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Original Research

The Impact of Higher Education on Andean Spirituality: A Case Study with Quechua-Speaking and Rural Youth in Peru

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Abstract: The growth of rural–urban migration not only affects the social and economic adaptation of the new rural generations to urban spaces but also produces a series of changes in their mental representations, as occurs with religious beliefs. Contrary to the assumption that Christianity is a religion adopted by the Latin American population in a uniform manner and in accordance with the patterns of the official religion, the present study shows the deep-rootedness of pre-Hispanic beliefs in a group of students of rural origin and from the south of the Peruvian Andes. This belief system manifests the persistence of animistic traits in the spirituality of rural youth in the Andes. The qualitative study uses ethnohistorical, anthropological, and theological analysis tools to demonstrate that young people of rural origin who access higher education (approximately 10% of the total population of rural youth) would be developing, through processes of critical analysis, new ways of elaborating a religious synthesis between imposed Christianity and ancestral beliefs of Andean origin.

Keywords: *Migrants, Syncretism, Andean Christianity, Andean Spirituality, Andean Animism, Rural Youth*

Introduction

Research on religious beliefs throughout the shift from a domestic and rural economy to an urban and industrial one has not always highlighted how people's traditional beliefs change when they access higher education (Foner et al. 2018; Libarios et al. 2018; Hidayah et al. 2021; Orozco et al. 2021; Yuan and Zhang 2023). In addition, the syncretism phenomena under study are usually comprehended through the analysis of collective practices and customs in specific populations during different time periods from analytical perspectives generally linked to ethnography, anthropology, and history (Pease 1973; Gruzinski 1994; Broda 2003; Marzal 1983, 2005).

The aim of this study, which started at the end of 2023, was to analyze the religious and spiritual experiences of young, bilingual (Spanish–Quechua) students or recent university

graduates from rural areas.[1] The interviewees discussed how their traditional spiritual beliefs interact with Western and Christian conceptual frameworks during the higher education learning process.

Due to the absence of studies of this kind in the social and cultural analysis of contemporary Peru, this study began with a series of postulates related to history, local anthropology, and religious phenomenology. Thus, this theoretical framework's compilation served as a conceptual support for the analysis of the interviewees' discourses.

Levels of Interpretation

The first level of interpretation, related to the depiction of native practices and beliefs, has as a reference framework the existing anthropological and ethnohistorical research that demonstrate the syncretic character of the Andean religiosity (Marzal 1983; MacCormack 1993). Studies like Manuel Marzal's (1983, 2005) took for granted the syncretic character of Christian practices, which were then linked to the Catholic religion's doctrinal principles, without questioning how some practices were subordinated to others.

A second level of interpretation is then imposed, this time under the critical paradigm of post-coloniality, with new approaches to Andean religiosity that give the protagonists of such beliefs more agency. In other words, studies on native spiritual beliefs and values have gradually come into line with a new analytical perspective that seeks to grasp Andean epistemology from its own categories. This shift has been prompted by the hope for the same Andean or native people to reconstruct the process of interpreting their spiritual reality, being aware of their old pre-colonial roots, even assuming a Christian affiliation, ultimately incorporated as a relevant part of their belief system, despite having been imposed in the colonial past.

This last twist conceals a third level of interpretation that is fueled by a growing historical consciousness of the methods used to indoctrinate indigenous populations into the Western worldview. The historical lens has exposed the cultural and discursive violence, and it is increasingly evident that the supposed evangelization was a harrowing process that severely devastated the foundations of Andean communities' worldview. Native beliefs were subjected to processes of eradication and demonization that are common when certain peoples conquer others (Todorov 1982; Gruzinski 1994; Cervantes 1996; Millones and López 2013; Smith 2011). A paternalistic and subalternizing system was established when the enforced colonial system forced the local communities to adopt additional cultural values, including the infamous restrictions of being subjected to law as minors. At the same time, new narratives and discursive forms, such as literacy, were embedded in the collective

[1] It should be noted that the Quechua language was neglected for centuries due to the imposition of Spanish. However, it has recently been promoted in bilingual intercultural education, which has generated a significant revaluation of the language. All the young people in this study are graduates of this new curriculum.

mentalities. All of this led to complex, often simultaneously, processes of adaptation and resistance (Stern 1986; Glave 2005).

The organization of the deepest belief systems was channeled by the Catholic ecclesiastical institution, which, in principle, only sought to impose its system of spiritual interpretation from a purely metaphysical paradigm and detached from the connection with nature (MacCormack 1993; Müller 2021; Grueso 2018; Jensen 2023; Dejo 2023). The lack of linkage between mind and body in Catholic spiritual practices is widely known, with the exception of asceticism, which is usually defined as a set of techniques linked to the containment, repression, or avoidance of some desires and emotions (Brown 1998; Freiberger 2006; Foucault 2018; Parra and Montero 2019). With the exception of some meditative practices that incorporated imagination or awareness of affects, generally speaking, the objectives were focused on emphasizing the control and negation of emotions and bodily affects from an ancient Platonic tradition that has been incorporated into the Christian discourse from early centuries of our time (Manuel 1965; Osborn 1993; Hadot 2002; Foucault 2018).

