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COVID-19 and the Awajún: An onto-epistemic crisis in the Northern Peruvian Amazon

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Abstract: This study aims at revising the onto-epistemological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic among the Awajún, an ethnolinguistic group inhabiting the Northern Peruvian Amazon, and how, in a context also fueled by historical marginalization and exclusion, this group experiences, confronts, and makes sense of public policy while developing agency, resistance, and knowledge production. For this purpose, we analyze the material, epistemological, and ontological aspects of the hierarchical relationships between the Peruvian state, its majority or core culture, and those categorized as 'indigenous peoples'. In parallel, we collect and analyze the voices situated in the ethno-linguistic and socio-geographical discursive sphere of the Awajún to learn about their local interpretation of nation-wide political processes amid a global health crisis, the impact of such processes on their lives and experiences, and their own response mechanisms to such a crisis. As our findings indicate, while ontological insecurity and, more specifically, a fear of population control were present among the Awajún, they also implemented ontological translation and equivocation control, as well as identity politics by means of religious boundary blurring and self-reliance on formal and informal institutions. This allows us to conclude that, to them, COVID-19 meant both a health and an onto-epistemic crisis. The present article seeks to expand the rather limited research on the ontological and epistemological aspects that divide Peruvian society into 'worthy' and 'unworthy' in relation to the categories 'non-indigenous' and 'indigenous,' respectively.

Keywords: COVID-19, Awajún People, Public Health, Structural Violence, Epistemic Injustice, Identity Politics, Cultural Recognition

1. Introduction

In contemporary Peru's dominant public sphere, the social category 'indigenous' remains undervalued. Even more undervalued are related terms such as *'indio'* and *'serrano,'* which continue to be articulated pejoratively, thus functioning as racial slurs. *Indio* still carries this connotation despite the evolution of the word since colonial times and the various meanings it has acquired across the American continent. Regarding *serrano*, it continues to circulate, especially in the largest urban areas of the Peruvian Coast, with its derogatory connotation too often overriding its literal translation as 'mountain dweller' or 'mountain person.' Over the past few years, however, the negative use of these expressions has moved from a 'non-issue' to their increasing subjection to public debate, and at times even to legal intervention. That Peru's public sphere articulates myriad discursive elements to make sense of a social phenomenon as complex as racism, even calling it by its name, indicates that the system of interpretation that determines the said sphere has become increasingly ample and diverse. While this may reflect the dominance of progressive narratives, it is enough to confront the latter with the material, epistemological, and ontological reality of 'indigenous people' (officially, *pueblos indígenas u originarios*, Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026) to realize that the Peruvian state and society do not just continue to undervalue the multiple 'indigenous' identities, but are also more efficient at window-dressing the beliefs, practices, and worldviews that belittle them. It takes a phenomenon as expansive as the COVID-19 pandemic to expose this underlying condition. Hence the suggestion of Ventura Santos, Pontes and Coimbra Jr., (2020, 4) to understand the pandemic vis-à-vis 'indigenous people' through the lens of Mauss (2002), that is, as a 'social fact,' the historical, social, cultural, political, legislative, religious, aesthetic, moral, and scientific dimensions of which have significant parallels with multiple layers of their not-so-distant past.

Like many other ethno-linguistic groups of the Andes and the Amazon who are 'minoritised' (Selvarajah et al., 2020) as '*pueblos indígenas u originarios*,' the Awajún met the pandemic from a position of historical exclusion and distrust of the State (Santos Granero & Barclay, 2010). Furthermore, the measures implemented by the Peruvian state, such as the trans-

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-lation of informational material and vaccination campaigns (Cárdenas Palacios et al., 2024), omitted the perspectives of 'indigenous' leaders and others in possession of adequate intra- and inter-cultural knowledge in attempting to address the disproportionate way in which 'indigenous' communities were affected by the pandemic (Cavero, 2011). State-led healthcare policies were mainly guided by a Western biomedical logic, one that proved unfit for the various socio-geographical settings in which the lives and experiences of the members of Peru's 55 'indigenous peoples' unfold (see Valdivia, Benavides & Torero, 2007). Although the critical phase of COVID-19 has long passed, its structural consequences are still present and are especially manifested among historically marginalized ethno-linguistic peoples such as the Awajún. Studying how this community experienced, confronted, and made sense of public policy during the pandemic not only highlights the limitations of the state apparatus but also the myriad ways in which agency, resistance, and knowledge production emerge in contexts of historical marginalization and exclusion. This article analyses the Awajún people's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at the material and onto-epistemological levels. Our analysis responds to two research questions:

1. How does the historical-structural context that determines the unequal relation between Peru's dominant ethno-linguistic, socio-geographic, and sociocultural majority or core group and the indigenous population that inhabits this country's jurisdiction affect the latter's responsiveness to the pandemic?

