

## Moments of Redemption: Decolonization as Reconstitution of the Body of Katari

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This essay responds to Gina Athena Ulysse's call to participate in this forum, since her idea of *rasanblaj* formulated in the Caribbean context strikes me as connected in intriguing ways to a notion of *reconstitution* elaborated by indigenous Aymara activists and intellectuals engaged in a project for political and spiritual decolonization in Bolivia.

In 2006, two young Aymara activists (Abraham Delgado and Willy Paco) and an older Aymara ritual specialist (Valentín Mejillones) met up to talk politics and reflect on their activities:

VALENTIN: We're in a bad way. We'll never be able to go forward.... We are divided just as they divided our great leader Tupaj Katari. Divided like this, we'll never do anything.

ABRAHAM: It's true that everything they've done [to us] started there in the town of Peñas. That's the place where they divided our leader. We can't begin from what is divided. We have to do something.

They were reflecting on the myriad and profound challenges faced by radical Aymara groups seeking to alter what they see as power relations and a course of history entrenched over centuries. For indigenous activists and intellectuals, the fundamental problem in the land today known as Bolivia derives from enduring dynamics of colonialism, especially internal colonialism. These challenges are not only external obstacles at the level of the country as a whole, such as a state controlled by foreign powers or creole and mestizo elites, a racialized class hierarchy, or forms of cultural discrimination. They also involve internal fractures—divisions present within indigenous and popular social movements themselves. According to some, the problems can even be traced more intimately to debilitating psychic or spiritual fissures. For Abraham, the countervailing forces in 2006 were daunting, but they were not a cause for outright despair. His acknowledgment of the many historical conditions impeding transformation went together with a conviction that transformation was indeed possible. It was, in fact, in that moment of sober recognition in 2006—"we can't begin from what is divided"—that a creative new idea emerged about how to initiate transformation. In the town of Peñas, they would spiritually reconstitute the body of Tupaj Katari.

Tupaj Katari was the bold, charismatic leader of tens of thousands of Aymara community troops that rose up in March 1781, laid siege to the Andean highland city of La Paz, and sought to bring down the Spanish colonial regime. It was an autonomous regional insurgency, though linked to the movement led by the Inka nobleman Tupac Amaru and his relatives in Cuzco. After withstanding more than six months of punishing assaults, royalist auxiliary troops sent from

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Buenos Aires finally liberated the Spaniards holding out in La Paz. Katari refused to surrender and retreated towards Lake Titikaka, where he was ultimately betrayed and captured in early November. After his interrogation, the colonial magistrate sentenced him to exemplary punishment, an appalling execution in the town square of Peñas, the site of an important church and pilgrimage destination, as well as the base for the insurgent movement. His severed limbs would be publicly displayed throughout the provinces where his movement had held sway:

I condemn said Julián Apasa (alias) Tupac Catari...to death.... I order that he be taken from prison with an esparto grass rope around his neck and that he be dragged from a horse's tail to the Plaza of this Sanctuary, where the town crier will publicly make known his crimes. Indians from the nearby provinces should be brought so that before the execution, it is explained to them how pleasing...[the execution] will be to God and King, and worthy of justice, beneficence, and the sustenance of [the Indians] themselves. And tied by strong ropes, he should be quartered by four horses...until he dies a natural death...and this being done, his head should be taken to the City of La Paz in order that it be placed on the gallows of the central Plaza...and that after some time it should be burned and the ashes thrown in the air. His right hand shall go first to his natal town of Ayoayo and afterward to Sicasica where the same shall be done. The left hand to the town...of Achacachi.... The right leg to the Yungas and the provincial capital of Chulumani and the other to Caquiaviri in Pacajes.... Any of his goods that have been or can be found are to be confiscated. In conformity with his infamous crimes of treachery, sedition, murder, and being a cruel man or monster of humanity in his inclinations and abominable, horrible customs, I do pronounce and sign this definitive sentence. (Francisco Tadeo Diez de Medina, 13 November 1781)<sup>1</sup>

The sentence was carried out the next day, November 14. Before the execution, Katari bore himself with utter calm and dignity and delivered a vigorous address to the assembled multitudes of Indians. One observer to the scene wrote, "They were astonished to see such a punishment applied to an Indian whom they had so respected" (Thomson 2002, 208).