Finally, all of the earlier-mentioned interpretations lead to a last level of analysis that considers how Andean spiritual beliefs were reconstructed using the new Judeo-Christian gear of symbols, narratives, and cosmic organizing concepts. In the Andean world, Christianity would have been incorporated and amalgamated with a series of pre-Hispanic spiritual practices. In contrast, there are a number of findings that cast doubt on the purported conversion of the local people when examining the current and vast corpus of work related to native beliefs from a post-colonial analytical perspective. Based on the interviews conducted for this study with a group of students of rural, Andean, and Quechua-speaking origin, it is possible to argue that both worldviews show a continuous tension in which, however, a harmonious, but not fully analyzed, worldview navigates. This can be identified as Andean Christianity. This last definition has not yet been developed to fit into Christian orthodoxy or the notion of whether a heterodoxy resides in it, which would be dubious from the viewpoint of official theology. In summary, the different levels of interpretation aforementioned help to analyze the interaction between both Andean and Western spiritualities and religious notions that are evident in the interviewees' discourses.

The Foundations of Judeo-Christian and Andean Worldviews

Self-reflection has persisted in Western thought. Moreover, it adheres to its appropriate spirit, which includes abstraction and its related processes of induction and deduction. This is the constitutive metaphysical mode of what is now the West. In spite of its purported demise, metaphysics continues to foster the collective mentalities of horizons of expectations, which, in turn, continue to generate religious discourses in various secular spheres (Calhoun et al. 2013).

For the purposes of this study, spirituality is not the same as religion. There is not enough literature to agree on anything that is not yet properly settled, so it is worth addressing the hypothetical state of this distinction proposed in this article as a technical tool of analysis.

Spirituality is a mostly social experience emerging from ancient practices that influences individual behaviors, providing a feeling of total awareness and meaning (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Frigerio 2016; Peri 2021), and creating a sense of well-being which is recently studied by specialists incorporating neuroscience analysis tools (Newberg 2018; Yaden et al. 2020; Miller 2021; Winkelman 2023). While spiritual experience is generally indescribable, on the other hand, it is encapsulated by religious doctrinal narratives and rituals of a cultural milieu (Durkheim 2001; Winkelman 2012; Dunbar 2022). Both dimensions most likely fed back over the course of centuries of human evolution, growing increasingly sophisticated as large human groups approached the so-called Axial Age (Sanderson 2018; Dunbar 2022). Nowadays it is undeniable that spiritual practices do not diminish as a result of the doctrinal religious crisis (Armstrong 2009; Calhoun et al. 2013; Aray 2018; Manzanelli 2021; Perino 2022). These undergo a process that is likely as old as human life itself, changing their skin and eventually recurring under other clothing.

The Christianity transmitted in the Hispanic colonies of Latin America was the rigid transmission of a doctrine inserted in the so-called Catechism—a rigorous synthesis of the fundamentals of Jesus' revelation that Catholics must understand and adhere to (Zumeta 1920; Ghelarducci 2020). After a harsh persecution of the religious beliefs that were kept clandestine among the native population, it is assumed that the population, in general, had already been Christianized during the eighteenth century.

Three centuries later, the survival of the fundamental elements of pre-Hispanic Andean beliefs is evident. Toward the end of the twentieth century, ritual and religious activities associated with the Andean worldview became more visible, coinciding with the crisis of the sacredness that the Catholic Church had enjoyed. Due to the contact with the market, it is more challenging to determine whether these practices are transparent, as their profusion has coincided with the growth of tourism. Nevertheless, studies like this one gather the testimonies of people who have lived comparatively far from popular tourist destinations. By contrasting their experiences and narratives, this study achieves the goal of categorizing religious or spiritual elements.

Before introducing them, it is possible to highlight some of their main characteristics that are evident in the disparity across scientific literature. The Andean worldview places a marked emphasis on organizing the world mentally around the cycles, rhythms, and essential features of nature. The universe as a conjunction of time and space is *Pacha*.[2] Thus, Andean religion is characterized by interconnecting "the different *pachas* or worlds with each other particularly, living beings with the *Pacha*, the generative source of all manifestation of life."

[2] This is one of the multiple meanings of this term in Quechua.

(García and Roca 2017, 37). This becomes more tangible in the earth itself, which is the source of all nourishment. The *Mama Pacha*. It is worth questioning whether recent abstractions of Andean thought and worldview accurately reflect the protagonists' own experiences (Titizano 2017; Perino 2022). This is what some authors propose by pointing out that Andean thought follows a different logic from the predominant one in the West (García 1996; Millones 1997; Campohermoso et al. 2015). The latter uses its dual excluding logic, which is operated on the premise that if two assertions are contrary, then only one of them is true. This kind of statement illustrates this logic: "There is only one true God. If my God is true, then your God is false." From Andean rationality, this reasoning is not the only one and cannot be applied to all situations (Dejo 1990; García 1996; Mendoza-Zapata 2022).

This article does not have the immediate objective of reconsidering the categories that currently circulate in academic circles, leaving up the potential that studies of this type might contribute to a deeper understanding of Andean worldview, religiosity, and spirituality. These three elements establish concentric circles that converge in a community of components that distinguish the Andean culture's fluidity.

