

Special Issue

Healing in the damage: Towards novel perspectives on
human-environment entanglements in the Americas

Healing as political care:
Kallawaya ethnomedicine in Bolivia's plurinational state

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Abstract

Bolivia's transformation into a plurinational state, explicitly recognising the existence and rights of its Indigenous peoples, was ideologically underpinned by an agenda to decolonise quasi-colonial political structures while being unable to escape them. This article engages with Dürr and Rohrer's call to recognise Indigenous practices of healing as crucial responses to the planetary crisis, through ethnographically examining how the Kallawaya, an Andean Indigenous nation famed for expertise as healers, engages with the environment and political institutions that impact life at different levels of scale, through an idiom of healing. Kallawaya healing practices act on recursive relations between the human and more-than-human world, constituting forms of socio-ecological repair that address both colonial legacies and ongoing disruptions in the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Such healing imagines socio-ecological transformation beyond resilience or adaptation, suggesting that decolonial healing must be understood as a project of world-making that is at once political, ecological, and ontological. *Keywords:* Kallawaya, Bolivia, healing, recognition, decolonisation.

Resumen: Sanación como cuidado político: Etnomedicina kallawaya en el Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia

La transformación de Bolivia en un Estado plurinacional, que reconoce explícitamente la existencia y los derechos de sus pueblos indígenas, estuvo ideológicamente sustentada por una agenda orientada a descolonizar estructuras políticas cuasicoloniales, aun cuando no logró escapar plenamente de ellas. Este artículo dialoga con la petición de Dürr y Rohrer a reconocer las prácticas indígenas de sanación como respuestas cruciales a la crisis planetaria, mediante un examen etnográfico de cómo los Kallawaya (una nación indígena andina conocida por su conocimiento curativo) se relacionan con el entorno y con las instituciones políticas que inciden en la vida a diferentes escalas, a través de un lenguaje de la sanación. Las prácticas de sanación kallawaya actúan sobre las relaciones recursivas entre el mundo humano y el más-que-humano, constituyendo formas de reparación socioecológica que abordan tanto los legados coloniales como las interrupciones en curso en el Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia. Esta

sanación imagina una transformación socioecológica que va más allá de la resiliencia o la adaptación, y sugiere que la sanación decolonial debe entenderse como un proyecto de creación de mundo que es simultáneamente político, ecológico y ontológico. *Palabras clave:* Kallawaya, Bolivia, sanación, reconocimiento, descolonización.

Introduction

Healing at different levels of scale, as the special issue editors argue (cf. Dürr & Rohrer, 2022), is a decolonial endeavour, whereby relationships characterised by structural inequality are transformed, beginning with recognition by the self and others (Johnson & Sigona, 2022). However, in the context of decolonisation, recognition must go beyond a top-down acknowledgement by the state of the existence and rights of Indigenous people, to include dialogue across ontological borders (Blaser, 2010). Healing occurs not only when the state recognises indigenous peoples, but when relations between the state and Indigenous peoples and their territory are reconfigured in ways that partially undo colonial forms of hierarchy, and the separation of society and nature characteristic of the modern condition (Latour, 1993).

Charles Taylor (1994) has argued that recognition is a vital human need, the lack of which can contribute to psychological harm, because identities are formed in dialogue with others. For Indigenous peoples, particularly in Latin America, whose identities have often been profoundly shaped by state policies (Yashar, 2005, p. 282; Urban & Sherzer, 1994, p. 4), including struggles against the impositions of the state, recognition – particularly of colonial injustice and present-day coloniality¹ – may constitute an important step in decolonial repair. This necessarily involves external recognition by institutions of the past and present traumas experienced by Indigenous peoples, and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their systems of governance (Johnson & Sigona, 2022). However, critics of the liberal politics of recognition have pointed out that recognition of Indigenous peoples tends to involve the latter having to shape themselves to fit into categories that make themselves legible to the state and do not threaten the structures inherited from colonisation (Coulthard, 2024; Doyle, 2026, pp. 44-45).

Such critiques are particularly relevant in Latin America, where Indigenous people have frequently been incorporated into projects of national integration that sought to eliminate, rather than sustain, difference. Following the European conquest of the Americas, diverse peoples were collapsed by colonial bureaucracy and discourse into the homogenising category of *indios*, governed through distinct legal regimes and positioned as inferior subjects within colonial society. When twentieth-century revolutions in some Latin American countries sought to integrate Indigenous people into the nation as citizens with equal rights, this occurred through nation-making projects of *mestizaje*, the fiction that in the centuries since the European conquest of America, such a biological and cultural mixing had occurred that there was really only one national subject: the *mestizo*.

In Bolivia, following the 1952 National Revolution, the state re-labelled rural people collectively as *campesinos*, bestowing them with supposedly equal rights as citizens (even if they did not have equal ability to exercise those rights), at the same time erasing their identity as Indigenous peoples. This “difference-blind” assimilationist model of citizenship (Taylor, 1994, p. 43) exemplifies what Pierre Clastres identifies as the ethnocidal nature of the state, at the heart of which is the fear of difference, resulting in a “project of reducing the Other to the Same” and the “dissolution of the multiple into the One” (Clastres, 2010, p. 108).

