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The Procession that Travels Inside: Yuyachkani's "Santiago"

Abstract

In collaborative theater projects like *Yuyachkani*, it is hard to define the exact moment when a new project begins. Generally we have a very imprecise idea as our initial point of departure and we explore it more fully in the day-to-day work, where it changes a great deal. Santiago is a project that began as a processional performance piece in the public plazas before premiering as a theatrical work in its current form, as a largely Quechua-language play focusing on permutations of faith in an almost uninhabited Andean village. The final project arrived as a result of this complex process of research and exploration. Santiago has a very long road to its current form, always with the indispensable accompaniment of the writer Peter Elmore, the co-author of the play.

The Procession That Travels Inside:
Yuyachkani's "Santiago"

Miguel Rubio Zapata
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“the war is over, but when will peace arrive?”¹

The last three inhabitants of an almost empty town one night are locked into a church where Santiago, the town's patron saint, is venerated. Political violence and illness explain the recent abandonment of the town and the church, located somewhere in the Andes mountains. There are three characters inside the church: Bernardina has lost her twin sons during the time of violence and has promised to take the saint out in procession. She looks for retribution, by way of a miracle from Apostle Santiago, that will make her children reappear. Armando, a businessman and self-proclaimed MC of the festival, wants the saint to process so that life might return to town, and he can continue with his business. Rufino, the church custodian, who inherited the job from his father, does not really care if the procession takes place or not, a reason that the others are suspicious of him.

Bernardina thinks that the church is closed because it was hit by lightning; for that reason she feels that everything there remains as if carved in stone. An ancient belief names children born during storms as “Children of Lighting.” Thus, they are destined to become priests in the Andean tradition, and when they are born twins, one of them is dedicated to the service of the God of thunder and storm. She observes the custodian distrustfully and is almost certain that

he is a son of lightning and a shaman. The situation that moves the action is given, since, except for the church custodian, the other two characters are determined to take the saint out in to the procession, as it has been fifteen years since the last such occasion.

Santiago awaits, sitting in his casket, for people to take him out, dress him in festival clothing, and mount him on his white horse, but the keys to open the casket are not there. The tense night passes, with a touch of hope at dawn when the horse's saddle and fittings appear, along with the sword, the gold-embroidered cloak, and his hat. Everything appears, except for the image of the Moor who should be under the horse's feet; that statue has mysteriously and permanently disappeared.

Body of Christ

We first see Apostle Santiago in Cusco, during the feast of Corpus Christi, certainly one of the most spectacular festivals in the Andean south. When the Spaniards arrived in Cusco in 1532, they were surprised to see processions for the mummified bodies of Inca rulers. From this origin arises the custom of touring fifteen Virgins and Catholic saints, as was once done with the Inca mummies. In the Corpus Christi festival the old and new worlds come together as part of a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in which one feels the presence of the *Pachamama*, 'Mother Earth,' the *Tayta Inti*, 'Father Sun,' and other Andean divinities.

The procession takes place every year, sixty days after Easter Sunday. The statues of the saints come from different zones of the city and leave very early, heading towards the central plaza (Plaza de Armas, formerly called *Huacaypata*, a Quechua word translated sometimes as 'the warrior's plaza' and other times as 'the plaza of lamentation'). This memory-burdened site has been the witness to crucial historical events, such as the drawing and quartering of Tupac Amaru II, after seeing his family executed, for rising up against Spanish power in 1780. *Huacaypata* has changed its face as it transformed into the Plaza de Armas, where today stands the Cusco Cathedral, the point of arrival for the statues after the pomp-filled, competitive, baroque, and popular parade of saints and Virgins. In this parade, the people combine their religious fervor and the evocation of entertaining stories about the relations the saints have with

each other, especially focused on what they talk about the night they share in the cathedral.

It is impressive to see this procession from a distance, slowly closing in on the Cuzco Plaza de Armas. Distance only allows us to see the figure of a mounted man, as if suspended in the air, advancing through a fervent multitude. One can barely see the peasants carrying the platform with the rearing white horse on their shoulders, and riding it, a victorious Apostle Santiago advances toward the cathedral.