Methodology

Design

Based on semi-structured interviews, the study is qualitative and exploratory, and aims to identify the participants' experiences from an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates Andean history, psychology, and religious anthropology; from a hermeneutic approach of the spiritual discourse; and from a constructive-interpretative epistemological positioning.

Participants

Eight Quechua-speaking university students from rural centers in the central and southern Andes, including Huancavelica, Junín, Apurímac, Cusco, and Puno, participated. It should be noted that all of them identify themselves as Christians. The vast majority of the Peruvian population identifies as such, since the process of Western colonization meant the superimposition of Christianity.[3] This superimposition, however, in rural and non-urban areas, did not eliminate the old pre-colonial beliefs, which still exist today. The interviews help to show this syncretic structure in the analyses that the participants make of their own spiritual and religious experience. They are all students or have recently completed higher education. They all have the characteristic of having migrated to the capital to further their education. The sociodemographic characteristics of these participants are detailed in Table 1.

[3] According to the latest census in 2017, 94% identify themselves as believers within the universe of Christian beliefs. In rural areas the percentage is even higher (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI] 2018, I, 58).

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Code	*Gender*	*Place of Origin*	*First Language*	*Age*
A	Woman	Choclococha, Huancavelica	Quechua	25
B	Man	Qocha, Apurímac	Quechua	25
C	Woman	Chahuarinay, Apurímac	Quechua	25
D	Woman	Ocobamba, Apurímac	Quechua	25
E	Woman	Vilque, Puno	Quechua	25
F	Man	Pucacocha, Junin	Quechua	22
G	Woman	Occururo, Cusco	Quechua	21
H	Woman	Chillca, Cusco	Quechua	21

Ethical and Quality Care

Age segmentation is the first step in the study's ethical care. Every respondent is older than 18. They were invited to sign an informed consent outlining the study, the fundamental security measures to protect their identity by letter coding, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the interview. At the conclusion of the study, the recordings and confidential data were disposed of following transcription. Given the specific features of a universe of similar traits, interviews were conducted for an extended duration in accordance with the saturation criteria.

Results

Analysis of the interview data yielded the following three conceptual categories that will be used in further discussion: first, conceptual revaluation and revision of original beliefs; second, a relational ontology, as an interpretation of reality as constituted by relational interactions of mutual interdependence of living entities; and finally, the development of a syncretic spiritual thought may be explained by an interaction between two belief systems in continuous tension, as the Andean and the Judeo-Christian.

Conceptualization and Grounding of Beliefs

Every interviewee stated that university studies were important to reevaluate the pre-Christian beliefs that had been transmitted to them. Furthermore, these beliefs—which are expressed through ritual practices—remain often dissociated from the sphere of religious practices to this day. This is because Christianity was imposed in a manner that the official Catholic regime was the only one that could define and qualify anything pertaining to religious practices. Consequently, spiritually oriented activities that were outside the official framework were relegated to the secular sphere—mostly in daily life and connected to

agricultural cycles. Even though these behaviors are not formally identified as religious, they do have certain similarities with Christian faith, according to the participants' reflection. This first level of interpretation of the interview material aims to take into consideration the spiritual and religious dimensions that are formed by the participants' introspective process. The students recall a series of cultural practices in response to the topic of how they interpret the spiritual experience.

Most of the practices that the interviewees cited are related to the ritual of "paying the earth back" (*pago a la tierra*) as a way of gratitude. Through a series of objects placed on a blanket that represents the earth's natural environment, a specialist—*yachaq* in Quechua—or the eldest member of the family –in all of the aforementioned cases, a man— thanks a natural entity with which he establishes a relationship of protection: "Only the *yachaq* is able to touch the top of the blanket [on which the objects are placed]… It was like a representation of the environment."[4] (G).

These ritual gestures are compared with some acts appropriate to the Christian faith, in which the believers position themselves in a posture of devotion, reverence, and dependence on the deity or the Virgin, Christ, or the saints. For this reason, for many young people, giving thanks to God or nature could be a cause of certain conflict: "Thinking that God would resent it if he did not like it [the ceremony of the *pago a la tierra*]…When my mother told me that one [an indigenous ritual or a Christian one] does not exclude the other, it gave me peace of mind… I felt calm to see that it is not excluding… Beliefs [then]… are synchronizing."[5] (H).

This religious experience is lived as tension, but since higher education is where the spiritual experience is strengthened, this seems to be better understood. For one of the interviewees, Andean religiosity was interpreted as "knowledge."

> It is complicated to understand it [reality] if one sees it from only one side. What is useful can be taught; what is not is discarded [like that type of knowledge]. That is why knowledge is about recovering and rescuing what is useful. It is a principle of Andean culture: to regenerate life in the society you are in, in the time you are in. Regenerating the *Pachamama*.[6] (B)

[4] "Solo el *yachaq* tocaba lo que estaba encima de la manta [sobre la que se emplazan objetos]…Era como una representación de su entorno" (G).

[5] "Pensando que Dios se resentiría si eso [el *pago a la tierra*]no le gusta…Cuando mi mamá me dice que uno [un ritual indígena o cristiano] no excluye al otro…me dio tranquilidad…. Me sentí tranquila de ver que no es excluyente…Creencias…se van sincronizando" (H).