The right to difference was recognised in Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution, which redefined Bolivia as a plurinational state, and was the result of decades of struggles by social movements against the homogenising politics of the state of 1952. It acknowledged the existence of Indigenous nations and peoples and set out an initial framework for them to self-govern within the Plurinational State as Indigenous Native Peasant Autonomies (Autonomías Indígenas Originarias Campesinas, AIOCs). This article draws on research with the Kallawayá Nation in the municipality of Charazani, one of twelve municipalities which were among the first tranche to begin the process of becoming AIOCs in 2009. The Kallawayá are well-known in Bolivia for their expertise as healers, and are implicitly recognised as an Indigenous nation through article 2 of the Constitution, which describes Bolivia as composed of Indigenous nations and peoples, and article 4, which lists the Kallawayá language Macha-jujuy as one of the 36 official indigenous languages of the state, alongside Spanish. The Plurinational Constitution was itself a significant step in decolonial healing because it not only made explicit the recognition of Indigenous nations and peoples, but also their right to govern themselves their way according to their understanding of living well (*vivir bien*), as set out in the preamble, article 8 and article 306 of the Constitution. This is a recognition of what Charles Taylor elucidates as giving meaning to each and every one of us: that “[t]here is a certain way of being human that is my way” (Taylor, 1994, p.30). The Kallawayá conception of *Vivir Bien*, as I have described elsewhere (Alderman, 2016; 2021a), is based on notions of sickness and health that are relational: humans and other-than-human beings living in balanced equilibrium in the rural Andean community, the *ayllu* (rural kin-based territorial units with pre-colonial roots).

In this article, I focus on the decolonising nature of Kallawayá healing practices. The Kallawayá heal using medicinal plants from their local region and through rituals that seek to rebalance their patients’ relationships with others at different scales, both within their own community and in wider collectives. Kallawayás treat illnesses holistically, examining the patient in the context of their relationships with others, including other-than-human beings in the surrounding landscape (what Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena [2015] calls *Earth Beings*). Kallawayás place importance on symbolic healing through ritual, taking into account that their patients are affected by outside forces, such as the state with its own rituals, that shape the person. The Kallawayás also

examine the health of collective bodies – such as the *ayllu* with its nested collective structure – as patients whose well-being is likewise determined by the quality of their social relations. This includes the state, which, like other bodies, can be acted on, become sick, and receive treatment. A common cause of illness is a person becoming spiritually unmoored through failing to maintain ritual relationships with local ancestor deities. I examine here ethnographically how the decolonial healing of the Kallawaya seeks to reconfigure the relationship between the state and the *ayllu* by putting the state in a direct social relationship with ancestor deities known as *achachilas*.

The article is composed of three main parts. In the section that follows, I outline the historical trajectory of the Kallawaya towards recognition by UNESCO in 2003 and in the plurinational Constitution in 2009. I then describe Kallawaya healing practice, based on examining and healing patients' relationships at different levels of scale. Finally, I examine Kallawaya healing in relation to the state, looking back at a ritual encounter with a representative of the Bolivian state on an anniversary of the UNESCO declaration, which takes into account that although there have been genuine attempts to decolonise the state, it is built on the foundations of colonial structures.

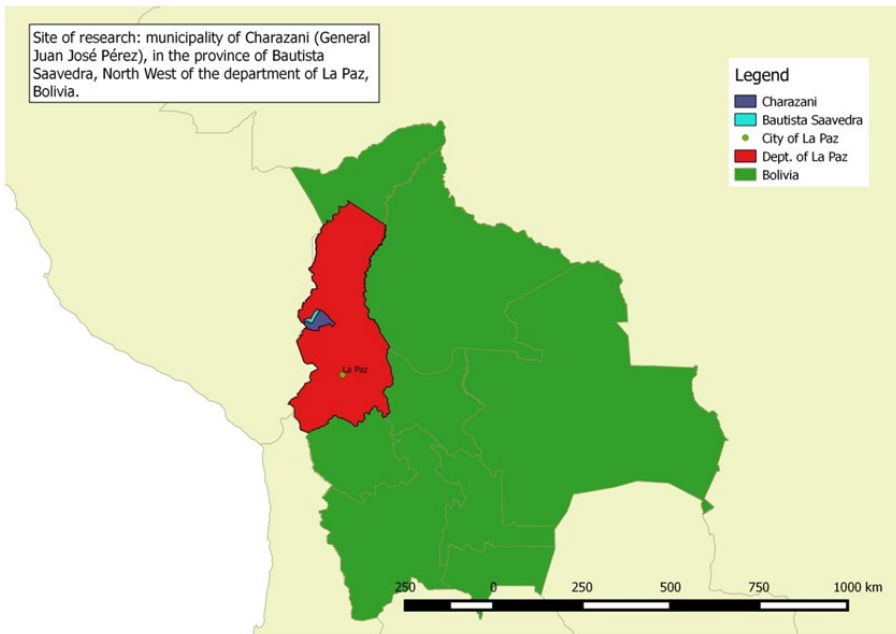
The Kallawaya and their path to recognition

The Kallawaya are an Indigenous nation located in the province of Bautista Saavedra, and parts of neighbouring provinces, bordering Peru in the north of the department of La Paz in northwest Bolivia (Figure 1). I have mostly conducted fieldwork research with the Kallawaya in the municipality of Charazani, the larger of two municipalities in Bautista Saavedra, alongside its neighbour Curva. The Kallawaya are well-known in Bolivia as traditional healers, noted for their itinerancy and shamanic rituals, practised both within and beyond their native communities.