From this curiosity came our impulse to initiate Santiago's long scenic path. It was only much later in the process that we learned that this statue also contains an image of *Illapa*, a millenary God of pre-Inca origins, a very feared divinity in the Andean world, and one who is associated with lightning, thunder, and storms, with bringing the beneficent rain to the fields and giving life, but who also sends electrical shocks and fires, which can cause animal death. This unique image carries with it a long history of transformations and meanings that have changed through time. These successive transformations that fused the God *Illapa* with the Apostle Santiago responded to the indigenous need to preserve their gods even after the imposition of Catholicism. This relation, upon which all scholars agree, is very alive today among the faithful who venerate the saint.

The image of Santiago linked to the God *Illapa* was venerated in *Koricancha*, which in Quechua means 'land of the sun,' and which was located a few meters from the Plaza de Armas in Cuzco. It was an ostentatious temple erected in honor of the *Inti*, or Sun God, and where *Viracocha*, the Creator according to the Andean cosmovision, was also worshipped. The mummies of several Inca kings rested in its interior, and were revered as much or more than in life. The Santo Domingo church was erected over this majestic site of history and legend; one can still see the foundation of finely worked stone from the Inca temple. In this same location, the people worshipped the God *Illapa* as part of the sacred trinity.

The mounted saint extends his sword as a sign to attack. The front feet of the horse rear up and are just about to crush the Moor who, fallen to the ground, lifts one arm in the air to protect himself from the horse's feet. Santiago and the Moor are a single image in

full battle, representing at the same time attack and resistance. The Apostle Santiago came to America as the standard-bearer of the colonizing forces, and he ends up converting himself into the protector of the indigenous towns. Today, his image remains unchanged since he arrived in these lands, and is beloved and venerated in many towns in the country.

The Branding (Herranza) festivals—also known as the festivals of Santiago—are celebrated between the months of July and August, to thank the earth and the tutelary apus (mountain spirits), and to ask the saint as lord of the rain to fecundate the grass and make the cattle reproduce. This is an old saint with deep roots, especially among the peasants in the different regions.

I could not imagine that this interpretation, about which I had written accounts, would still be so close to people's hearts, and I began to understand that it is very typical to relate Santiago directly with the heavenly bodies. Already Augusto Casafra, an actor born in Cusco and a member of the group, had commented to me:

My mother told me, gazing upon the image of Santiago: "Look son, he has a star. You're seeing a star." And I didn't understand very well. Now I know that she was giving me a piece of information. When we took up research for the work, I learned things that still leave me perplexed: that the lightning falling according to *Illapa* or Santiago gives way to the appearance of distinct levels of Andean priests of greater or lesser degree. Thus, the first lightning bolt kills a person; the second disintegrates him; the third resuscitates him, reconstructs him. In this way, the Andean shamanic forces receive a dose of cosmic energy and, to continue qualifying it, are to a specific degree able to become expert in reading coca leaves or in verifying—through the behavior of fire or of knowledge—what there is in certain trees. I haven't invented this; I heard it from my mother and I heard it also in Paucartambo where I know a family that maintains very ancient traditions.

I remember when we were performing the play, at the end of one of the shows a young woman, who had attended with her mother, came up to me and told me, pointing to her: "she told me that when it rained in her town and there was thunder my grandmother told her: 'it's Santiago who is galloping through the heavens.'" "It's true,"

her mother added. "I know the sound of hoofbeats and I felt them when he trotted in the sky."

Similarly in Lamay, a town near Cusco, I attended a rehearsal party for the saint's procession, and what most caught my attention was to see the main altar of the church covered with a blue plastic sky full of silver paper stars. In the statue that is venerated in this church there is also a star at the point of the saint's sword. Streams of silver imitating lightning bolts stream from that sword. In the Quispicanchis chapel, also in Cusco, a painted Santiago rides over the rainbow.