[6] "Es complicado entenderlo [la realidad] si lo ve uno de un solo lado. Lo que es útil se puede enseñar, lo que no es se descarta [ese tipo de conocimiento]. El conocimiento se trata por eso de recuperar, de rescatar lo que sirve. Es un principio de la cultura andina: regenerar la vida en la sociedad que te encuentres, en el tiempo que estés. Regenerar la *Pachamama*" (B)

In this case, the student's understanding of Andean spirituality is integrated as the essence of an entire culture. It is said that the concept of regenerating or revitalizing is the type of knowledge that produces a spirituality that brings one into close contact with nature.

The participants' exposure to critical studies courses aided in a process of deconstructing a certain mentality that is indicative of experiencing the consequences of a colonization of thought, as recent critical studies have been revealing (Quijano 2020; Córdova-Quero et al. 2019, 2020; Guttorm et al. 2021). Some of these courses include Contemporary Social Thought, Philosophy, Religiosities and Cultural Values, and Western Art and Literature. One of the interviewees recalls that in an anthropology course, she questioned the idea of an imagined or projected God to rule the masses. She applied this same skepticism to her family's beliefs in the Andes. She found it difficult to get over this doubtful state. At the moment of the interview, she acknowledged that she was still working to balance the two kinds of beliefs (Andean and Christian ones) (C).

The phenomena of spirituality are not theoretically addressed in the curricula of nearly every Andean community. Additionally, the entire curricula are in Spanish, and most of the educational content is delivered in Spanish language programs. According to one of the interviewees, it was difficult for her to discuss Andean spirituality because, first, she could not find precise equivalents in Spanish, and second, because there is usually no analytical process of religiosity in the Andean culture itself: "Only it was experienced through dances or theater…There was no greater awareness, as [it was] part of life itself. There was nothing [explicitly explained]."[7] (D).

The second issue is the (self)censorship of the first language, where the notions seem to be incommensurate with the Western mental structure. If the language is subject to such strong social censorship, there is little room for reflection, as the prestige given to the Spanish language influences the types of discourses that take place. The political and educational ones that privilege Western knowledge end up demeaning their own. The consequence is to establish the parameters of a discourse that begins by reflecting on the same concepts. Students in class often discuss the semantic variations they observe between the ideas or concepts that underlie their formal statements. In socializing spaces where Quechua is empowered and invested with the same dignity as Spanish, students were able to develop a critical reflection of their own culture. One of them concludes that university studies gave them a theoretical–reflexive dimension that was an understanding of such a degree "that there was no longer a complex of silencing what we lived because it was part of our experience"[8] (D). This interviewee found it enriching to understand spirituality in a broader way because "it is not only the context [in] which one is,

[7] "Solo lo vivían en danza o teatro…No había mayor conciencia [porque era] como parte de la vida misma. No había nada [explícito]" (H).

[8] "que no había ya complejo de callar lo que vivíamos porque era parte de nuestra cultura" (D).

but where one lives the culture. We were all reflecting together, and as professionals in training, we were able to develop an awareness of this"[9] (D).

Spirituality as analogous to culture again comes to the fore in this observation. The collective and social aspects of the discussion in one's own language helped people become more conscious of the importance of their own culture. One of them, from his early academic years, indicates that he feels that "his [Andean culture] should be revalorized and that he has only recently become aware of it."[10] (F). Another student, in the middle of her studies, is starting the process of reconciling the two belief systems: Andean and Western Judeo-Christian. She has initiated this process with the aid of decoloniality analysis. She understands that not all knowledge is Western-based and that current debates revitalize original ways of producing knowledge relevant to global existence (H).

A recent graduate similarly elaborates on her own spirituality to comprehend its value from the perspective of Western rationality. For her, Andean spirituality helps her because of its "mythical [*sic*] character." By interpreting its myths, she finds a life lesson:

> Understanding the rationality of the myths… for example, not the myths themselves, but the interpretation of them… to give meaning to them, to interpret the symbolisms that are behind Andean spirituality, to feel their sacredness…their own place. For example, the prohibition of "not throwing stones or kicking them" because they are living beings to be respected. They serve to make *apachetas*.[11] The symbolism there, knowing every part that makes up Pachamama... it's all sacred.[12] (A).

Another recent graduate can apply what he has learned when he returns to his hometown. He mentions that "to analyze all this, you need to have an education. If I had been born in the district [and not in a remote community], I would not have been able to understand all of this."[13] (B). According to this participant, he has been able to comprehend his own spirituality and rationality because of the reflection prompted in college. He reworks his belief system by assembling new concepts that he may notice by contrasting with the specific experiences of his peers. This is the case, for instance, with the notion of unity, which

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[9] "no es solo el contexto [en] que uno está, sino donde vive la cultura. Entre todos se hacía una reflexión y, en tanto profesionales en formación, podíamos desarrollar una conciencia al respecto" (D).

[10] "él siente que esto [gruesamente hablando, la cultura andina] debe revalorarlo y que solo recientemente se ha dado cuenta de ello" (F).

[11] Mound of stones along the roads as an offering to the forces of nature.