Kallawayas trace their history as itinerant healers and traders in medicine back to before the Inca conquest (Meyers, 2002). The colonial chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala (1936, p. 331) describes Kallawayas as having had the honour of carrying the Inca's throne through Cusco in the fifteenth century. However, through the colonial and early Republican periods (the latter from 1825 into the twentieth century), Kallawayas were prohibited from exercising their profession, and in the words of Aurelio Ortiz, a Kallawaya healer from the community of Lunlaya (a 45 minute walk from the municipality's eponymous town), during the colonial period Kallawayas had to hide their practices within Catholicism so as to collectively keep Kallawaya culture alive and individually avoid being punished by the Extirpation of Idolatries. "There are some aspects of being Kallawaya that are hidden within the Catholic religion. Because if it weren't like this, there would be no Kallawaya culture. When the Spanish arrive, they grab the Kallawayas and call them witches. They burn them alive, saying that we talk with the devil" (A. Ortiz, personal communication, 13th December

2012). The Extirpation of Idolatries, which for the native population of the Andes replaced the infamous Spanish Inquisition in 1571 (Griffiths, 1994, p. 19; Silverblatt, 2004), was “essentially corrective” (Foucault, 1997, p. 166). It aimed to colonise the way in which Indigenous people perceived the world and themselves (Klor de Alva, 1991; Mignolo, 2011, pp. 165-166). The colonial administration operated a “microphysics of power” (Foucault, 1997, pp. 27-29) on native Andeans, reorganising them into colonial organised villages called *reducciones* and actively attempting to reshape them and their ways of thinking. While each ethnicity incorporated into the Inca empire had been allowed to worship their own gods and maintain their particular identity, European colonisation eliminated the formal ethnic identity of colonised peoples. As the Bolivian philosopher Juan Jose Bautista Segales (2021) argues, the subject, which developed intersubjectively through the colonisation process, was taught to view itself through the eyes of its oppressor. For the Kallawayas, this meant internalising perceptions of themselves as *brujos*, whose specialisation as healers was not recognised within the medical system. This fits Du Bois’ (1965) description of the “double consciousness”, which can form when one sees oneself through the eyes of oppressive others, resulting in a person’s soul splitting into two warring halves.

Figure 3: A map showing the location of the municipality of Charazani and the province of Bautista Saavedra (Source: author)



Nevertheless, Kallawayas worked as itinerant healers for centuries and are happy to tell outsiders how their ancestors cured patients of malaria during the

construction of the Panama Canal and the daughter of the president of Peru of a supposedly incurable disease (Loza, 2004, pp. 13, 127-128). Whenever I visited Aurelio in Lunlaya, he was usually on the point of leaving on a journey, away, or just returned from one. However, Kallawaya healing practice was officially proscribed until fairly recently. In 1908, practising medicine without an official medical title was prohibited by the Direction General of Public Health (Loza, 2004, p. 127). Despite this, many people preferred to consult Kallawayas rather than enter public hospitals, where they might be more likely to contract a disease than be cured of one (Zulawski, 2000, p. 114), even though Kallawayas continued to struggle against being perceived as either *brujos* or charlatans. Many of those who worked as healers had to do so clandestinely while working in other professions in the city (Ranaboldo, 1987, p. 255; Loza, 2008, p. 44), and would ask for written references from their patients to demonstrate their competence. To overcome the perception of themselves as charlatans, Kallawayas began lobbying in the early 1980s for legislative changes to allow them to practice their profession openly. Following the election of Walter Alvarez from the Kallawaya community of Khanlaya as a member of congress in 1982, and hyperinflation in 1983-1984, which led to a 5,000-6,000 per cent increase in the cost of synthetic medicine, the Ministry of Health legalised traditional medicine for the first time (Healey, 2001, p. 48). In 1987, Congress approved Alvarez's proposal to create the Instituto Boliviano de Medicina Tradicional Kallawaya, declare Bautista Saavedra province the capital of traditional medicine, and establish norms regulating the practice of traditional medicine in Bolivia. There were no further developments in the recognition of the Kallawaya until the turn of the century, when Alvarez and other Kallawaya leaders, including the mayors of the two municipalities, decided with the Ministry of Culture to apply to UNESCO to officially recognise "The Andean Cosmovision of Kallawaya Culture". The document sent by the Ministry of Culture to UNESCO distinguished two types of specialists in healing: *sacerdotes-medicos* that used natural remedies, and *adivinos* that fed the earth and ancestors (Viceministerio de Culturas, 2002, p. 21). The purpose of the application, according to the document, was to "detain the irremediable loss of collective memory, owing to acculturation and globalisation, and create a plan of action permitting the conservation and revitalisation of the Kallawaya cosmovision". A panel in Paris announced the candidature's success on the 7th November 2003. Alipio Cuila, the mayor of Charazani at the time, declared that the UNESCO declaration would be the first step in the Kallawaya constituting themselves as a nation. The next formal step towards this aim would be on 29th March 2009, when the Ministry of Cultures published a resolution recognising the province of Bautista Saavedra as the Kallawaya Nation.