Amiel Cayo, a member of the group, tells us of his family in his birthplace of Puno:

They celebrate Santiago. I remember when I went to the home of some cousins; they were celebrating Santiago but didn't have an image of the saint on horseback. I asked them where the saint was, and they pointed to a wooden box with glass that had some cotton inside. "There is the saint, there is Santiago," they told me. As time went on, with the research we have done for the play, I thought some more and went back to that cotton image. It turns out that inside the cotton was something that the grandfather of my cousins had picked up: some pieces of metal fused by a lightning bolt that hit the ground. They picked it up because for them, that is Santiago. Also Ana, when she spoke with the master mask-maker from Puno, Edwin Loza, says that he told her that once he was commissioned to make an image of Santiago. They came from the community that had commissioned the image and they gave him some "bullets" (they call those pieces of metal fused by lightning "bullets") and they asked the artisan to put them inside the image of the saint. In that way it would have validity for the peasants, because otherwise it would be just a statue, and only with the bullets would it be Santiago for them. On the shamans' tables, and in all payments that are made for land, the image of Santiago is always present. When you go to the market to the land office to make payments, Santiago's image always comes to mind because he is the patron saint of cattle and productivity.

A Long Road

Long after having attended the Corpus Christi festival in Cusco and as part of one of the group's tours, I visited the Cathedral of

Santiago of Compostela in Galicia, Spain, where it is believed that Santiago's body rests. I felt transported in time upon being at the site of the other strong source of this myth (the previous experience was in the temple of *Koricancha*). In this majestic church I witnessed the arrival of pilgrims from all over to visit Santiago, one of Christ's twelve Apostles, transformed by the necessities of the war against the Arabs into a symbol to combat the unfaithful during the period of the Reconquest of Spain (771-1492). Santiago is thus converted into the patron saint of Spain and at the same time is the companion of the conquerors in America, where he is transformed from Santiago the Moor Killer into Santiago the Indian Killer.

Years later, remembering this fact that had increased my curiosity, I went to visit the church of Santiago in the area of Cusco of the same name. With time, the procession, and especially the image, had become rich with meaning for me. I wanted to see the saint once again and close up. I found out that the church was closed, but I was able to convince the custodian to let me enter by a small door in the Sacristy that opened into the church. He asked me not to take pictures, and I understood that his reluctance derived from the continuous thefts occurring these days in the old churches in the Andean south of Peru, which contain true national treasures.

The image of the saint in this church was a gift to the city of Cuzco from the Viceroy Toledo. Upon entering the church, the custodian turned on the lights, and there was Santiago, inside a glass case, sitting on a throne as if resting, but his face still held the strength that I felt the first time I saw him in the streets. In the back of the church his horse awaited him, tied to the carrying platform (*anda*) with ropes and covered with tarpaulins. Beneath his lifted feet, I could see the Moor, stretched out on the floor, holding himself up with one arm and covering his face from the horse's hooves with the other. Unlike the saint, the Moor has no possibility of ever resting, even within the church.

The saint only mounts his horse when he goes on procession. "If he were mounted all year he'd get tired," Sabino Tupa, a member of the Brotherhood of the Gentlemen and Ladies of Santiago, told me the next day in the same place. I was also surprised that, since this was Santiago's church, the saint's image was inside a case that looked provincial. When I asked about this, they showed me the side altar

of gilded woodwork where Santiago had been located previously, and from which he later had to be removed, since the water seeped in and didn't allow him to remain in his own altar. The roof had been repaired many times, but the water always dripped through. To protect him, they took him out of that site and installed him in the glass case where he is currently located. Maybe the reason the water did not let him rest is because Santiago is not just a saint who arrived from Spain; he is also *Illapa*, the warrior come down from the sky.

Teresa Gisbert notes that: "he was the giver of rain and for that reason it was up to him to benefit the fields or to kill the crops and the animals with cold and hail. Children were sacrificed to him, as were spotted alpacas—that is, not the white or the black ones, since the former were already dedicated to the Sun and the latter to *Viracocha*." She adds:

In more recent times, the Incas imagined *Illapa* as a warrior. Cobo says, "they imagined he was a man formed of stars in the sky; with a war club in the left hand and a sling in the right, dressed in cloth of light. He had the splendor of lightning when he spun around to sling stones; and their crashing caused thunder, which he did when he wanted water to fall. They said that an enormous river crossed the sky, signaled by the white ribbon we can see from here below, called the Milky Way. They imagined a lot of nonsense about this issue. From this river, then, they believed that he took water to spill upon the earth . . . They attributed to thunder the power of rain and hail along with all that is related to clouds and the air." (Gisbert 71, 75)