[12] "Entender luego la racionalidad de los mitos…Es decir, no los mitos propiamente tales cuales, sino la interpretación de los mismos…Darle sentido, interpretar los simbolismos que están detrás de la espiritualidad andina, sentir su lado sagrado…, su lugar propio. Por ejemplo, la prohibición 'no tirar la piedra o no patear' sino que son seres vivos a respetar; sirven para hacer *apachetas*. El simbolismo que otorga, conocer cada parte que constituye la *Pachamama*…es sagrada." (A)

[13] "para analizar todo esto, es necesario tener una formación. Si hubiera nacido en el distrito [y no en una remota comunidad], no hubiera podido entender todo esto" (B).

enables him to understand the perspective of communal life and the means of achieving both individual and shared objectives. It requires a "balance between rational thinking [because otherwise it] can bring crisis or misfortune."[14] (B).

In contrast, nearly every student reveals a very weak elaboration of the idea of the Christian God or of the central Christian figures, starting with Christ. The formation in both spiritualities, one of which is the hegemonic one, causes conflict too (C). She recalls that her father's payments to the earth came before an optimal agricultural output. However, she was doubtful at the time since she did not understand how God was actually responsible for this well-being (C). One of the graduates, who is trained more in the Catholic faith, concludes that God is the creator of nature. In her process of abstraction, she tends to subordinate Andean ancestral beliefs as subject to God, as part of its creation. However, she draws a comparison between the *Apus* [the hills], souls in purgatory, and the crosses. She sees them all as instances that one may relate to, because "it is not necessary to attend the mass [since], if one prays deeply, one connects with God."[15] (E). This connection is made through the aforementioned intermediaries. Another participant, in the middle of her studies, states that she followed her mother's advice to return to her village and "reconnect with her hill" (G) after experiencing an anxiety crisis that left her uncertain about her academic performance.[16] This student, after the healing process that she attributed to the reconnection with her *Apu*, felt torn between her idea of God and her non-Christian spiritual experience. She recalls her mother's response: "You are connecting with other parts that are part of your life."[17] (G). This shows the close relational link between the beings of nature and humans as an essential part of their faith.

A Relational Ontology

Thanks to this second category of analysis, the participants' conceptions of spirituality and religion include the idea that humans are conceived as part of a network of connections that define life itself. Throughout the interviews, the participants indicated several entities that may have been a part of their childhood anecdotes and memories. Considering the local healers (*Altomichayoq* in Quechua) of "C"'s memories, he recalls rituals of payment to the earth, which he compares to Catholic candlelight rituals. For him, this illustrates the link with God and *Pachamama*: "*Pachamama* has to do with time… God would be the one who

[14] "equilibrio entre el pensamiento racional y el sentimiento [porque de lo contrario ello] puede traer crisis o desgracias" (B).

[15] "no es necesario ir a misa [ya que] si uno ora profundamente se conecta con Dios" (E).

[16] "reconectar con su cerro" (G).

[17] "Tú estás conectando con otras partes que son parte de tu vida" (G).

gives life [but earth as well…], restores it to…everything that happens [and that] has life. This is what has generated life."[18] (C).

When she is asked what God would be then, this education graduate begins to list a few ancient local deities. Many of them are associated with constellations as reflections of earth's elements, such as rivers, llamas, llamas' eyes, and partridges (C).

Pachamama as space and time of creation is identified and linked to the creative act of giving and/or engendering life. All entities seem to possess the same breath as humans: "When my grandmother shelled her corn, or the *cancha* [toasted corn in Quechua], and when the grain fell to the ground, you had to pick it up and not step on it because she said it hurts it. So, it would not grow next year."[19] (D).

Every participant believes that the existence of a conscience in natural beings is obvious. One of the young women, today an educator, assures that "there is a special feeling" in the payments she makes to the *Pachamama* as well as to the *Apus* (E).[20] The ancestral beliefs are interwoven with the young people's memories. Their grandparents, rather than their parents, transmit this relationship with the environment. "F" remembers that "when the wind is strong and kills the plants or corn, it is said that the hill [*Ullo* in Quechua] is angry. The community then goes to the top of the hill and puts stones in the shape of a tower (*apacheta*)…It is a ritual to calm it down."[21] He also recalls a time when someone from his community went to a nearby lagoon with alcohol and coca leaves to perform a ritual because it was believed that it would not rain if the sun rose too high. He witnessed something similar at St. James the Apostle's feast. He saw certain flowers, like the Lima-Lima, being picked and carried to the hill with their respective payments in order to produce rain.

Nature is not, however, just another entity with which everyone relates. The emotions are the same as in family circles: affection, reverence, fear, jealousy, or revenge. "C" recalls a memory that her father told her. To protect them from harm, he placed plants under the stones when they reached the hills. The settlers are afraid of specific locations. They all recall stories of how certain natural locations take revenge for a forgetfulness of gratitude by, for instance, punishing people with illnesses. However, there are ambiguous phenomena. For example, the lightning that falls on someone has the potential to either destroy them or give them a new life with gifts recognized by the community and transform them into a community character with authority that they may use as a wise person. "E" is the granddaughter of a wise individual who was impacted by the lightning. When she is asked if

[18] "Tiene que ver la *Pachamama* con el tiempo…Dios sería el que da vida [pero la tierra también], la restaura a…todo lo que ocurre [y que] tiene vida. Lo que [*sic*] ha provocado la vida" (C).