For Spanish officials, the aim of the spectacle was most immediately to awe and terrify the population into subordination. But the severing and distribution of the body parts also carried a charged political connotation. They were sent to the capital towns within each of the La Paz provinces where Katari's movement had emerged and staked an alternative claim to rule. The gruesome distribution then was meant as an act of dismemberment of the body of the insurgency itself. Where a single unified insurgent body and territory had once been articulated, it was now broken apart into pieces. All would be able to witness the sovereign power of the royal justice and the devastating defeat and dismantling of the rebellion. In this staging of a colonial theater of power, the body of Tupaj Katari acquired a dramatic significance as the condemned symbol of a rebel movement and insurgent territory now shattered.

The intention of the counter-insurgency was to dissuade the population from any future challenge to colonial order, and more than two centuries later, the

repercussions of the execution were still felt by Aymara activists and their elders: “We are divided....” The reconstitution ceremony held on 14 November 2006 sought to repair the collective body dismembered under colonialism. The younger activists who initiated and organized the logistics for the event, like Abraham and Willy, identified as kataristas-indianistas and belonged to the October Youth Movement (*Movimiento Jóvenes de Octubre* or MJO, whose name refers to the popular insurrection that had toppled the neoliberal government in October 2003). They teamed up with elder ritual specialists, like Valentín, who designed the ritual and officiated, as well as older indianista political leaders, who could afford it public stature. In the end, they received an impressive array of endorsements from organizations of indigenous people, workers, neighborhood residents, students, media groups, and women in El Alto. Representatives from many of these groups attended the ceremony.

At his meeting with Abraham and Willy, Valentín lamented the execution and immolation of Katari: “Because of that quartering, because they blew the body away, the ash of our leader, we cannot unite.” Accordingly, the first challenge for the ritual reconstitution was to recover the disassembled body. Over a period of several days prior to 14 November, five commissions traveled to each of the sites where the parts had been originally dispersed, and in each they requested permission from the local authorities to conduct a small ceremony. In the ritual act, they made offerings to the Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the ancestral mountains of the area and requested permission to take the parts back to Peñas. Their aim was not to bring back actual physical remains. They understood that the ash had merged with the Pacha,<sup>2</sup> that Katari was part of the Pacha, and hence they collected earth from each of the locations in a clay pot. On 13 November, the commissions regrouped in the central square of the town of Peñas. The five clay pots were placed together on *awayu* textiles and strewn with flowers. Over the course of the afternoon and evening, a growing number of people, young and old, congregated around the ritual objects and engaged in collective conversation, reflection, and remembrance. All were very aware of Katari’s presence, and a tone of solemnity prevailed. Some sang songs or recited poetry. Others reminisced about the life of Katari and the parallels that they saw between Katari’s time and their own. They chewed coca leaf, and as the piercing cold of the highland evening came on, they lit a bonfire and passed around alcohol with which to fortify themselves and make toasts and offerings to the ancestors and heroes of the past, beginning with Katari and his consort Bartolina Sisa.

After midnight, the *amautas* or *maestros* (Andean ritual specialists), along with a few of the youth organizers, withdrew to private quarters carrying the parts of the body in order to conduct the ritual of reconstitution. The atmosphere grew increasingly intimate and full of emotion, and over a period of hours, the ceremony unfolded like a funeral wake in reverse. The purpose was not to part with the body and send off the *ayaju* spirit of the deceased, but to reassemble the body and recall and reincorporate the spirit. A larger clay vessel was now placed on an *awayu* and each of the *amautas* came forward to place the earth from his own pot within it. Shedding tears and sharing heartfelt words, their concentration was fully

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focused on Katari, whom they conceived of as their own ancestor. Valentín, one of the amautas, later described it in poignant terms:

Each one deposited [the earth] with meditations explaining which part he had brought, what his objective was in doing this, what this earth would help with, and so on. Each one spoke and meditated as he came forward. “This is his right arm.” “This is his left arm.” “This is the leg.” Last, the ones from Killikilli brought the head... Some with sobs, some pained, thinking a lot about him, the pain of his quartering, how it was in that time. We all were thinking about him in the moment of uniting him, making him into a body.

After the body was joined together into a single vessel, they knelt and prayed to give thanks. They called Katari’s spirit to return, and, after the spiritual return of their ancestor, they spoke to him and asked for his support in bringing about the unity they desired: “May the reconstitution help us, may we be able to go forward, may all the movements unify in a single bloc.”

