

Colonialism in Context
An Aymara Reassessment of ‘Colonialism’, ‘Coloniality’
and the ‘Postcolonial World’

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Introduction

On her way down to the centre of La Paz, after one of her conversations with the shaman,¹ Don Carlos, Muxsa watches the people on the street and laughs, ‘thinking of them as sick really changes your idea of people, doesn’t it? But that’s what they are, sick.’ She stops laughing and says, ‘the worst thing is that we too are sick.’ Muxsa is an urban Aymara woman in her late twenties, and although she does not distinguish herself from other urban women of her age, she is a recently initiated and consecrated shaman. Don Carlos is a tranquil, humble middle-aged man; but he is also a determined and

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¹ I use the term ‘shaman’ as the generic term for a great variety of Aymara ritual and ceremonial specialists, e.g. the *yatiri* (he/she who knows), the *qulliri* (curer), the *ch’amakani* (owner of darkness), the *amawt’a* (wise one). However, see Huanca (1989, 36) for a discussion concerning the appropriateness of using the term ‘shaman’ specifically in the Aymara context.

demanding *indianista-katarista*² shaman. As a shaman and activist, or perhaps more correctly, as a shaman activist, he embodies the current process of indigenous political activism and its merging with indigenous cosmology and ritual practice (see Burman 2009). Muxsa and I visit Don Carlos now and then to listen and learn; we talk about matters such as spirits, illnesses and cures.

In conversation, Don Carlos criticizes all things modern and urban, and praises tradition and the rural community. I ask him why he then lives in the city of El Alto and not in his natal community. ‘Why do *you* think I am here in the city?’ he asks me in his strongly Aymara-accented Spanish. From underneath his baseball cap, his intense gaze demands a response. I have none. ‘I am here to save the people, to cure the people,’ he says, ‘in the city they are all sick, they are all domesticated.’ Laughing, he then asks, ‘*Domesticated*, can you use that word like that? Like a cow, right? Like a sick cow... Anyhow, the shaman has to go together with disease.’ At the core of Muxsa and Don Carlos’s diagnoses of urban and modern being is the experience of Colonialism and its outcomes³. Don Carlos and Muxsa do not think of urbanity and modernity as unintentional side effects of Colonialism. Nor do they think that a process of modernization of Bolivian society would emancipate it from Colonialism. Urbanity, modernity and colonialism prove interlaced processes, or different aspects of the same phenomenon. Decadent modern-day urban life represents, in their view, the primary contemporary incarnation of Colonialism. Their notions resonate with Ramón

² In order to understand the rise of the *indianista-katarista* movement in Bolivia, one ought to scrutinize the post-revolutionary intense Aymara experience of continuing sociopolitical marginalization, second-class citizenship, discrimination and racism, on the one hand, and the collective memory of colonial serfdom and indigenous rebellion, on the other hand (cf. Rivera Cusicanqui, 2003 [1984]).

³ When I spell ‘Colonialism’ with an upper case ‘c’, I primarily intend to capture a subaltern Aymara understanding of an apparatus of past and present domination; but I also spell *Colonialism* in this manner to encompass ‘colonialism’, defined as ‘classic colonialism’ and ‘coloniality’ defined as the nature of the present world order (cf. Ramón Grosfoguel 2006: 29).

Grosfoguel's⁴ on global coloniality and transmodernity when he states that, 'coloniality and modernity constitute two sides of a single coin' (2006, 27), and they also resonate with Arturo Escobar, when he argues that, 'there is no modernity without coloniality' (2003, 61). And so it is not a question of modernity's inability to overcome Colonialism, but rather of modernity's status as an innate part of Colonialism. In short, modernity is coextensive with Colonialism, and Colonialism develops as a constitutive part of modernity. Or, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes, 'Modernity as a discourse and as a practice would not be possible without coloniality, and coloniality continues to be an inevitable outcome of modern discourses' (2007, 244). At the same time, though, Muxsa and Don Carlos's notions of Colonialism differ from those of Grosfoguel, Escobar and Maldonado-Torres. These various notions diverge as their respective holders form meaning from differing ontological, epistemological and, in the end, cosmological dimensions. According to Muxsa and Don Carlos, people are ill from Colonialism and in need of a cure.