[19] "Cuando mi abuela desgranaba su mote de maíz, o la cancha, y cuando se caía [*sic*] había que recogerlo y no pisarlo porque decía que le dolía. Ya no va a dar cultivo el año siguiente" (D).

[20] "hay un sentir especial" (E).

[21] "cuando corre viento fuerte y mata a las plantas, maíces, se dice que el cerro (*Ullo*) está molesto. La comunidad entonces va a la punta del cerro y ponen piedras en forma de torre…es un ritual para calmar" (F).

she considers that there is something sacred in the *Apus* or in the payments to the *Pachamama*, she answers that there is a special feeling that is related to the place where she comes from. "It is like when you dance,"[22] she says, graphing her relationship with the environment.

Some refer to experiences of reading destiny through signs found in nature. "A" says that, after breaking his left foot, he went to the *Apu* called Sacsayhuaman. This, with other rituals, helped him to overcome it. Throughout this process, he recalls that a wise woman read coca leaves and helped him decide to migrate and settle in a distant location. To all these processes, he concludes that "being next to the *Apu* helps to understand many things."[23]

Several participants have intermingled feelings with these natural entities because they vividly recall that diseases or collective damages are related to what could be described as poor management of the relationships with the entities of nature. Harvest misfortune may result from engaging in certain activities during specific lunar cycles or shelling corn at an improper time. Notwithstanding these concerns about the harm that some elements of nature can bring about for mere transgressions that are not always understood, there are remedies to overcome the harm that might arise in nature itself. One of the participants argues about this aspect:

> Nature has a diversity of ways in which it can affect or benefit. One must have respect, care, and knowledge of how to treat illnesses. When one gets sick, one takes the *harapu* [meal composed of coca leaves, candies, fried food, objects, and a local beverage named *chicha*] to the place. So, the place that has made the person sick feels that it has received its payment. This allows the person to be healed. Those places have lives. The hills have life.[24] (D)

In short, the basic nature of things consists of a relational dimension. People have unique relationships with the natural entities that constitute their environment, such as hills, lakes, passes, rocks, plants, and animals. Daily rituals are upheld, establishing a network of gratitude that addresses the causes of potential ills for both the person and the community. Like all agrarian cultures, communities' celebrations are tied to the cycle of planting and harvesting. They are an opportunity to strengthen what happens every day. The main events are also usually associated with Catholic devotions, where Christian adoration imagery is mixed with ancient Andean beliefs. Academic literature abounds with descriptions of these festivities (Escobar 2019; Dávalos 2019; Botero et al. 2016; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017; di Salvia 2017; García et al. 2018). These works show the staging of the circulation of reciprocity networks, which are also re-signified by Western traditions, such as the

[22] "Es sentir como cuando bailas" (E).

[23] "estar al lado del *Apu* ayuda a entender muchas cosas" (A).

[24] "La naturaleza tiene diversidad de modos en que puede afectar o beneficiar, y que hay que tener respeto y cuidado, y saber tratar las enfermedades. Cuando se enferma, se lleva el *harapu* [ofrenda compuesta de coca, dulces, fritas, objetos y una bebida local llamada *chicha*] al lugar, para que el lugar que ha enfermado a la persona se sienta que ha recibido su pago y que deja a la persona que se sane. Esos lugares tienen vida; los cerros tienen vida." (D)

mayordomía. This position describes the labor that a community member assumes each year as the organizer of the festivity, which includes a magnificent display of gifts and fests that are shared with the whole community. This community celebration ritual showcases and honors the collective gratitude of belonging to a life where reciprocity is the foundation (García 2021; Lozano et al. 2019).

The Interaction Between Two Belief Systems

The last category used to interpret the interviews is how the two belief systems interact in their discourse, concluding that they are assumed to exist as a tension that is not dramatic, although not without difficulties.

Every participant perceives themselves to be Christian or Catholic. In recent years, Evangelical churches have been replacing the Catholic Church, and although their belief systems are very similar, Evangelical churches' rejection of the aforementioned Andean beliefs is particularly noticeable. Even though all participants claimed to have been baptized, some of them had in their family divisions between Evangelicals and Catholics. Despite the uncertainty that weighed on some of them having an Evangelical father, for example, they had been able to obtain the values of a Catholic upbringing and the transmission of ancient Andean values through their mother's side or their grandparents.

In addition to identifying as Christians or Catholics, they all confirmed the strong influence of Andean beliefs. Concerning the spiritual dimension, every participant mentions rituals as a priority. From this initial allusion, they move to a second, more reflexive level, which leads them to conceptualize and affirm that it is a discourse that they have only developed through university studies, when they have been able to legitimize the significance of the Andean ancestral beliefs.

As a result of Christianity, every interviewee expresses a clear moral nuance. When discussing Catholicism, several referred first to the content of the Ten Commandments—the Decalogue of Moses. One of the recent education graduates mentions that "the idea that God is watching you and that, if you do not comply with this morality, which leads you to do good…, it can go bad."[25] (C). Although she acknowledges that many do so for fear of punishment, she concludes that "[many] try to do good even though they are not Christians."[26] (C). She considers that although her father is not religious, he has taught her to act well. Thus, the Christian formation background is associated with an ethical behavior that is very clearly identified with the Western component of her spirituality.