As noted above, *Illapa* has had successive metamorphoses, the last of which was after the Conquest when he acquired the face of the Apostle, more precisely in 1536, upon the Spaniards' defeat of the insurgent troops of Manco II in the event known as the Sun-turhuasi miracle (site of the current Cuzco cathedral). The chronicler Guamán Poma de Ayala describes the incident:

Like a lightning bolt he fell from the sky to the Inca fortress called Sacsahuaman, which is an Inca fortress '*pucara*' above San Cristobal. And because he fell to the earth, the Indians were frightened

and said that Yllapa had fallen, the God of thunder and lightning. . . . Thus the lord Santiago came down to defend the Christians. They say he came mounted on a white horse . . . the saint was fully armed and carried a banner and a naked sword and wore a red cloak, and he came with great destruction and killed many Indians and tore down the barricade that *Manco Inca* had constructed against the Christians, and the saint was very noisy and the Indians were frightened by this. . . . And ever since, the Indians have called lightning by the name of Santiago. (qtd. in Gisbert)

Since that time Santiago and *Illapa* have been identified with each other due to the fact that Santiago on horseback includes in his traditional iconography all the elements associated with *Illapa*.

Ever since I first saw the church, which according to the townspeople was constructed with the stones from Sacsahuaman, I have returned to visit it many times, to sit before the saint, gazing fixedly at him, awaiting a sign.

Processions

In collaborative theater projects like *Yuyachkani*, it is hard to define the exact moment when a new project begins. Generally we have a very imprecise idea as our initial point of departure and we explore it more fully in the day-to-day work, where it changes a great deal. Sometimes we also simultaneously mix together other projects that are floating around and that we feel like exploring, not always with a specific goal in mind. A collective project begins to appear almost naturally; forms appear in space and take off, acquire rhythm, and begin to walk. *Santiago* has a very long road and is part of several previous approximations explored by the group, all of them with the indispensable accompaniment of the writer Peter Elmore, the co-author of the play.

One of the first activities in this process was to have a white horse similar to the one in the Cusco church made for us; at that time we still did not have a clear idea what we would do with it, but we knew that having the horse nearby would invite us to explore it, and so there it was. With this horse and Augusto Casafranca mounted on it with a sword and cape, we invaded the San Francisco church in Lima, Peru one night. The performance consisted in carrying the saint, represented by the actor, in a procession accompanied by the

faithful and a town band. The saint entered the plaza frozen, then came alive and stood up on the horse to the astonishment of the people, then returned to his place, and the procession continued.

The second activity was also a procession, this time in Lima's San Martin Plaza, as part of a street performance we called "Surrender *Atahualpa!*" In this performance, which was more elaborate than the previous ones, we incorporated a new character into the portable platform. Under the horse's hooves, Amiel Cayo, a scissor dancer, lay in the same position as the Moor in the original statue, but wearing his costume as a dancer and with his scissors in his hand. A priest with a megaphone preceded the procession and proclaimed a hallucinatory speech about faith, in which, among other things, he called for the "surrender of *Atahualpa.*" The first approximation to *Yuyachkani* actor Ana Correa's role (later developed into the character Bernardina), was during this street performance, in which she was an itinerant food vendor who followed the procession pushing a cart with charcoal brazier that she fanned with a straw fan. She comments:

The director had suggested to me a serene, tranquil presence; one that would accompany the procession with her cart without adding anything. It was like a vignette of those food vendors who follow processions selling grilled meat (*anticuchos*). During the trajectory, she develops a relationship with the scissor dancer under the horse and when he jumps up to dance, she fans the fire as if encouraging him, as if saying, "heat it up." Much later I realized that my character contains some of the characteristics of this first image, in her tranquility and her attitude of not giving anything away, of keeping herself very contained, very internalized. I let her free through the flame that she fanned, but still when I remember this woman, the grilled meat vendor, the fire she fanned was social, a relationship with others. The fire that invades Bernardina is that of a woman burning up inside.