In contemporary Bolivia, the concept *Colonialism* is used so frequently, and with such distinct connotations by such a diverse set of actors that it demands scrutiny. Indigenous activists employ the concept, shamans and their apprentices make use of it, high-ranking officials, and even the president, bring it into official state discourse and politics. Consequently, the meaning of the concept cannot be taken for granted. When Muxsa and Don Carlos speak of Colonialism they express themselves in the idiom of modernity. However, this does not mean they necessarily embrace the *logics* and the *semiotics* of modernity; the semantic, semiotic or cosmological meanings of Colonialism cannot be assumed. This article, then, examines how Colonialism — as a cosmologically informed process of profound existential and political implications — is understood, experienced and conceptualized by Aymara shaman activists. By contextualizing the

⁴ See also Grosfoguel's article in this volume.

term Colonialism this article reassesses not only the supposed *postcolonial* nature of the world, but also the distinctions between *colonialism* and *coloniality*.

Colonialism as illness

Aymara shamans are engaged in ritual therapy and their equation of Colonialism with illness is consistent with this. Colonialism is understood as a *strange* subject with agency and it is treated as such in ritual curing practice; decolonization is interpreted in terms of healing. Interestingly, such an equation is found elsewhere too, in state discourse and in *indianista-katarista* discourse, albeit more metaphorically. Colonialism is not only understood as a *yaqha* (strange) illness inflicting the Aymara body, world and spirit, but also as *encompassing a strange state* of worry, stress, fear, envy, individualism and negligence of *native spirits* in the landscape. This *strange state* not only aggravates illnesses; it causes new illnesses to emerge. In other words, Colonialism is on the one hand considered a sickness and on the other hand the source of sickness. Most notions of illness held by Aymara shamans find their equivalents in notions of Colonialism. Three of those correspondences will be the focus of the following discussion. They are notions of loss, imposition, and incompleteness.

Loss is persistently present in the Aymara world. The risk of *ajay sarqata* — i.e. losing one's spirit or soul (*ajayu*) or certain aspects of it — is real to urban and rural Aymara men and women alike. The fright produced by a barking dog or a truck blowing its horn may be enough for the spirit to detach from the human body, especially if the affected person is a child or if they wander worried or afraid. Spirit loss may result in corporeal and mental symptoms. However, at the core of the illness is the loss of one's ability and will to interact properly with others, i.e. the loss of one's social personhood,

and, ultimately, the loss of one's proper human nature. The illness caused by spirit loss finds a parallel in notions of Colonialism as implicated in the loss of something of vital importance — the very essence of virtuous social being, of moral Aymara personhood. This is a theme that has been further elaborated in ethnopolitically framed notions of the loss of Aymara identity caused by Colonialism. In one way, then, Colonialism is conceived of as a pathological state. In another, Colonialism is also conceived of as the disorder required for loss to occur. Worry, fear, and lack of respect for the ancestors are identified by shamans as some of the most fundamental reasons for spirit loss to take place, while simultaneously representing pathological states and attitudes intimately associated with the *strange* modernity brought about by Colonialism.

Loss is central to notions of illness and notions of Colonialism alike, and the same is true of notions of imposition. Moreover, in Aymara therapeutic systems of knowledge there is an association between *loss* and *imposition*. If the loss of an innate spirit could be visualized as the *loss of self*, then the subsequent imposition of a *strange* spirit made possible by that loss could be visualized as the imposition of *an other self*. Nevertheless, that *other self*, because of its strange nature and its otherness, is destined to have an unhealthy influence upon its human subject. The *other self* forces the subject to live *an other life* with an illusory view of reality, and to estrange the once *proper* existence. The shamans' equation of Colonialism with illness may thus be understood in relation to this equation of the imposition of strange spirits with the imposition of strange notions, norms and values brought about by Colonialism.