My own research with the Kallawaya began in 2012, focusing on the Kallawaya project to transform the municipality of Charazani into an Indigenous Native Peasant Autonomy (AIOC). As mentioned in the introduction, the conditions for the creation of AIOCs were set out in the 2009 Constitution which re-founded Bolivia as a plurinational state with autonomies. The new Constitution

was the result of decades of struggle by Indigenous organisations, particularly from the 1970s onwards, to reframe their relationship with the state in a way that would see their Indigenous as well as peasant identity recognised. A new Constitution, written by a constituent assembly, which would properly recognise Bolivia's diversity, was one of the key demands of the social movements that supported the rise to power of Evo Morales as president in 2005, at the head of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party. These social movements developed within the environment of the paternalistic politics of Bolivia's Revolutionary government after 1952, which encouraged rural Indigenous communities to form peasant unions. The Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinas de Bolivia (CSUTCB), the national organisation with the closest relationship to the MAS, grew from an Aymara movement known as Katarismo (after Tupak Katari, the leader of an eighteenth-century rebellion against the colonial state), which rejected the national revolutionary government's ideology of *mestizaje* and proposed an Aymara nationalism in response to the assimilationist model of the state of 1952 (Canessa, 2000, pp. 122, 129, 144).

Katarismo arose from union politics, but Kataristas preferred to analyse their situation "with two eyes": as an exploited class and as one of many oppressed nations of Bolivia, discovering class solidarity within their ethnic identity (Albó, 1987, p. 143; 1994, p. 55). The Kataristas were the driving force behind the reform of the peasant movement and, in 1979, formed the CSUTCB as a confederation of peasant unions that emphasised autonomy from the state and political parties (Yashar, 2005, p. 178). The CSUTCB was founded on the understanding that Aymaras, Quechuas and other Indigenous nations of Bolivia were the true owners of the land, and in their second national congress in 1983, a proposal was presented for the transformation of Bolivia into a plurinational state (Schavelzon, 2012, p. 91; Albó, 1994, p. 59).

A coalition of the CSUTCB with two other Indigenous organisations, CONAMAQ and CIDOB, pushed for the formation of a constituent assembly to write a new Constitution. CONAMAQ (Consejo de Ayllus y Markas de Qullasuyu) was formed in 1997 as the agglutinative organisation for *ayllus* and *markas* (a collection of *ayllus*), which had been officially reorganised from peasant unions into *ayllus* through the oral memories of their members in the 1990s. The creation of CONAMAQ left the CSUTCB predominantly representing communities that had been incorporated into haciendas until the National Revolution and Agrarian Reform in 1953, while CONAMAQ mainly represented communities that had maintained their identities as *ayllus* until agrarian reform, when all Andean communities became peasant unions. The third social organisation was CIDOB (Confederación Indígena del Oriente Boliviano), which represented Bolivia's lowland Indigenous peoples. Connections between the highland and lowland organisations were made from the latter's March for Territory and Dignity to the city of La Paz in 1990, deepened during another march in 2002, and formalised during what came to be known as the Unity Pact in 2004.

The law convoking the constituent assembly was one of the first passed by Evo Morales' government after he assumed the presidency in 2006. The assembly sat between 2006 and 2007 and designed a Constitution that incorporated a level of recognition and self-determination for Indigenous peoples, which had been absent from previous iterations. In participating with a unified voice, the distinct geographies and identities of the organisations comprising the Unity Pact posed a challenge, which was overcome with the descriptive phrase “*pueblos y naciones indígena originario campesinos*” (NyPIOC). The recognition that Bolivia had precolonial “nations and peoples” formed the basis for renaming it a plurinational state.

Perhaps the most significant aspects of the Constitution for NyPIOCs were articles 289 and 296, which laid out the roadmap to Indigenous Native Peasant Autonomy (AIOC). For the leaders of CONAMAQ and CIDOB in particular, AIOCs were a vital aspect of what it meant for Bolivia to be a plurinational state – in 2012, a Kallawayá leader who had recently served as a national-level authority in CONAMAQ told me that without AIOCs, there was no plurinational state. Although the relevant articles in the Constitution are vague regarding the purpose of the AIOCs, Article 5.5 of the Framework Autonomies and Decentralisation Law states that autonomous governments should base their activities on the philosophy of *Vivir Bien*, “belonging to our cultures”. In the preamble and Article 8 of the Constitution, *Vivir Bien* is mentioned as a moral precept of the state. A fundamental principle of *Vivir Bien*, which arose as a concept prior to the constituent assembly, is that nature should be treated as a subject rather than an object in a balanced coexistence between all living beings (including humans, animals, the earth, air, water and mountains) (Medina, 2011, pp. 44-46; Gudynas, 2011, p. 242).

Charazani was and is just as split between different social organisations locally as Bolivia nationwide. As elsewhere in Bolivia, following the 1953 agrarian reform, the communities of the whole province became part of the nationwide Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CNTCB), which in 1979 became the CSUTCB. Likewise, as happened elsewhere, in the 1980s, community authorities began to debate the relevance of syndicalism for local community organisation. In the 1990s, various peasant unions officially reconstituted themselves as ayllus, but only those that had maintained their identity as ayllus without being incorporated into haciendas throughout the colonial and republican periods, until agrarian reform joined the new organisation, CONAMAQ, leaving the provincial branch of the CSUTCB mostly representing ex-hacienda communities. In Charazani, the situation is complicated further by the existence of a third organisation, FOYCAE (Federación Originario Yungas Carijana Agroecológico), representing tropical coca-growing communities.