[25] "la idea de que Dios te está viendo y que, si no cumples esa moral, que te lleva a hacer el bien,…te puede ir mal" (C).

[26] "[muchos] tratan de hacer el bien por más que no sean cristianos" (C).

Another young educator considers how, despite her studies' criticism of Catholicism as a hegemonic religion, which made her doubt her devotion to it, she, beyond the sacrament of baptism, communion, and confirmation, came to the following conclusion:

> I thought about living the way of life in which the religious values that underlie that religion, before going in person [to mass]… [It is about] living it and having the awareness that God is in those good actions or that awareness that you know where you are going and [thus] taking life with courage.[27] (D)

On the other hand, she recognizes that valorizing Andean spirituality has enriched her to the point of affirming that "looking at it in a reflective, conscious way, I live both spiritualities, not as an imposition. It is a possibility that I have, thanks to an intercultural background."[28] (D). Both dimensions and cultural traditions have helped her to live her own religiosity.

> At times when there is something to be thankful for, the word God, Jesus, or the Virgin is present [*sic*], or prayer, or a simple conversation that can be made with them. At other times, when they send me a package [a shipment from their village to the city where they are], the simple smell of the potato as I thank them [*sic*] for enjoying and feeding me, thanking the *Apu*.[29] (D)

Some participants integrate the two spiritual and religious traditions in their own development:

> God is the creator, and we believe in his creation, [such as] the earth that bears the food. Making payment to the earth is a matter of gratitude, and the Catholic faith strengthens the soul to sustain itself. Sometimes you let go of God, and life does not make sense. I felt [sometimes] that I did not know what to do when I let go [of God]. The relationship with the hills is the creation of God. It is gratitude.[30] (E)

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[27] "Pensé vivir el modo de vida en que los valores religiosos que subyacen a esa religión, antes que ir presencialmente [a misa]…[Se trata de] vivirlo y tener presente esa conciencia de que Dios está en esas acciones buenas o esa conciencia de que sabes a dónde vas y [así] tomar con valor la vida." (D)

[28] "Viéndolo de un modo reflexión [*sic*], consciente, vivo ambas espiritualidades no como una imposición; es una posibilidad que tengo gracias a una formación intercultural" (D).

[29] "Por momentos en que hay que agradecer algo, está presente la palabra Dios, Jesús, o la Virgen, o el rezo, [*sic*] o una conversación simple que se puede hacer con ellos. En otros momentos, cuando me envían una encomienda [un envío desde su pueblo hacia la ciudad en que se encuentra], el simple olor de la papa como agradezco [*sic*] por disfrutar y alimentarse dando gracias al *Apu.*" (D)

[30] "Dios es el creador y nosotros creemos en su creación, [tal como] la tierra que da el fruto. El hacer el pago a la tierra es una cuestión de gratitud y la fe católica fortalece el ánima para sostenerse. Unas veces uno se suelta de Dios

Discussion

By using the oral testimonies of rural residents to examine the ways in which Andean and Western worldviews interact in terms of their spiritual and religious components, this study sheds light on a subject that is not always clarified by anthropological research (Zaldívar 2013; Solano and Köhler 2020; Titizano 2017). However, not much research has been done on these ideological contents in the context of cultural shifts, particularly when it comes to university education, where it is unavoidable to include interpretation mechanisms that also imply critical thinking, which prompts reflection on one's own belief systems (Cantero 2021; Mendoza-Zapata 2022; Auris et al. 2022; Wences 2021).

This is the first contribution the interviewees yielded. Those participants who are just starting their studies, those who are halfway through them, and those who have just finished them are all in different stages of the same reflective process. Higher education has given them the opportunity to expand on the contents of their original ancestral traditions, even if they did not have this kind of reflection before their studies. However, this formation attempts to address the conflict that this same reflection has made clear regarding the difficulties that have been suggested in the cohabitation with Christian-based values and beliefs. In contrast, this interpretation is creating a kind of harmonious complementation of both belief systems in people who have concluded their studies.

Young people from rural backgrounds benefit from this analytical elaboration because not only does it help them develop conceptions that enable them to account for an internal—or spiritual—world, but it also connects to their self-perception of identity and causes them to reevaluate their ethnic and Andean roots. This is particularly pertinent for future generations in a country that, from a post-colonial perspective, wants to escape the subalternization inherited by historical systems of exclusion. The country is heavily impacted by the overvaluation of the urban over the rural or the Western over the Andean. This can help bring the ideals of these relegated groups into the context of their own modernity while also integrating them into the broader universal dynamics of a world that desperately needs it (Vich 2024; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007; Ríos 2019; Jamieson 2005; Arnedo-Gómez 2021).