Behind the statue, a band of musicians played the traditional hymns that accompany religious processions.

A group of *Sikuris*, dancers, entered the plaza, stationing themselves defiantly in front of the procession, preventing its passage. The actor lying under the horse jumped down from the platform

and danced with the *Sikuri* group. In response, the saint stood up on the horse and raised his sword. This was the sign for the band to play military attack marches and for rockets and fireworks to explode from the platform. The actor continued dancing along with the *Sikuris*. The event ended when the dancer returned to his position under the horse and the procession as such continued. It was an impressive performance, even without the full design, which later included a portable cart with a lot of television screens showing images of violence in contemporary Peru. These street interventions already began to show signs of our intent to explore the historical precedents for the violence in Peru, part of a continuous history of unsolved problems in a society founded on exclusion.

The third time our “Santiago” went out into the streets was at the inauguration of the III National Biennial of Fine Arts in the Lima’s Plaza de Armas, as part of an intervention involving a confrontation between angels and devils from different regions of Peru who had taken over the plaza. This time the saint appeared as a mediator in the conflict. He was lifted into the air by an immense crane and when he waved his sword, the lights of the Plaza went out, the activity was frozen, and rockets and fireworks exploded behind the Lima Cathedral. This time the intention was to explore the festive element and the spectacle signified by taking over the plaza.

“Santiago,” thus, is a project that began in the plazas before premiering as a theatrical work. The initial theatrical investigation took place, as we saw, in street performances and it seemed to us that it was going to be a street play. However, on beginning exploration within the theater it continued to evolve and, curiously, the improvisations that took on the most force were those related to our earliest stages of research about the festival, when we took pictures of the faithful and thought of the idea of seeking out the characters’ social model. Later, in the *qochakuy* ritual (in which the saint is taken out into the sun before changing his clothes), the activity is not dressing the saint, but sitting him down to sunbathe before preparing him to mount his horse and put him on the moveable platform. It was important to be close to the MCs and the people involved in the festivity. Ana Correa recalls the evolution towards her character:

In the beginning of the process I looked for a person much closer to myself and my personal culture as an actor. At that time I was

working technically with objects; I performed with benches—lifting and carrying them; I worked with all the props in the space, juggling candelabra and the saint's sword. It was a very difficult time because I felt the director was making fun of me. When attending the preparations for the festival, I chose one of the women as a model. I spoke a great deal with her; she told me her dreams—I have a notebook full of dreams. There I found out that the responsibility for preparing the festival comes to someone in dreams when the saint sends a revelation. Now my character Bernardina is a strong woman who has lived through the war, has learned how to live in it, has had to be servile. She is a woman who dreams on stage. The audience may not notice it, but for me it is very important. In her dreams she is threatened with death and at the end of her performance she decides to awaken to life.

On the other hand, and as a complementary activity to this work, attending the festival itself was an important stimulus for retaining much of the final text of the play in Quechua. As the actor Augusto Casafranca mentions:

In Quechua there are things that come out that I cannot say in Spanish with precision and that even have a different meaning when translated. It is like sharing another kind of information, establishing a level of complicity with oneself and the other. Above all, it is a spoken Quechua. I felt this very clearly in the tour we did in the south; the audience there was completely complicitous. I feel that I speak to all of them at the same time, I feel I am surrounded by a chorus who follows the action second by second, who is sensitive to other moments; even the comments of the audience at the end of the play are different. The audience in the theater is more aware of technical issues; the other audience feels that we are speaking to them of their lives.

As a result of this observation, the activities of the actors on being translated into the theater space develop inside a closed church located in the center of an Andean town during the years of internal violence in the country. In this church rests the statue of the saint, a saint who has not gone out on procession in fifteen years. Thus, the only three remaining inhabitants of the town confront each other in the interior of the church: Ana Correa as Bernardina, Augusto

Casafranca as Armando, and Amiel Cayo as Rufino, the church custodian.