The population of the municipality of Charazani voted in December 2009 overwhelmingly in favour (86.6 per cent) of beginning the process to become an AIOC. However, it took until August 2011 to form an autonomy assembly to

write the statute by which the AIOC would govern itself, due to disagreements regarding the conformation of the assembly. Continuing disagreements during the statute's drafting, both between the different social movements and among individual communities, meant that the statute was approved in principle but never in detail, and the AIOC project came to a standstill in 2013.

Although there are various reasons for the collapse of the AIOC project (see Alderman, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019; Alderman & Tomaselli, 2020), some of which relate to the way that as an NyPIOC the Kallawaya rendered themselves legible to the state by seeking autonomy along the existing borders of the municipality, which do not match the ancestral territory of the Kallawaya as an Indigenous nation (see Doyle's 2024, 2026 critique of this process), some Kallawaya healers blamed local political authorities for forgetting their ritual obligations towards the *achachilas*, a complaint frequently made by older members of Kallawaya *ayllus* when decrying the behaviour of the younger generation. *Ayllu* members must make offerings throughout the year to local gods from their household, and authorities are obliged to do the same at the level of the *ayllu* itself. A key aspect of Kallawaya healing involves examining the health of the relationships of their patient, including through ritual with other-than-human-beings, because unhealthy relationships are considered a possible cause of ill health. Healing at the individual and collective levels will be examined in the next section.

Intersubjective healing at the different levels of scale

Kallawaya healing attempts to understand health in the context of intersubjective relationships. Fundamental to the idea is that every aspect of life is reflected in a homologous manner at different scales. The lowest scale at which healing takes place is the individual person in relation to their *ayllu*. *Ayllus* are defined by their homologous nature and the mutual recognition between humans and what Kallawayas call *achachilas* (grandparent in Aymara) or, sometimes, *machulas* (grandparent in Quechua). As de la Cadena (2015) identifies, recognition in the form of offerings continually reinforces the identity of a community as an *ayllu* and those living within it as *runa* or *jaqi* (human being in Quechua and Aymara, respectively). Ina Rösing (1993, pp. 185, 195; 1996, p. 151) has described the more-than-human beings incarnated in the mountains of the Kallawaya region as "transpersonal beings" because their identity as more than just mountains (de la Cadena, 2015) is established and continually reinforced through relationships with the people residing there. An *ayllu* exists at different levels of scale, from the level of the family house and the couple who live inside it, upwards, in the manner of a Russian doll. Houses have their own *cabildo* (an offering place to the gods of the surrounding landscape) and are usually divided into upper (masculine) and lower (feminine) halves. A large *ayllu*, such as Amarete, the largest Kallawaya *ayllu*, is divided into several *juchuy* (smaller Quechua) *ayllus*. The

juchuy ayllu and *athun* (larger) *ayllu*, likewise, have their own *cabildos* and are similarly divided into upper (masculine) and lower (feminine).

Although the most common territorial divisions in the Andes are into upper and lower halves and four quarters, some Kallawaya *ayllus*, as Bastien (1985) identifies, through his ethnography of *ayllu* Kaata, are divided territorially into three, which is reflected homologously in thinking about the person. The Kallawaya, like other Andeans, believe the cosmos is divided into three *pachas*, or worlds. These are (in Quechua) *janaqpacha* (the upper world), *kay pacha* (the terrestrial world), and *ukhu pacha* (the dark world of spirits) (*alajj pacha*, *aka pacha* and *manqha pacha* in Aymara). The beings of the three worlds can penetrate every aspect of one's being in ways affecting our health (Rösing, 1995, pp. 231-3). Like the wider cosmos, human beings are also commonly believed to be divided into three (Spedding, 2004, p. 50). Many Andeanist anthropologists identify a belief in three souls among human beings (Fernández Juárez, 2008, p. 112; Canessa, 2012, p. 135). The names given to these souls vary, but they are commonly referred to as *ajayu*, *animu* and *coraje* and thought to reside in the heart (Fernández Juárez, 2004, p. 191; 2008, p. 11). The most important of the souls is the *ajayu*, otherwise known as the *ajayu grande* (Fernández Juárez, 2008, p. 110), which is the prerequisite for life (Burman, 2011, p. 117). When it leaves the body, the person becomes seriously ill, leading to possible death. The *animu* (also known as the *ajayu* pequeño) can also leave the body, though calling it back is relatively simple (Fernández Juárez, 2008, p. 112). Aurelio explained to me during my visits to his house in Lunlaya that averting the loss of and calling back these two *ajuyus* forms the basis of Kallawaya ceremonies. *Animu* and *ajayu* agglutinate the different parts of the body together in a sense of unity (*coraje* is of lesser importance, its loss being temporary and resulting only in a minor incident [Fernández Juárez, 2008, p.113]). If any of the souls is threatened, therefore, the unity of the body is put at risk (Fernández Juárez, 2008, p. 133). The *ajayu* also integrates human beings in the wider network of the cosmos (Burman, 2011, p. 120). Losing one's *ajayu*, therefore, means losing one's ability to relate to the wider world. According to Burman (2011, p. 120), Aymaras see the stresses of modern city life as likely to be responsible for the loss of a person's *ajayu*, because such a lifestyle breaks the connection between them and the spirits of their *ayllu*, leading to a loss of identity. A foreign spirit may then take its place in the form of foreign mental, ideological or religious doctrines (Burman, 2011, p. 92).

