suggested by Robert Orsi (2005: 51), doctrinal and ideological efforts to obliterate the power and ‘sensual presence’ from ‘indigenous’ images and things often attempted to transfer that same power onto another set of objects which the elites or the state could claim to be theirs.

NOTES

I am grateful to Nanneke Redclift, Roger Sansi-Roca, Martin Holbraad, Ioannis Kyriakakis, Matthew Engelke, Editor of IRAI, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and critiques of this article. I also would like to thank Varinia Oros, Frank Salomon, Teresa Gisbert, Rubén Ruiz, and Edgar Arandia for their help with the iconographic material.

1 Cholo can be a problematic term with a pejorative connotation. It is usually used by creoles (criollos) to refer disparagingly to urban settlers of rural indigenous origins. However, in the neighbourhood of Gran Poder, the word cholo can be embraced by the urban indigenous to vigorously emphasize their cultural difference from criollos. Alluding to the transitional process of urbanization and integration of indigenous people in the modern nation-state, the cholo has increasingly come to represent a social category of its own. In fact, today the word cholo represents a social group which religious and political authorities have not been able to domesticate, therefore embodying a potential challenge for modern urban values and practices.

Identifying the mixing of Andean and Spanish ‘blood’, the definition of mestizo has been extended to include the cultural mestizaje of people of indigenous origins who left the countryside for the city. While mestizos are generally better integrated into the urban world and have often embraced the urban life-style and its habits and customs, cholos still maintain strong bonds with the peasant-indigenous world and culture.

In relation to the settlers of Gran Poder, given the neighbourhood’s heterogeneous social composition and, simultaneously, its coherent though flexible sense of community, I opted for the definition of

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cholo-mestizo (see also Reinaga 1971; Sanjinés 2004). Despite the differences, distinctive social organization, values, and aesthetics characterized the cholo-mestizos (for an in-depth discussion of urban social categories in La Paz, see Tassi 2010a).

2 Although the intrinsic divinity of sacred images was suppressed by the Council of Lima (1582), representing the divine remained an impossible and yet necessary endeavour, accounting for the human need in certain moments of weakness to materialize the divine. In practice, however, the mythic physicality of images remained widespread.

3 The ethnographic material used in this article was collected during a total of eighteen months of fieldwork conducted in the city of La Paz between 2003 and 2004 and in successive field trips in 2008 and 2009. My research aimed to outline the intersection of economic and religious practice and material and spiritual domains among cholo-mestizos in the neighbourhood of Gran Poder. I worked with two of the largest cholo-mestizo religious fraternities, focusing on their economic networks and religious practices as well as on their involvement in and organization of the religious festival of Gran Poder.

4 This overlapping of material and meaning has also been explored by scholars working on Andean textiles and forms of representation (cf. Arnold & Yapita 2000; Cereceda 1986; Quilter & Urton 2002).

5 Edward Muir (1997) suggests that in medieval Europe, representations of Christian saints could also be subjected to criticism, disapproval, and even physical beating.

6 With regard to the transformation of the dead enemy into 'auxiliary' in the Andes, see the work on head-taking by Denise Arnold and other scholars (Arnold & Hastorf 2008; Arnold & Yapita 2000).

7 While Gruzinski is an historian of the Mexican colonial world, some of his insightful observations on seventeenth-century Spanish colonial practices and iconography seem pertinent also to the Andean context.

8 The khipu (alsoquipu) is a recording device made of coloured strings and knots used in the Inca empire to administer its territory and record information and narratives.

9 Father in Aymara. It is an affectionate way to refer to the Lord of Gran Poder.

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« Danser l’image » : matérialité et spiritualité des « images » religieuses des Andes

Résumé
Dans la tradition chrétienne, la représentation du divin est souvent considérée comme une gageure impossible et pourtant nécessaire, motivée par la nécessité humaine de visualiser Dieu dans les moments de faiblesses. À partir des matériaux de terrain obtenus auprès de groupes autochtones urbains à La Paz, en Bolivie, l’auteur suggère ici que l’articulation des traditions et pratiques de représentation locales et catholiques a conduit à concevoir l’image religieuse moins comme un objet de contemplation détachée ou une référence à un symbole religieux que comme un élément chargé d’énergie, qui donne physiquement forme à la relation et aux échanges entre le monde matériel et le monde spirituel. L’article suggère qu’à travers l’étude des images religieuses andines, on pourrait élaborer un autre point de vue ontologique sur la relation entre les mondes spirituel, matériel et vivant.

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