2. How have the Awajún people responded to the pandemic at the material, ontological, and epistemological levels?

To respond to these questions, we undertook exploratory research based on in-depth interviews and oral history, combined with a historical-structural analysis of the social context from which participants' voices emerge. In this sense, this study follows Wodak's methodological emphasis on combining content and form (2015, 5). In terms of content, we engage with the historical-structural and socio-political context in which hierarchical relations among the Peruvian state, its majority or core culture, and indigenous peoples unfold, focusing on the material, epistemological, and ontological aspects of these relationships. Regarding the process, we collected and analyzed voices situated in the ethno-linguistic and socio-geographical discursive sphere of the Awajún people to learn about their local interpretation of nation-wide political processes amid a global health crisis, the impact that such processes have on their lives and experiences, and the strategies that they have developed in response to such a crisis. First, even when given certain tools to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, the Awajún were disproportionately affected compared to other groups in Peruvian society due to the fact that they were not only dealing with the virus at a material level, but also at an onto-epistemological level, a consequence of their historical-structural relation with the State and mainstream society. And second, the relatively minimal presence of the State in the Amazon and its misinterpretation of the actual needs of the inhabitants of this region, among them the Awajún, on the one hand, fed the latter's ontological insecurity, thus reaffirming a fear of population control among them. On the other hand, it mobilized ontological translation and equivocation control, as well as identity politics by means of religious boundary blurring and self-reliance on formal and informal institutions.

2. Literature review

Indigenous peoples, ethno-racial minorities, (racialized) immigrants, refugees and stateless people, other racialized and Orientalized people, and subordinated groups in general have been among the most vulnerable identity categories in socio-geographic, socio-economic, political, and legal terms in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hatcher et al., 2020; Hayward et al., 2021; International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2021; Miller, 2022; Rasnača & Bogoeski, 2023; Shi et al., 2023). Their experiences of particularly high infection and mortality rates were more strongly related to structural conditions such as poverty, institutional racism, territorial exclusion, and distrust in state-run health systems than members of other social categories (Iglesias-Osores & Saavedra-Camacho, 2020; Marcucci et al., 2025; Vallejo & Alvarez, 2020). This disproportionate impact is linked to historical-structural processes of racialization, linguistic marginalization, and state-level structural abandonment (Sánchez & Koulidobrova, 2023). To understand this, we need to focus not just on the historical and present material marginalization of indigenous peoples in Peru, but also on how material, epistemological, and ontological injustices intertwine and reproduce one another. In this way, we can better understand how indigenous communities have not only been denied access to basic human and civil rights, but also how their credibility as 'knowers' (see Fricker, 2007) has been delegitimized, rendering them unlikely or impossible sources of knowledge. As such, onto-epistemic marginalization becomes a fundamental component of structural violence through the un- or misrecognition of indigenous systems of knowledge and existence (Evans et al., 2022; Farmer, 2003; Iglesias-Osores & Saavedra-Camacho, 2020; Vallejo & Alvarez, 2020).

At the material level, 'indigenous people' continue to be significantly affected by structural inequality and violence and the resulting reproduction of social hierarchies. While the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, the United Nations, and other international institutions have highlighted that the connotation of 'indigenous' is primarily based on self- or group identification (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2018; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2026), this signifier is still strongly subject to external categorization. Looking at the situation of the Awajún and other 'indigenous people' of the Peruvian Andes and Amazon over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we can understand why their responsiveness to the pandemic was rather limited, thereby contributing to their increased vulnerability (Orcotorio Figueroa, 2022).

In Peru, 'indigenous people' entered the twenty-first century as the most economically and socially disadvantaged people in the country (Sulmont, 2010; Valdivia, Benavides & Torero, 2007). They had the least access to (quality) education (Sulmont, 2010) and to the necessary socio-cultural resources to develop their own ways of learning (Figueroa, 1999). They were stranded in the least qualified positions in the Peruvian labor market and in low-productivity economic activities (Sulmont, 2010). This situation has persisted to the present. If at the beginning of the 2000s, Indigenous people had the least access to public services or social programs (Torero et al., 2004), statistics published a year before the pandemic indicate that 75% of them still did not have adequate access to basic sanitation, and only 23.4% had access to a proper water supply (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2018). Similarly, at the threshold of the twenty-first century they were still the most vulnerable people in terms of political violence (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003; Manrique, 2007; 2012; Merino, 2007), while enjoying rather low political representation and participation to address the said vulnerability from within their communities (Figueroa, Altamirano & Sulmont, 1996; Ñopo, Saavedra & Torero, 2004; Sulmont, 2005; Torero et al., 2004). Over the past two decades, they have continued to be the most common victims of social, political, and environmental conflicts, such as the 2009 political crisis (Bebbington, 2009; Rénique, 2009), the 2015 Tía María social conflict, and the 2022-2023 protests against the

government of Dina Boluarte (Human Rights Watch, 2023), among others. Ventura Santos, Pontes, and Coimbra Jr. (2020, 2) used the expression 'a perfect epidemic' to refer to the aggregation of the longstanding material disadvantages affecting 'indigenous people' with a devastating pandemic.