The fundamental idea here is that “colonialism isn't something that belongs to outside social, political and economic structures, but imposes on the body and spirit itself” (Burman, 2011, p. 92, my translation). These foreign mental structures have been systematically imposed by the colonial state from the outset of colonisation. Burman (2011), who uses the concept of “colonial modernity” which he takes from Escobar's (2003, p. 61) analysis that “there is no modernity without coloniality”, writes of his Aymara informants in a similar vein, equating colonialism with illness and decolonisation being the cure. “Decolonisation”

became one of the key official objectives of the state under Evo Morales's presidency. Decolonisation, following Walter Dignolo's definition (2011, p. 53-54), describes the territorial struggles of states to free themselves from capitalism and communism. Decoloniality, meanwhile, proposes a decolonisation of knowledge: an epistemological autonomy.

Aurelio posits local political problems as illness caused by the abandonment of *ayllu* traditions and the embrace of capitalist modernity, and the cure as rituals that would unite representatives of competing local political organisations with one another and with the sacred places of the Kallawaya. He would frequently refer to community authorities who were focused on money and uninterested in the rituals they were supposed to perform as having become '*sifilizado*', and to the loss of tradition in Kallawaya communities as "*la sifilización*" (highlighting modernity as a disease that attacked *ayllu* traditions) (cf. Alderman 2022). For Kallawayas, the cause of all illnesses or misfortunes can be found in a lack of observance of obligations to sacred places (Bastien, 1985, p. 129). When the AIOC project came to a grinding halt, Aurelio put this down to local political leaders being 'sick', citing the nylon clothing they wore, a focus on money and a loss of spirituality on their part, and suggested that representatives from the Aymara highlands come to him with llama fat and from the tropical lowlands with coca and together they perform a ritual to sacred places (Alderman, 2016, p. 206). Sickness, in the Andes, is seen as a disequilibrium between the spirit and body, and healing this sickness, therefore, requires rebalancing this equilibrium. Aurelio's proposal was to treat the Kallawaya themselves collectively as one body politic.

Healing the nation-state

Recognition by the Bolivian state and UNESCO has been important for the Kallawaya as subjects, because, as Taylor (1991, p. 48) notes, "our identity requires recognition by others". However, as Coulthard (2014) has argued, the liberal state, like the colonial state that Fanon (2008) critiqued, produces "colonised subjects" through the reproduction of relations of domination. Fanon, like Hegel (1949) and later Taylor, believed that recognition was vital to human subjectivity and freedom, but questioned whether the mutuality envisaged by Hegel was possible within colonial society (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 39-40). Coulthard extends Fanon's critique to problematise the possibility that the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state can be reconciled through a liberal politics of recognition, arguing that contemporary colonialism operates through, rather than against, freedom (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 151, 156). Doyle (2026, p. 9) is similarly sceptical of state-led politics of recognition in the Bolivian context, even as a plurinational state, arguing that while an aspect of the decolonising project under Morales was to accommodate the state to local ways of life, it actually required Indigenous communities to significantly reshape and simplify themselves to make themselves legible to it (Doyle, 2026, pp. 39, 45). While I

acknowledge the validity of critiques of the politics of recognition, I argue that Andean communities do not passively receive the recognition of the state, and only reshape themselves to be legible to it, but also seek to draw the state on an ongoing basis into what Platt has called a “pact of reciprocity” (2016).

In this section, I examine how mutual recognition is reinforced through ritual. A significant step towards Kallawayaya self-identification as a nation has been their recognition by UNESCO, commemorated annually with a ceremony at which members of the municipal governments of Charazani and Curva, along with authorities, curanderos, and musicians from various Kallawayaya *ayllus*, are present, as well as a representative of the Bolivian state. They are actually one of the few ritual occasions when representatives of Kallawayaya communities make offerings to the achachilas together. I have been lucky to be present at these commemorations twice, in 2012 and 2023. These events are usually held on Qalla Qallan, the mountain in the centre of the province, where the UNESCO declaration was first celebrated in 2003 (as in 2023). However, in 2012, the event took place on Usich’aman, a mountain in the municipality of Curva.