The purpose of the ceremony was similar to some of Tupaj Katari’s own spiritual efforts in 1781. One Spanish witness recounted that, when Katari approached the pre-hispanic Aymara tombs known as *chullpas* while traveling about the high plateau, he spoke in a loud voice to the departed ancestors: “Now is the time for you to return to the world to help me!” (*¡Ya es tiempo de que volváis al mundo para ayudarme!*). In 2006, the amautas effectively did the same in invoking Katari. And having done so, they also felt Katari encouraging them. As Valentín put it: “His spirit, his *ajayu* is with us. That *ajayu* is pushing us forward. It’s like saying, ‘All right, get going! All right, do it!’” (*Ya pues, ¡andá! Ya pues, ¡haz!*).<sup>3</sup>

Before dawn on the morning of 14 November, the amautas brought the reconstituted body back to the square for the final ceremony. The public reassembled and the large vessel was placed before the ritual altar. As the sun rose over the distant horizon, the assembly raised its hands toward it, in silence and in great concentration. The amautas asked that Father Sun “bring us to unity, that there be no more racism, no more problems, that things change now.” They lit a fire to consume the ritual offering, and as this *wajta* burned, the amautas from each commission spoke to the crowd, as did representatives of the social movements. One member of the MJO read out the Declaration of Peñas, a manifesto written for the occasion. A portion of the text announces: “Tupaj Katari lives and moves like a luminous serpent announcing to his sons and daughters they should prepare for the great day of total liberation in all the corners of our territories with the *qamasa* and *ch’ama* of our self-government.”<sup>4</sup>

For indigenous movements in Latin America and the Andes, conquest in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries is commonly seen as the time of native peoples’ historic downfall. For the participants in the ceremony for Tupaj Katari in 2006, by contrast, the more immediate historical inflection was the defeat of the Aymara insurrection in 1781. In both views, subordination is not seen as a

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permanent condition but as a historical phenomenon—that is, a time, a phase, or a cycle that had an identifiable beginning and that will eventually come to an end, as well. The Aymara movement in Bolivia has come to conceive of the prospect of a new historical time, not only in terms of change in external conditions (state control, institutional racism, creole class supremacy), but in terms of its own political, cultural, and spiritual *reconstitution*. The term has been applied to the recuperation and revitalization of traditional community structures, systems of communal authority, territorial units, spiritual practices, and so forth. These are forms of collective organization, imagination, and practice that have broken down or disappeared under centuries of colonial domination, but are seen as historically valid and holding potential for the future. The indigenous movement's stubborn insistence that even the most scorned, broken, or painful elements of the past can be reclaimed and that their meanings can be recast is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's dictum about historical redemption: "Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past" (Benjamin 1969, 254). Reconstitution then may be seen as a form of redemption from the ongoing and external, internal, as well as intimate aspects of colonial domination and violence. That redemption also implies plenitude and wholeness, the received totality of the past in the present, time as a unified body.

Tupaj Katari's dismemberment and death continue to reverberate today, and the ceremony of his spiritual reconstitution was conceived to redeem the past in the present. The reconstitution implied Katari's integral reanimation in the consciousness, the political and spiritual organization, and the territoriality of indigenous Andean peoples. In concrete terms, the ceremony for Katari in 2006 had multiple unifying effects. It brought together a range of representatives from diverse social movements for the act itself. It spurred collaboration between older and younger generations of activists and political leaders who organized the event. It joined political leaders with spiritual authorities, who tend to occupy different spheres of activity. It reconciled political leaders of historically divergent ideological and party tendencies. It also caused different spiritual authorities to overcome personal rivalries in order to cooperate. This last example was especially striking during the ceremony itself. Before the final late-night ritual in which the members of the body were combined together, there had been tensions between the amautas over who would lead the ceremony. With some amautas threatening to abandon the event, one of the young activist-organizers, Abraham, resorted to a forceful moral intervention. He argued that the conflict between the amautas was a prime example of the very division of the body of Katari that the ceremony sought to heal. Ultimately, the breach was overcome and the ceremony carried to its conclusion.

In the wake of recent events, there was also a broader sense that the reconstitution of Katari signified a unified mobilization against domination. In September and October of 2003, the social movements with indigenous organizations and leaders at their head had mounted a powerful popular insurrection in the countryside and in the cities of El Alto and La Paz that had successfully toppled the neoliberal government of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. In

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May and June of 2005, mobilization had spread around the country to successfully block a counter-revolutionary bid to take over the government. These uprisings were exceptional moments of unified social and political action, lived collective experiences of reconstitution. And the historical consciousness of Tupaj Katari had been vivid and explicit, as protestors in El Alto mounted a formidable siege of the city of La Paz, just as Katari had done over two centuries earlier.