At the epistemological level, progressive concepts and the discourse of social justice have indeed permeated Peru's official and public debates, influencing diversity management and policymaking, particularly around equity, diversity, inclusion, and memory. These perspectives have certainly endowed a larger part of Peruvian society with narrative and cultural resources. However, the use of these resources remains limited to avoiding direct discrimination and broadening formal access to the workforce. If we consider racist beliefs and practices alone, we can see that their manifestations have mostly relocated to the realm of the private (see Goldberg, 2002) or oscillate between the 'backstage' and the 'frontstage' according to the context of social interaction (see, Eliasoph, 1998, 100-103; see also Edwards & Potter, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Potter, 2011; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

On the other hand, progressive concepts and the discourse of social justice have been auxiliary in the internalization of a neoliberal utilitarian model of development and liberal multicultural vision of a political community almost entirely based on the perspective of the Peruvian state and its mainly urban, coastal and Spanish-speaking elites and middle-classes (see, Drinot, 2011; 2014b). Unlike Drinot, who considers that in Peru 'there is little of the hegemonizing or governmentalizing multicultural neoliberalism' seen in other parts of the world (2014b, 186), we believe that it is in fact deeply present – only that it exists in neocolonial, utilitarian, profit-oriented, proselytist, and pragmatic manifestations; those indifferent to its social and cultural impact on indigenous peoples' lives and experiences. Considering the country's multicultural and postcolonial context, progressive discourses have increasingly aimed at masking a variant of neoliberalism that has been intensely populist, ruthless, and unregulated from its origin (see Ruiz Torres, 2005), and which has had as its paramount interest the promotion of foreign investment and 'modernization' (Balarin, 2014, 131; Perla, 2014, 75-76). Progressivism was, in this sense, much needed to maintain the hegemony of neoliberalism. This has been the case especially following Alberto Fujimori's 1990s 'neoliberal revolution,' 'competitive authoritarianism,' and political deinstitutionalization (Drinot 2014a, 1-2; see Levitsky and Way, 2010). More pronouncedly, the articulation of a connection between progressive discourse and development was fundamental in the subjection of 'indigenous people' to 'sovereign power' while allegedly defending the interest of Peru's national (non-indigenous) majority during Alan García's second regime (2006-2011).

Relatedly, this leads us to the ontological level, which deals with the 'implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants' (Trouillot, 1995, 73). This ontological structuring of society is the product of the political articulation of the relations between social forces (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, 138; Mouffe, 1995, 502; see also Yilmaz, 2016, 12, 21, 62-63). Our claim is that the relation between the Peruvian state, mainstream society, and 'indigenous people' is grounded in both a cultural(ist) and a middle-class ontology. On the one hand, a cultural(ist) ontology, in cultural terms, guides the opposition between indigeneity and non-indigeneity, as identified by De la Cadena (2015, 33). In other words, according to this cultural(ist) ontology, indigenous 'culture' is in opposition to non-indigenous 'culture.' For De la Cadena (2015), this is more significantly an onto-epistemic problem of cultural recognition versus non-recognition. From this ontological position, for the non-indigenous majority and core group members, or the 'cultural' or 'semiotic' centre (Lotman, 2005), the problems of the 'periphery' are non-events and nonissues and the leaders and intellectuals tasked to address them cannot be envisioned as politicians (see, Fricker, 2007, 50), and nor can the actions of the latter be political (De la Cadena, 2015, 76-79). This limitation, De la Cadena claims, is due to the persisting 'ontological division between humans and nature that constitutes the modern world' (150-151). In this division, for example, what she calls 'earth-beings,' or the 'entities whose regimes of reality, and the practices that bring them about, unlike history or science, do not require proof to affirm their actuality' (150-151), and which exist in a world where they are integrally related to plants, animals, and humans (111-112), cannot simply be. The public presence of earth-beings in politics is hence 'inconceivable,' 'extremely controversial,' and 'ontologically unconstitutional in states ordered by biopolitical practices that conceive human life as discontinuous from (what those same practices call) nature' (88-89). While, according to Latour (1993, 28), the 'modern constitution' prompts the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans, Rancière (2004) emphasizes that modern politics also requires this distinction to be hierarchical. This is the case even with the more recent increase in the public presence of indigenous intellectuals in the political sphere of Andean countries.