Although the anniversary of the UNESCO declaration is on 7th November, the event in 2012 was postponed to 14th December in the expectation that Bolivia’s president, Evo Morales, would be able to attend. However, due to bad weather, the president was unable to arrive by helicopter (his typical mode of travel in Bolivia) and was replaced (although presumably they were both scheduled to attend) as the guest of honour by the governor of the department of La Paz, Dr César Cocarico. At the top of the mountain, Cocarico, as representative of the Bolivian state, accompanied by the mayors of the two municipalities of the province, two members of the plurinational congress, and other provincial leaders, was met by various groups of Kallawayas, representing different communities. Each group that greeted the dignitaries bestowed them with garlands of flowers, made offerings to the achachilas in front of them, and wafted the smoke from incense burners towards Cocarico in particular (Figure 2). In doing so, Cocarico was invited to participate in the same communion with the achachilas that Kallawayas participate in on a daily basis when they eat, wafting the steam from their food towards the achachilas and making *ch’allas* (offerings with alcohol) to the Pachamama. In a similar manner, the incense burner’s smoke was directed towards Cocarico so that he would consume the ritual offerings alongside the achachilas. Incense is a symbol of purity. Rösing refers to patients of kallawayaya healers being “cleansed” with incense (1996, p. 152). Aurelio later confirmed to me that incense was directed towards Cocarico as a representative of a state that needed to be purified and to transmit positive energy and good omens so that there would be no deaths (a reference to the still relatively recent state violence towards its citizens when president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada ordered police to fire on protesters in 2003), as well as to strengthen Kallawayaya culture and regional agricultural production.

Figure 2: Dr Cocarico being greeted by a Kallawayaya with an incense burner (Source: author)



The Aymara healers that Burman (2011) worked with told him that the very buildings used by state ministries had been made sick by centuries of foreign domination. When Sanchez de Lozada (who grew up and was educated in the United States) was expelled from Bolivia following a popular uprising in 2003, this was considered a cleansing of the state (Burman, 2011, p. 185). Nevertheless, in state-occupied physical spaces, malignant spirits called *saxra* still attacked people's *ajayus* (Burman, 2011, p. 242). Although Morales' government was generally understood to represent Indigenous peoples, those working in the government, from the president downwards, and their political agenda could become infected by these spirits and, as such, needed to be purified. Curing the nation, writes Burman, means Indianizing it, incorporating it into Aymara society, and transforming it into something genuinely native. This suggests that the state is not simply an institution that acts upon society, but may itself be the object of diagnosis and healing. Approaching the state through healing opens it up as an object enacted differently across different practices. Following Mol (2002), objects are not singular entities viewed from multiple perspectives, but multiple realities connected through practice. While in bureaucratic practice (the domain in which political authorities relate to it), the state appears as an administrative apparatus responsible for governance and recognition, in Kallawayaya ritual practice, it emerges as a porous relational body that can be contaminated by *saxras* and requires therapeutic intervention. Just as Earth Beings are enacted simultaneously as mountains and powerful ancestral beings (de la Cadena, 2015), so too is the state enacted as a vulnerable patient in a wider field of relations that requires continual maintenance and repair.

Kallawayas heal at multiple scales through offerings called ritual *mesas*, which petition and feed *achachilas* (see Alderman, 2021b). When offerings are

made, it is not just *achachilas* who are fed, but also those who make and participate in the offering. Feeding creates reciprocal obligations. Named places are “the primary givers of all types of food to humans – food that constitutes the substance of their bodies and their social relations” (Salas Carreño, 2016, p. 827). To feed them is an *ayllu*’s way of recognising that they owe their lives to the harvest provided by the *achachilas* and the Pachamama (Allen, 2002, p. 29), and according to Bastien (1985), it is a primary way in which one can become a member of an *ayllu*. I interpret the mesas in which Cocarico participated as an attempt by Kallawayas to enmesh him and the state in a web of reciprocal obligation.

The final ceremony at the summit, overseen by various Kallawaya ritualists, involved the offering of numerous guinea pigs and more plates of ritual food than I had previously seen. According to the programme that had been printed to mark the day, the aim of this ceremony was to transfer Kallawaya energy to the President, Evo Morales (whose place was taken by Cocarico), and to name him as *Kuraj Paqu Kallawaya*, the highest position of authority among the Kallawayas (Rösing, 1996, pp. 28-30). The *paqu* can call the owners of the sacred places, talk with them, and, if they are angry, find out the cause (Rösing, 1996). The *paqu*, as a Kallawaya authority, is at the bidding of the *achachilas*, the highest Kallawaya authorities, and therefore, if a petition is successfully made to them, he must see their wishes carried out. By making a state representative a *paqu*, the Kallawaya connected the state with Kallawaya *ayllus* as part of the same segmentary hierarchy of authorities that mutually recognise one another, and participating in feeding the *achachilas* opened up a channel of communication with them, since such feeding is itself a form of communication (Allen, 2015, p. 39).

After the ceremony on Usich’aman, all those present wound their way down to the plaza of Curva below, many dancing on their way. In the plaza, around a dozen dances were presented in front of a stage where the authorities and invited guests were seated. Cocarico, the two mayors (of Charazani and Curva), the members of the departmental assembly, and Walter Alvarez, the architect of the proposal to UNESCO, all gave speeches. Both Javier Tejerina, the assembly member representing the province in the plurinational assembly of La Paz, and Martin Canaza, the mayor of Charazani, speculated about why Evo Morales was unable to arrive, with Canaza dedicating much of his speech to lamenting climate change caused by the evils of capitalism. He attributed this to the atmospheric conditions that had made it too risky for the president to make the journey by helicopter. His argument pointed to structural factors beyond the head of state’s control. Evo Morales might have had an agenda to decolonise the state, but his presidency was temporary, and the state’s foundational structures were longer-lasting.