Situation, Action, and Character

Much later and after a long research process we found the “situation”—as understood in the terms of Santiago García: “the complex of spatio-temporal circumstances in which an event develops”—that permitted us to tie together the materials that originated in the theater space. We defined the situation as follows: “the last three inhabitants of an almost-ghost town in the Peruvian Andes decide, in an act that pairs hope and desperation, to take the statue of the Apostle Santiago out into the streets, in an attempt to revive a ceremony that had been abandoned for the last fifteen years.” Defining this situation was the key to exploring what would happen to these three people inside the church that night. Santiago García’s text, *La situación, la acción y el personaje* ‘Situation, Action, and Character,’ was extremely important in the development of this process, in his words: in drama “there are three categories without which one cannot conceive of the existence of a theatrical spectacle (situation, action, and character). We call them categories because, despite their indispensability, they can be subject to determined orders or categorization according to the emphasis that is placed on each of the three.”

The situation became the frame allowing for the coherent sequence of activities of the characters, generating a triangle whose sides nurtured and created a spiral progression. The situation required something of the character and this is manifested in the action, enriching the character and adding complexity to the situation. Inhabiting the space was the actors’ task, as Amiel Cayo comments:

When we were rehearsing the play, I came to live in *Yuyachkani*’s house. I slept in the theater, I got up at night and walked around, I learned each corner of the theater and I could mentally walk through the whole space. I have the sense of its smell, its heat, the sounds inside, all of it is incorporated. Because of living there for a time, in that space where we performed the play, and since my character was the custodian, I felt that it flowed like water. My model was a neighbor who was custodian of the Puno cathedral.

This neighbor was a musician and he played the organ in the religious ceremonies. From him I took the way he walked, the way he talked. The *Tiquillaka* church from my mother's hometown twenty-five kilometers from Puno was also important. *Tiquillaka* means 'town of flowers.' When I was a child I went to that church and explored it from top to bottom, even climbing the towers. The church was mostly empty because a priest only came to offer mass once a month.

The Link: A Tool for Improvisation

In the successive improvisation sessions we worked on finding units of action with a beginning, middle, and end that we called "links" and that we move around like reference cards until they find their place. "Inhabiting the situation" was our key for this stage of the work. The link assures us that the action is moving forward, that something is happening at each moment and in a parallel manner in the church. Accumulating links gives us presences in the space that with the development of actions eventually sketches out a character. The character is the sum of his actions, and what happens is the important aspect. The order of the links has to do with the continuity that appears in the exploration of the situation. In the beginning we played with putting together the links in different orders and ways; this is a body of material in continual process of editing with respect to the central action, in this case, "the procession." Nevertheless, the freedom to play with little unities of action reveals unsuspected and unpredictable moments in the situation and distances us from the linear illustration of a central conflict.

The procession must go outside but not all of the elements needed to put together the platform are available. They appear little by little, thus resolving the conflict. First the clothing appears, then the keys to the glass case, and then the saint is dressed and placed on the horse, but the statue of the Moor has disappeared. Can the procession go on without the Moor? This question creates the final conflict. The plot affirms the continuity of the situation but doesn't resolve everything. While some links go in the direction of the plot, others are organized by physical reactions that put together sequences from life that take place in a parallel manner, and this enriches the dramatic text and the principal action.

Here too I repeat something noted on other occasions, that our

creative intent is oriented by the organization of action in space. For this reason, we bring together diverse materials (physical, sound, sight, smell, narrative, literary, etc.), some of which are found as a result of improvisation. At this point of selection, Peter Elmore's contribution was particularly important. Upon receiving the basic material that had been evolving in the space, he returned it to us adding his own elements: typically, plot, texts, biographies, ways of speaking, etc. In this way we achieved a dramatic story that in its turn became an organizing force to give coherence and growth to the situation. This returned us to the space, and then Peter developed the argument and proposed final texts that we tested on stage.

The final project arrived as a result of this long process of exploration in which disparate sources flow together, both research and participant observation, all filtered through the personal training of the actors, the accumulation of props, the selection of material, and the staging.

Translated by Debra A. Castillo

Notes

1 "Bernardina" in Santiago. Collective creation of *Yuyachkani* and Peter Elmore.

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