

Radio and the Voice of the Aymara People

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Blog post published April 10, 2014 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/a10k9-4qx52>

Abstract

Welcome back to our continuing series on radio in the Caribbean and Latin America: Radio de Acción.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, Ethnographic, History, Identity



Recommended citation

kswinehart. (2014, April 10). Radio and the Voice of the Aymara People. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/a10k9-4qx52>

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Welcome back to our continuing series on radio in the Caribbean and Latin America: **Radio de Acción**. A consideration of the multilingual history of radio from Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti to the Southern Cone and beyond, **Radio de Acción** turns this week to the Aymara in Peru, Chile, and especially Bolivia in a fascinating piece from anthropologist [Karl Swinehart](#).

If you missed our first post, **Alejandra Bronfman**'s stunning history of radio and violence in the Caribbean, you can find it [here](#). In the meantime, keep your dials tuned to Karl Swinehart's study of the micropolitics of language and power on Aymaran radio.

– Guest Editor **Tom McEnaney**

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“What do you like most about working at this radio station?” was a simple question I had asked Celia Colque Quispe, an Aymara language radio broadcaster on Radio San Gabriel in El Alto, Bolivia during an interview I conducted in 2007 as part of my dissertation research on Aymara-language media. Her response was simple, but profound.

“Clearly, here, being Aymara. I like to be Aymara.”



Celia Colque Quispe; photo by the author, all rights reserved

Quispe came to Radio San Gabriel from a small, rural community on the shores of Lake Titicaca. One day, she had heard an announcement on the radio that Radio San Gabriel would be hiring personnel through an open selection process involving an Aymara language fluency assessment. Competing against university-trained linguists and graduates of communications programs, Quispe stood out for her eloquent Aymara speech and was hired, beginning a career in radio where she came to not only to work as an announcer, but as a member of the Aymara Language Department where she wrote and approved scripts for the station's programs. Stories like this are not unusual at Radio San Gabriel, but are otherwise rare in this multilingual Andean republic, still profoundly marked by anti-Indian racism. What “being Aymara” means in Bolivia remains highly contested. One thing was clear from my conversation with Quispe, however—her work at the radio allows her “to be Aymara.”

The presence of the Aymara language on Bolivian airwaves contrasts sharply with its general absence within other Bolivian media. There are some notable exceptions: Bolivian state television occasionally runs Aymara language programming on programs like *Entre Culturas* (‘Between Cultures’), and, famously, the neorealist director Jorge Sanjinés’ work has dramatized the struggles of highland Aymara and Quechua Indians in films like *Yawar Mallku* (Blood of the condor) and *Nación Clandestina* (Clandestine Nation).

<https://youtu.be/SgQPLBf3FQ>

These are exceptions, however, that prove the rule of Spanish language dominance within Bolivian television and film, leaving radio to stand out as the medium that most reflects the country's multilingualism. In this post we will tune in to Radio San Gabriel, Bolivia's oldest and most prominent Aymara language radio station, to ask how Aymara language radio might not just reflect Bolivia's multilingualism, but also actively intervene in it, shaping how Aymaras hear their own language.

Aymaras and Bolivia



*Geographic distribution of the Aymara
language, public domain*

The Aymaras are one of the the largest ethnolinguistic groups within Bolivia, a nation that is now officially a “Plurinational State” in which 36 indigenous languages are recognized as co-official with Spanish. Aymara is among the most widely spoken of these and Aymaras constitute a majority of the population in a contiguous territory surrounding the nation’s capital of La Paz, and crossing national borders into neighboring Chile and Peru. With approximately two and a half million people (and many more than this if speaking Aymara is removed as a criterion of ethnicity), Bolivia has the largest concentration of Aymaras in the region. Perhaps because Bolivia’s political capital sits within Aymara territory or because of their sheer numbers with respect to other indigenous populations, the Aymara have long played a significant role in Bolivian politics. Increasing the presence of the Aymara language in public space, on the airwaves or otherwise, is thus a prominent component of a multifaceted politics of indigenous resurgence in contemporary Bolivia.

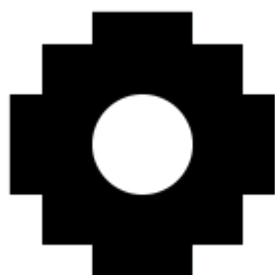
Aymar Markan Arupa – “The Voice of the Aymara People” – Radio San Gabriel

As Bolivia’s first and longest running Aymara language radio station, [Radio San Gabriel \(RSG\)](#) calls itself “Aymar markan arupa” (the voice of the Aymara people). In the wake of [the 1952 Bolivian revolution, a major social upheaval in which miners’ militias played a crucial role](#), Maryknoll Jesuit priests founded RSG in 1955 with aims of Christian evangelization within a broader effort at rural uplift. RSG’s mission was also in line with the new government’s hopes of integrating indigenous rural communities into national political life. Jesuits had experience with radio in mining communities, a broadcasting milieu dominated by radical syndicalist and communist political currents, where Jesuits had also founded radio stations of their own. Although miners are remembered as the central protagonists in the 1952 revolution, also crucial to its victory were the highland indigenous communities who overturned nearly feudal relations of the haciendas through insurrectionary land expropriations.