One might well wonder why some Aymara forces would believe a ceremony of reconstitution for Tupaj Katari was needed in 2006, after such powerful historic events and after the presidential election of Evo Morales, the leader of the center-left Movement to Socialism (MAS) party who is himself of Aymara descent and who sought to govern in the name of indigenous peoples. Yet in 2006, radical Aymara activists and intellectuals were already sensing that new forms of exclusion and hierarchy were coming into being. In the post-insurrectionary period, as the new governing party sought to reconsolidate state power over society, they perceived reemerging divisions in the collective social and political body.

The intense concentration and sense of harmony that participants experienced in that moment in Peñas in 2006 left them with feelings of joy and confidence. For example Elío Yanarico, another of the young activist organizers from the MJO, recounted: “That action unified us more spiritually. It made us feel more fortified. In the future... a new era begins, a new process of katarismo is coming forth.” But if the ritual experience created a profound sense of unity with lasting repercussions, its purpose was not to achieve supernatural effects or to treat real conflicts as illusions to be magically dispelled. In fact it was accompanied by an awareness of ongoing divisions, and the split between the radical Aymara activists and the MAS government sprang into view on the very morning of 14 November 2006. The organizers had originally decided not to coordinate the reconstitution ceremony with the government, for fear of losing control over the event. After the small ceremony had ended and the participants dispersed, President Morales arrived in Peñas at the head of a large convoy of Iranian-Venezuelan tractors that he would distribute to local peasants. In an official ceremony to commemorate Tupaj Katari, Morales publicly read the death sentence dictated by the Spanish magistrate Diez de Medina in order to evoke a sense of horror at the evils of colonialism. The contrast between the content of the two events could not have been more striking. This split between the government and the autonomous and radical indigenous forces in the country would only deepen in subsequent years. There was also an embarrassing subsequent development that partly vitiated the memory of the ceremony itself. Four years later, Valentín, the well-known Aymara priest instrumental in the initial design for the ritual, was jailed along with his son and two Colombians when drug police discovered petty cocaine processing on his property in El Alto.

For participants in Peñas at the time, there was a sense in which reconstitution meant collective action achieving fulfillment in the present. This sense of restored wholeness issuing in a new historical time was captured in the Declaration read that morning: “*The new pachakuti has arrived*, the new sun, for the rebirth of our historical memory, of our male and

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female leaders who have shed their blessed blood, and of our total self-government here and now and in our minds, our hearts, and in our territory today under the name Bolivia. We all stand up to govern ourselves forever.”<sup>5</sup>

But in other respects, the participants saw reconstitution as an ongoing process. In this sense, unity remained an ideal object of aspiration, ultimately for self-determination after the long divisions instituted by colonial power. The ceremony entailed a recovery of the spirit (*ajayu*, *qamasa*, or *koraji*) of Tupaj Katari and his partner Bartolina Sisa in order to wage a struggle that was not yet over. Again the Peñas Declaration reflects this understanding:

Today we declare before the memory and present body of Tupaj Katari the following:

Tupaj Katari is with us today newly converted into millions and millions. We are millions of Kataris and Sisas, and millions of Willkas, spread out like the small stones of our pachamama earth and our achachila mountain which is immense and lofty with a shining heart to *continue the struggle* for the total liberation of ourselves and our oppressors. From the heart of our mother earth and from our father the mountains, father sun and mother moon, we have come to officially declare the reconstitution of the *ajayu* and the body of Tupaj Katari, carried in the arms of men and women with telluric strength from the four points where it was dispersed by order of the assassin Francisco Tadeo Diez de Medina and exorcised by the catholic church.<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous Aymara organizers expressed a similar idea at the reconstitution ceremony held for Katari’s partner, Bartolina Sisa, in the central square in La Paz on 5 September 2008. The recuperation of Bartolina’s memory and spirit and her reanimation in the activists’ own lives were needed for their ongoing efforts:

Bartolina Sisa is present today in our bodies. Her memory, her *ajayu*, her courage did not die. She is present in her daughters, in the millions of “SISA” women who have risen up and stood up restoring our identities and our dignity against the colonial and neocolonial regime.