Despite the mayor of Charazani’s comment, Kallawayas believe that *achachilas* control the local weather. One could interpret Canaza’s view that the *achachilas* had caused excessive cloudiness as a response to capitalism, perhaps

because capitalism and the state threaten their very existence (De la Cadena, 2010, p. 32). Burman found that some Aymara curanderos considered climate change to be a punishment from the wak'as (sacred places) for forgetting native traditions, which prioritised a relationship between themselves and human beings (what Aurelio refers to as "*la sifilizacion*"). On my way to Curva for the anniversary celebrations, I sat next to a Kallawaya healer on the bus from La Paz, who, when making the sign of the cross as we passed certain mountains, told me of the importance of maintaining relationships between humans and achachilas, because "if we forget them, they forget us". The interpersonal relationships between *runa* (human beings) and *achachilas* are maintained at different levels of scales within the ayllu through ritual offerings at set times throughout the year. A breakdown in these healthy reciprocal relationships is understood to manifest as extreme variations in local climate, which Kallawayas respond to with special offerings to mountains and lakes (e.g., to call for rain during drought).

Tejerina, for his part, attributed Evo Morales's failure to arrive to the fact that the event had been scheduled for a Friday, a day of bad luck for the Kallawayas. I found the scheduling surprising for this reason and presumed it was simply the most convenient time given the president's schedule. A Kallawaya healer in the town of Charazani had explained to me that when something is scheduled for Tuesday or Friday, it is very unlikely to work out as planned. Tuesday and Friday are *saxra uru* (days of malignant spirits, or *saxras*) (Burman, 2011, p. 170). On these days, rituals can only be performed to receive power from malignant forces or to dispel it (Fernández Juárez, 1997, pp. 148-159). However, scheduling the event on a Friday supports the idea that the rituals were performed to cleanse the malignant spirits infecting the state. The fact that Evo Morales was unable to arrive was testimony to the continuing power of colonial-capitalist *saxras* over the structures of the state, thereby impeding the president's protection from them.

The invitation to the President of Bolivia to the event marking the anniversary of UNESCO's declaration of the Kallawaya culture as "oral patrimony" was also an invitation to the state to recognise the territorial rights and jurisdiction of ayllus. The choice of location was significant precisely because the mountains and other landscape deities mark Kallawaya territory. Platt (1982) has characterised the relationship between ayllus and the colonial state in terms of a "pact of reciprocity", by which ayllus paid tribute and, in return, their land rights were respected, and argued that ayllus in the North of Potosí sought to maintain this pact well into the twentieth-century republican period. On Usich'aman, through ritual, Kallawayas sought to bring the state into a contemporary ritual relationship of reciprocity, whereby, at the same time as the state recognised the distinctiveness of Kallawaya culture and the Kallawaya right to political autonomy, Kallawaya healing was directed as ritual care not just for Cocarico but the state itself.

The 2012 event to commemorate the UNESCO declaration involved flows of recognition between the Kallawayaya and the state. By participating in offerings to the *achachilas*, the state, through Cocarico, recognised their authority within the Kallawayaya political system. We can contrast this with the attitude of Peruvian President Alan Garcia (1985-1990, 2006-2011), who de la Cadena (2015, p. 277) describes as having no tolerance for the radical different excess by which a mountain could also be considered an Earth Being, and so refused to enter into discussion on the terms of rural Andeans, which she believes reveals the limits of the recognition of the modern state towards its “others”. De la Cadena argues that the (liberal) state offers recognition as a form of inclusion that must not impinge on the modern “partition of the sensible” (Rancière, 1999) between nature and the social (Latour, 1993). The *ayllu*, at its multiple scales, recognises no such division between nature and the social. Engagement with it on its own terms, therefore, challenges the standard ontological assumptions of the modern state by situating political authority within a wider ecology of relations in which the State itself becomes susceptible to diagnosis, care, and healing.

Conclusion

Kallawayaya healing operates at different levels of scale on the individual, their community, regional relations with the state, and to decolonise the state through healing rituals that approach colonisation as a spiritual sickness that can affect the individual and the structures of the state. An understanding of Kallawayaya healing practices contributes to planetary healing through the decolonial approach that Kallawayayas take to healing. Healing, for Kallawayayas, at the level of the person and the community involves acknowledging the mental structures imposed by colonialism and colonality through which a subjectivity develops which is subject-object, rather than subject-subject in relation to the other-than humans that coinhabit the world (Bautista Segales, 2021, p. 66), and attempts symbolically, through ritual, to strengthen and repair the bonds between their patients and others. Kallawayayas understand that consciousness is constructed intersubjectively, through relationships at various scales with others in the communities of which a person is a member, from their individual *ayllu*, greater *ayllu*, the state, and potentially further afield. Decolonial healing, for the Kallawayaya, means examining and rebalancing the interpersonal relations through which human beings (*runa*), communities, the State and other-than-human-beings constitute one another. In this sense, socio-ecological transformation is simultaneously political, ecological and ontological: political because it reworks relations of authority through reciprocity and care; ecological because it restores reciprocal obligations between humans and the landscape beings on whom life depends, and ontological because it enacts a world in which mountains and lakes participate as subjects in collective social life.

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Notes

- 1 Coloniality is the term coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2008) to describe the social structures of domination inherited from colonialism, which survive formal independence.

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