The offices and studios of Radio San Gabriel in El Alto, Bolivia; photo by the author, all rights reserved

In its early days, RSG approached the Aymara language as a bridge to Spanish language literacy and integration into the mainstream of the Catholic faith, an approach consistent with a mid-twentieth century view which formulated the “the Indian problem” as one of national integration. Yet these early assimilationist efforts would quickly change due to both developments in the Catholic Church, such as the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the rise of “liberation theology,” and also political ferment in Bolivia in opposition to military rule. During the 1970s radical Aymara nationalism, or *katarismo*, was on the rise, finding institutional expression through organizations like the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupak Katari* (MRTK, ‘Revolutionary Movement Tupak Katari’), and the founding of the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos Bolivianos* (CSUTSB, ‘Trade Union Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia’) under *katarista* leadership in 1979.



“Tawa Chakana” by
Wikimedia user
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Influenced by Aymara nationalism, RSG made a dramatic shift in its orientation towards Aymara language and culture. Their adoption of an Aymara-centric idiom resonated with other nationalist currents, while maintaining Maryknoll Jesuit aims of social justice and service to the poor by reformulating “liberation theology” as a “theology of inculturation.” Practices earlier demonized by the Catholic Church as pagan were now celebrated as being essentially Christian—with the spilled blood of a sacrificed llama, for example, recast as analogous to the wine of the sacrament. This remains in many ways the orientation of RSG today, and the station positions itself as an authority on questions of Aymara linguistic and cultural authenticity.

Broadcast language – dehispanicized “pure” Aymara

One of the ways that RSG’s authority becomes audible to its Aymara audience is through the language used on the air. On RSG, radio announcers speak without using Spanish loan words, using what radio announcers and other Aymaras refer to as “Aymara puro” (pure Aymara). This is ensured through the radio’s Aymara Language Department, which intervenes prior to each broadcast by either writing or editing scripts, and is responsible, along with the radio’s director, for these scripts’ ultimate approval. However, its responsibilities do not end with broadcasts’ content. The department is also responsible for a protocol extending through and beyond the actual broadcasts called *seguimiento*, or “following.”

Seguimiento involves two procedures: the real-time monitoring of broadcasts for “aberrations,” and a follow-up interaction with those who utter them on air. The department finds alternatives or invents neologisms for the many loan words in Aymara from Spanish. These loan words include words as common as the verb “to speak”—*parlaña* from the sixteenth-century Spanish *parlar*—and are testament to 500 years of contact with Spanish. Contact, of course, is a euphemism for what was first colonial and later republican subjugation, making the *aberración* serve as a linguistic reminder of this painful history. This is why, rather than simply “Aymara puro,” a more apt term might be *deshispanized* Aymara. While Spanish loan words are purged from the broadcasts, many words shared between Quechua and Aymara escape the protocols of *seguimiento*, even though these also likely entered the language as the result of earlier subjugation of the Aymara under the Inca Empire. It was not the Inca period, however, but the domination of all Indians, whether Quechua, Aymara, or otherwise, by the Spanish under the colony, then by their descendants during the Republican period and into the 21st century that has most profoundly shaped Bolivia’s dynamics of race and class and, it turns out, the linguistic phenomena that accompanying them, leaving the loan word, the *aberración*, to be understood as the residue of this history.



Outside the studios of Radio San Gabriel in El Alto, Bolivia; photo by the author, all rights reserved

Decolonization over the Airwaves

Is the linguistic purism of the RSG any different from that of, say, the Academie Française? In terms of aims and procedures, much remains the same—both groups identify loan words and push for consensus to implement neologisms. Such a comparison, however, would obscure the starkly different social context in which this process unfolds in Bolivia. If “protecting” the language is commensurate with protecting the people, at RSG, this means targeting loanwords that serve as reminders of the painful processes of colonialism. In this light, many at RSG understand their work as fitting within a larger project of decolonization, a project not without its contradictions or ironies, particularly considering the role of the Catholic Church in both the past and the present. I explore these ironies more in [a longer ethnographic account of the process of *seguimiento* at RSG](#).

Whatever the ironies, RSG’s cultivation of a model of refinement in Aymara speech has created opportunities for people who are otherwise profoundly marginalized in Bolivian society, particularly rural women, to advance professionally in a labor market that too often shuts them out. Where Celia Colque Quispe’s wearing of long braids, broached shawl, and full *pollera* skirt of rural Aymara women, for example, would have her barred from other employment whose job descriptions might demand of employees a euphemistically racist and sexist requirement of *buena presencia*, at RSG her traditional dress and status as a rural Aymara woman was valued and bolstered her authority within the institution. In a society still steeped in legacies of colonialism, it is no wonder, then, that what Quispe likes most about her work is simply that she can be Aymara.



<https://youtu.be/6oy8JWjRCc>

In the broader media landscape, stations like RSG surely fill a gaping hole of Aymara language programming. Yet as “the voice of the Aymara people” extends across the high plain, radio introduces new absences: the absence of speech deemed too marked by colonialism to appear on air. Linguistically, then, the static on the frequencies of Aymara language airwaves are many. Both the neologisms of the voices cultivated for the airwaves and the incursion of Spanish into the speech of those whose tongues are less trained complicate any notion that the voice of the radio resonates free of the static of history.

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Featured image: Aymaras marching to commemorate the uprising and massacre of 1921 in Jesús de Machaca, La Paz.

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Karl Swinehart is Collegiate Assistant Professor and Harper-Fellow at the University of Chicago. He is currently working on a manuscript on hip-hop in Bolivia, *Clear, Hidden Voices: Language, Indigeneity and Hip-Hop in Bolivia*. He is a linguistic anthropologist with interests in media, popular music, social movements, racialization and multilingualism. He is co-editor of *Languages and Publics in Stateless Nations*, a special issue of *Language and Communication*. His work can also be found in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *Language in Society*, and *Social Text*.

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