Intertwined with these expressions of loss and imposition, are notions and experiences of *incompleteness*. Inherent in Aymara ideas of physical and spiritual health and social wellbeing, there is a concept of *phuqata* meaning wholeness and completeness; this is a concept intimately associated with *the sacred*. The deed that

intrinsically contradicts completeness is dismemberment, and it is consistent that dismemberment becomes one of the archetypical but yet multivocal symbols of Colonialism. Colonialism is characterized as the dismemberment of an indigenous political and social body of virtuous and legitimate exercise of power. However, it may also be experienced as the dismemberment of one's being, and many young urban shaman apprentices and activists express their sense of being colonized in terms of incompleteness and retain a vivid recollection of the act that crystallizes *Colonialism as dismemberment* — the execution by dismemberment of eighteenth-century Aymara rebel leader Tupaj Katari.

Aymara notions of Colonialism, then, would seem to be informed by Aymara concepts of illness. However, I argue that rather than a unidirectional process of notions of illness informing notions of Colonialism, there is a conceptual interweaving of both ideas. It is not as though Aymara considerations of illness constitute the fundamental reference for interpreting more recent sociopolitical events. Moreover, Aymara perspectives of illness have probably changed because of the very Colonialism that is currently contested and resisted in the idiom of Aymara notions of illness. Central to my argument, however, is that contemporary Aymara notions of illness and contemporary Aymara notions of Colonialism — including radical *indianista-katarista* readings — share, to a noteworthy degree, the same dynamic frame of interpretation. They depart from the same social and cosmic order, and they acquire meaning and are articulated from within shared, but by no means static, cosmological dimensions of significance. The shamans' equation of Colonialism with illness, then, is only understood when one departs from those very cosmological conceptions that inform ideas of Colonialism and ideas of illness alike.

The myth of a postcolonial world

This brief discussion of Aymara comprehensions of Colonialism shows, I argue, that the analytical tools developed to understand colonial and *postcolonial* experiences elsewhere – i.e. conventional postcolonial theories – cannot be simply transferred and applied to an indigenous Latin American context, such as that of the Aymara. This is partly because the liberation of the former Latin American colonies and the foundation of independent republics did not result from native rebellions expelling the colonialists but from disagreement between peninsular Spaniards and *criollos* born in the colonies over the right to exploit the colonial territories and the ‘native’ populations (see Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, 2008 for more details of the Latin American *postcolonial* experience). Arguably, the distance between the dominating and the dominated is more significant in cases like that of contemporary Bolivia, in which class and ethnicity tend to coincide, than in cases where they do not. This has consequences for how Colonialism is experienced. To the indigenous peoples in Latin America it is a question of continuous Colonialism; the colonialists have not left. And although the colonial sociopolitical structure was not abolished upon *liberation* in most former colonies (Grosfoguel, 2006), the question is whether or not the exercise of power continues to be a privilege enjoyed by the descendants of the colonialists.

Although the *post* in *postcolonial* is contentious for the globe as a whole, it is even more so in relation to specific parts of the world. Consequently, ‘the myth of a postcolonial world’ (Grosfoguel 2006, 28) has never flourished in Aymara figuration. As illness, as lived experience and as collective memory, Colonialism is still present in the Andes. Central to contemporary Aymara experiences of Colonialism is what I term ‘the grand narrative of *la patria*’. It is a patriotic story of the woe and glory of the republic, its heroes and martyrs as told by the dominant *mestizo-criollo* elites and subsequently

instilled in the masses to provide a nationalist frame of interpretation for people's everyday encounters with a society characterized by its profound colonial nature. People's experiences of institutionalized racism, marginalization and exploitation are then supposed to be rendered meaningful in relation to the heroic sufferings that *la patria* has endured – war, defeat, territorial concessions, foreign exploitation and so on – which would, in turn, cause people to interpret their sociopolitical situation in a disarmed and conformist manner. Although for this result, the grand narrative of *la patria* must assume legitimacy.