The essential value of the relationship with nature, which is at the core of this identity, emerges in this process of valorizing ancestral spirituality and reclaiming memory and identity. This area of research largely reveals the identification of nature as the other (Descola 2005; di Salvia 2017), in contrast to the romanticized and ideal portrayal of it seen in contemporary literature (Zaldívar 2013; Dávalos 2019; Rodríguez 2020). In other words, it is a profound belief that humans and other natural entities have a lasting relationship and people are part of a civilization that encompasses these other natural beings. Atavistic animism traces convince the

y allí la vida no tiene sentido. Sentía [a veces] que no sabía qué hacer cuando lo soltaba [a Dios]. La relación con los cerros es la creación de Dios. Es gratitud." (E)

interviewees that the natural entities behave similarly to their ancestors: They provide protection and care, but they also expect human affection and reciprocity. This relates to the findings drawn from the old stories of, say, *Dioses y hombres de Huarochirí* [*Gods and Men of Huarochirí*] (Arguedas 2007) or the research done by ethnohistorians in the 1980s, including Jan Szemiński (1972), Franklin Pease (1973), María Rostworowski (1983), and Anne-Marie Hocquenghem (1987) among others. Nature is not a perfect entity because it has emotions and feelings just as people do, and they are all part of a total.

One of the most notable issues that requires further study is the interviewees' nearly nonexistent Christian or Catholic identity. This may contrast with some of the more Christianizing aspects of the Catholic-biased literature of the last forty years or so (Marzal 1983; Irarrázaval 1998). On the contrary, all the testimonies include a sort of paradox. Although they identify as Catholics, none of them expresses a moderately deep knowledge of Catholicism. This is limited to the idea of a creator God, a set of moral laws, and a vague affirmation of the existence of superior entities—the Virgin, saints, and Christ—with whom their relationship is strictly linked to the festivities that these devotions take place throughout the year. In some cases, one of the young graduates compares angels to the *Apus*. However, this is a personal viewpoint rather than an accurate representation of a widespread belief.

Based on the experiences and reflections of young people from rural and Quechua-speaking backgrounds, spirituality is most closely associated with a wide network of reciprocity that binds all living things. In this sense, the ethnologically influenced pioneering work of John Murra (1975), in turn, inspired by Karl Polanyi's study (Polanyi et al. 1957), is endorsed in today's Andean world. In addition to being a virtue, gratitude is a way to maintain a balance in life and prevent both social and natural evil. Agricultural festivities, which incorporate Andean and Christian ancestry, are often also religious events that highlight the value of sharing goods among all community members. In these cases, the relationships between all community members come together around animals, hills, and Christian religious images. From these offerings, all of them receive spiritual gifts like peace, happiness, and harmony as well as material ones like improved health, economic growth, and material advantages.

Conclusion

The findings of this study aid in challenging the assumption that self-perceptions and self-identifications align with ethnographically based analysis' results. This study shows the possibility that Peruvian young people from rural origin in higher education, who are not necessarily identified as indigenous or linked to a community with that legal characteristic, are redefining their belief systems of Andean ancestral origin. This is made possible by public policies that support their inclusion in the university system, which also helps them to revalorize this cultural identity in an unprecedented way in the country's history.

Simultaneously, this study highlights the shortcomings of the institutional religious experience, which ultimately resemble the circumstances of other groups of young people in the region that have been distancing themselves from religious practices over the last twenty years (Fernández and Castillo 2017; Baeza 2022).

Despite this, the spiritual dimension endures to the extent that young people revalorize ancestral ritual practices that they have given significance to during and after their education. They feel that they need this connection to nature and have come to identify the experience of this link as something of a transcendental order, despite being far from their hometowns, with a form of absence from, say, the hills, lagoons, or other local environments.

Among the contributions of this work at a global level, with respect to other post-colonial realities, it is deduced that, in order to face the threat of oblivion or marginalization of ancestral knowledge, it is necessary to provide the inhabitants who preserve these traditions with the tools of interpretation and analysis necessary for dialogue with the West, since this gives them the necessary agency to legitimize the values of the original cultures and that today can be useful for the planet, such as sensitivity to nature.

The study also contributes to other analogous societies to understand that religious beliefs are not necessarily rigid but can be "appropriated" and re-interpreted by their agents.

This study also indirectly proposes the need for educational policies of equitable access to higher education as a way of democratizing critical reflective thinking that can face the threat of fundamentalist belief systems.

However, this study has some limitations. The first is finding a difference between those who are in the process of concluding their studies and those who have completed them. This limitation reflects the need to broaden the search by segmenting the population based on their location when they are attending college.

Another limitation is that there are other groups that can be recognized as Andean outside the selected rural groups. The results of this study might be compared with those of studies involving other similar Andean communities if the analysis were expanded to include urban areas. One of the current conclusions regarding the weakness of the concept of God and the Christian belief system may have a similar outcome. To compare this hypothesis, the sample would need to be expanded to more locations in the country's semi-urban areas.

Finally, a deeper examination of the moral differentiation—evil and good—that the interviewees associate with the Christian tradition would also be intriguing, since it clashes with the undifferentiated character of morality in the context of Andean spirituality or religiosity. These findings require further investigation based on more data collected from other populations with similar characteristics (segmented by age, profession, and genre) in order to compare or validate the findings of this study. This will be useful, for example, to determine whether the value of morality is a Christian contribution or whether similar traits have always been present in the Andean belief system. Further data are warranted to affirm or refute the findings of this study in this regard.

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Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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