From this place where the body of Bartolina Sisa was torn apart, we symbolically reconstitute her *ajayu* and her body, bringing to our memory the strength and courage of an Indian woman who rose up and shook the foundations of the established order.

After the long struggles and resistance, the uprisings since 1781 during the siege of the city of La Paz, in which Bartolina rode on horseback and entered into El Alto as the female Viceroy together with her army, today we indigenous women likewise are *entering the search* for our Pachakuti, the rebirth of our memories, *struggling* for our collective rights and the restitution of our self-government.<sup>7</sup>

These reconstitution ceremonies have remained in the memory of the activists who participated

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in them as demonstrations that the unification of the body of Tupaj Katari or Bartolina Sisa is possible. In other words, the ritual act to reconstitute the body was itself a manifestation of that body. By the same token, the dramatic indigenous and popular uprisings in October 2003 as well as May and June 2005, or the siege of 1781 for that matter, remain as memories and examples of such unity in a collective political body.

But such exceptional moments should not be considered one-time events, disconnected from any time before or after. History does not come to an end after powerful moments in which given social boundaries may dissolve and established social hierarchies may fall, whether temporarily or permanently. Reconstitution must be constantly renewed, since new manifestations of colonial or internal colonial divisions continue to arise. But in the very moment of reconstitution, we can conceive of an act of redemption. Adolfo Gilly, glossing Walter Benjamin's notion of redemption, writes: "Redeemed: that is to say a mankind which in the course of its times and experiences has finally managed to attain in freedom the totality of its present" (Gilly 2006, 39). The ceremony in Peñas in November 2006, on one scale, and the insurgencies in October 2003 and May and June 2005, on another scale, were moments of such attainment. But the next moment requires its own act of decolonization and its own new redemption.

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## Note on Sources

My description of the Peñas ceremony and the quotations of activists are based on personal participation and observation, my conversations with other witnesses (especially Anders and Mina Burman), and interviews with the organizers conducted in El Alto in 2006 and 2007. For a fuller account of the events, the wider context of the Aymara efforts for reconstitution, and a transcription of the Peñas Declaration, see Thomson (2010). For a rich and important reflection on the cycle of reconstitution ceremonies for Katari and Sisa, as well as reproduction of the documents they generated (including the Peñas Declaration and the Political Declaration read at Sisa's ceremony), see Mamani Ramírez, Choque Huarín, and Delgado Mancilla (2010). Burman (2011) is a fascinating study that includes more material on the Peñas ceremony from an ethnographer closely involved with the amautas who conducted it. For an intriguing comparison, Ruelle-Orihuela and Soriano offer an account of memory-making surrounding the figure of José Leonardo Chirino, who led free people of African descent, slaves, and some Indians in the 1795 uprising in Coro, Venezuela, and was executed and dismembered by Spanish authorities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have slightly altered the translation in Stavig and Schmidt 2008, 241-242.

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<sup>2</sup> The Quechua and Aymara term *pacha* more abstractly signifies time/space and more concretely the earth.

<sup>3</sup> A number of other heroes from indigenous history were remembered as well in the ceremony. The most prominent was Bartolina Sisa, Katari's spouse and active collaborator during the uprising. Activists would carry out their own reconstitution ceremony for Bartolina on 5 September 2008 in the same square, the Plaza Murillo of La Paz, where she had been hung and then dismembered by colonial authorities.

<sup>4</sup> The name Tupaj Katari signifies "resplendent serpent." *Qamasa* and *ch'ama* are Aymara terms for energy and vitality.

<sup>5</sup> The italics in the quotation are my own. *Pachakuti* means an overturning of space and time, and serves here as an Andean idiom for revolution.

<sup>6</sup> The italics in the quotation are my own. *Willkas* here is a reference to Pablo Zárate Willka, the Aymara leader of community forces that mobilized autonomously during the Bolivian Federal War of 1899.

<sup>7</sup> The italics in the quotation are my own. The excerpt is from the Political Declaration of the Indigenous Women of This Kollasuyu Called Bolivia/Declaration of the Daughters of Our Leader and Indian Warrior Bartolina Sisa. Tupaj Katari claimed at one point to be the viceroy for the new sovereign Inka ruler Tupac Amaru in Cuzco, and Bartolina Sisa was acclaimed as the female viceroy (*virreina*). As Mamani Ramírez, Choque Huarín, and Delgado Mancilla (2010) recount, the reconstitution ceremony for Bartolina also involved tensions with the government.

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