While there are, of course, many Bolivians who subscribe to the grand narrative of *la patria*, the *traditional* version of the story was severely challenged by the indigenous and popular uprisings from 2000 to 2005. Moreover, since 2006 and the accession of Evo Morales the narrative is in flux. Nevertheless, to Muxsa and Don Carlos, this grand narrative is by definition illegitimate since it is the work of the dominant *other* trying to cloak an indigenous world and to muffle any indigenous counter-narrative. *La patria* itself is illegitimate to them. Since the traditional governing elites are *yaqha*, i.e. other or strange, it follows that *la patria* is as well. In short, *la patria* is sick with Colonialism.

To Aymara shamans and activists alike, the Bolivian state apparatus is the institution that *per se* represents *yaqha*; that is, *strangeness* in its purest form, or *otherness* embodied. The otherness of the Bolivian state apparatus is intimately associated with its conceived illegitimacy, its inscrutable ways, exploitative politics, and its repressive exercise of power. The shamans associate such strange politics not only with the strange origin of those who have held power since the foundation of the republic — a situation that only recently started to change — but also with the overwhelming presence of strange spirits within the walls of the power structures of the state, giving a

pathological and strange taint to anything emerging from such structures. Centuries of strange rule, state repression, and *mestizo-criollo* dominance have caused places and buildings to fall ill. The strange illnesses associated with modern urban life are found in these venues of parliamentary power in a distilled, and hence more severe, form. Strange spirits saturate rooms and corridors, streets and plazas and effect thoughts, feelings, acts, and politics of the people dwelling there. Evo Morales' victory at the polls in December 2005 did not change that. There is an imminent risk of the new regime being infected, or as the shaman Don Carlos puts it, 'they will be with bad thoughts. Like the *q'aras*⁵ thought of killing people, they will think the same.'

Don Carlos' statement should not be understood merely as an Aymara version of Lord Acton's observation that 'power corrupts'. In Aymara society, there is nothing inherently *bad* about power. Rather, power and authority are strongly associated with the notion of *cargo*, i.e. a social obligation that is often costly and laborious to fulfill. Neither should Don Carlos's statement be considered a simplistic metaphor chosen to comment on the state of national politics. Instead, he gives a medical diagnosis on the health of tangible buildings and of the officials working there. Consequently, the institutions of the Bolivian state apparatus are distrusted and even feared by many. They are not experienced as entities to serve the people, but as entities of a raw and capricious exercise of power. Hence, if that is *la patria*, then Don Carlos and his fellow shaman activists do not feel part of it. Rather, their sense of belonging is cultivated in other contexts and their identities are constituted in opposition to the strange colonial *patria* of the dominant. The decolonization of Bolivia would imply, if not its de-bolivianization, at least its re-signification.

⁵ Q'ara is the Aymara term for Bolivians of Europeans descent. It literally means 'peeled' and its usage is often explained with an anecdote of how the Spaniards came to what today is Bolivia 'without anything, no women, no belongings, no land', i.e. peeled. The dominant are culturally and socially peeled. Its connotations are related to another Aymara concept, 'yaqha', i.e. 'other' or 'strange'.

The distinction between ‘colonialism’ and ‘coloniality’

Drawing on Anibal Quijano (1991, 1993, 1998) and others, and as I mention in the note that starts this essay, Ramón Grosfoguel emphasizes the need to distinguish between *colonialism* and *coloniality*.⁶ He uses the concept colonialism when referring to: “‘colonial situations’ enforced by the presence of a colonial administration such as the period of ‘classic colonialism’” (2006: 29). The concept *coloniality*, though, is used to denote: “‘colonial situations’ in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system’ (2006: 29).

While Grosfoguel’s definition of colonialism is tied to an official and established colonial administration, such as once held by Spain, Portugal or England; coloniality is the nature of the contemporary world order, characterized by North American hegemony and bolstered by international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This distinction between ‘colonialism’ and ‘coloniality’ is used to capture the ongoing colonial nature of relations between north and south; although virtually no ‘classic’ colonial administrations persist today, the people of the south continue to be exploited as cheap labor by those of the north. Still, I posit, the difference between colonialism and coloniality is not equally relevant in all contexts, nor from all perspectives.

As Grosfoguel notes, all speech is positioned within structures of power (2006, 21). From the objective position that Grosfoguel criticizes for its hegemonic and universalistic pretensions (2006, 22), the distinction between colonialism and coloniality

⁶ The same distinction is more or less unanimously confirmed in a recently published thoroughgoing work edited by Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (2008).

may be relevant for analyzing the sociopolitical fields of power in which the indigenous peoples of Bolivia find themselves. Although the Spanish colonial administration no longer holds power over their former indigenous subjects, Aymara people of the 21st century are subalternized and impoverished in a global system that still has colonial traits. The distinction between colonialism and coloniality is useful for describing these persistent colonial politics that underpin the global order. However, I suggest that this distinction is less obvious from an Aymara point of view. On the contrary, if this conceptual distinction is made in order to highlight the continuity of the colonial dynamic, it may be counterproductive for the Aymara case. *The myth of a postcolonial world*, i.e. the notion that ‘the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world’ (Grosfoguel 2006, 28), finds no resonance among Aymara people. Colonialism has never been understood as an obsolete system necessarily tied to the Spanish colonial administration, but rather as a contemporary mechanism of domination linked to *the modern project*, in which the indigenous peoples are the dominated and *the others* are the dominant.

Although Aymara shamans and activists currently recognize the United States, and not Spain, as the source of strange colonial power, the Aymara experience is not one of rupture with the colonial past or of any significant transformation of their daily experience of their subalternity in Bolivian society. The *mestizo-criollo* elites are, to them, still the incarnation of strange colonial powers in Bolivia. Whether the dominant other is supported by the Spanish Crown or the Pentagon is of lesser importance. Moreover, from the perspective of my Aymara interlocutors, it would make no sense to speak of the Colonialism of the republican era as *internal colonialism*,⁷ since many of them do not feel part of and usually do not acknowledge the republic of Bolivia. ‘Internal

⁷ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (see e.g. 2003) uses the concept ‘internal colonialism’ in her works on indigenous peasant struggles during the twentieth century. According to Prochaska (1990: 8), the concept was used first by Lenin and then by Gramsci, from where it was adopted by George Bandalier, Robert Blauner and Pablo Casanova among others.

colonialism' would, to them, mean Aymara people dominating other Aymara people. The dominant are *yaqha*, 'other'/'strange', or *q'ara*, 'peeled'. There is, to my shaman and activist informants, nothing 'internal' to the asymmetric power relations between Aymara people and *q'aras*. The grand Bolivian narrative of *la patria* describes 'colonial times' as something of the past, but Aymara collective memory of colonial subordination and anticolonial rebellions, as well as, contemporary Aymara experiences of sociopolitical subordination and institutionalized racism make Colonialism an ongoing experiential reality.⁸ Although one might 'objectively' identify a break between Spanish colonialism and global coloniality, this is bridged by indigenous collective memory, everyday experience and a cosmologically entrenched notion of Colonialism as one continuous illness.

Scholars working within the *de-colonial turn* have theorized productively about subaltern epistemologies and perspectives (see for e.g. the works of Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Ramón Grosfoguel). Their critiques of Eurocentric perspectives have alerted me to issues that include the coloniality of power, of knowledge, of gender and of being. As noted by Loomba (2005, 22), however, 'the postcolonial' and 'the subaltern', or in this case, 'coloniality', cannot be meaningfully studied outside of specific contexts. The de-colonial turn should be anchored to specific lives and cosmologies by exploring the existential meanings behind subaltern notions of Colonialism and decolonization and, ultimately, of the world. This enterprise involves applying Grosfoguel's (2006: 22) emphasis on the importance of 'subaltern epistemologies'.

⁸ If there is a rupture in the reproduction of colonial power relations in Bolivia, it began in 2006, when the first indigenous president ever was instated. Andrew Canessa (2007: 159) argues that "it is possible to believe that the country has indeed entered a postcolonial era".

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