Middle-class ontology, for its part, is grounded in the relation between a 'worthy' and deserving self-attributed 'middle class,' and the 'unworthy' and undeserving Others. Weiss has described the concept of the 'middle class' as an ideology that denies that society is divided into classes, while affirming that every individual determines their own fate based on their worth – that is, on whether they are diligent enough (2019, 29; see also Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This position dissolves class-based social ontology, which acknowledges the antagonistic nature of class (Yılmaz, 2016), and so makes space for the emergence of a middle-class ontology that organizes the world according to the meritocratic relation between a middle class, self-described as 'standing on its own feet,' versus the 'dependent' underclasses and marginal populations (Weiss, 2019, 22-23). For Peru, one work that comes close to identifying this relation is Drinot's theoretical framing and critique of Alan García's sovereign biopolitics (2014b), a type of politics involving the culturalization of discourse and the production of 'revolted' 'indigenous' people as a distinct ontology (Yılmaz, 2016, 5). The author observes that through a 'dog-in-the-manger' rhetoric, García represents those opposing his neoliberal utilitarian agenda as 'communists' and 'indigenous' 'savages' who neither exploit the country's vast resources nor let others do so. This discursive articulation simultaneously epitomizes the contemporary character of neoliberal Peru and the longstanding antagonistic relation between the state and mainstream society and 'indigenous people.' The very existence of the latter is not only auxiliary in the reaffirmation of the former, but it also benefits the reproduction of its developmental project and model of a political community.

In this historical-structural context, there was therefore an overall incapacity to recognize anything that may come close to constituting an 'indigenous' or, more specifically, an Awajún healthcare response. This kind of response was, in fact, deemed unknown. This was also the 'indigenous experience' elsewhere (Galappaththi et al., 2023) – one mostly of silencing (Pickering et al., 2024), and connectedly, of invisibilization (Herbetta et al., 2021). In response, the Awajún and other ethno-linguistic groups in Peru, such as the Wampís, and those beyond the national borders, perceived state intervention as imposed, incomplete, and decontextualized (De la Cadena, 2015; Pesantes & Gianella, 2020). Therefore, they often organized themselves through territorial, political, and judicial movements (Dias da Silva & Neves, 2024). This weakened the efficacy of state intervention,

while mobilizing agency within myriad indigenous communities in Africa (Gumbo & Gaothobogwe, 2021), Asia (Garai & Ku, 2023), North America (Brant-Birioukov, 2021), and other parts of the world. In Peru, Awajún healthcare responses meant in principle the implementation of community-based quarantines, mobility management measures, and the use of medicinal plants such as *mukamu* (*uña de gato*, or cat's claw), *chiric sanango* (royal purple brunfelsia), and *matico* (spiked pepper) to strengthen the immune system and treat respiratory symptoms (Cárdenas Palacios et al., 2024). It also meant a system based on a different conception of illness. The presence of a model of 'indigenous' medical attention and assistance like this highlights the necessity of reconfiguring the national healthcare system. It promotes the participation of 'indigenous' intellectuals in the design and implementation of public policy; pushes for a more just and sustainable transition; encourages holistic, culturally safe, and anticolonial practices; and challenges the dominant biomedical system (Christianson, Still & Souleymanov, 2025; Pesantes & Gianella, 2020; Zank et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

To achieve depth in understanding how the Awajún made sense of and responded to the material, ontological, and epistemological tensions arising from both the COVID-19 pandemic and the state-led measures meant to counter it, our research adopted a qualitative methodology. This consisted of 12 in-depth interviews, primarily conducted in the Awajún communities of Cayamás and Mamayaque, to learn about participants' perspectives, experiences, and meanings regarding the pandemic. The interview guide was thus comprised of twenty open questions divided into three main themes: 1) local perspectives about COVID-19, 2) tensions with state policy, and 3) community strategies to confront the pandemic.

The sampling of participants was primarily purposive, that is, based on identifying and selecting individuals with specific knowledge and experience and holding a variety of roles within the community (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This not only allowed us to access information-rich cases (see Patton, 2015) but also offered us a wide variety of perspectives. Furthermore, part of this sampling technique involved selecting communities where Awajún is spoken as a first language by all members (always above 98 percent; see Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026). Hence, the choice of the Condorcanqui province rather than that of Bagua, although the latter is closer to Chachapoyas, where part of the research team that conducted this study was based. The intention was to collect, to the extent possible, local frameworks of interpretation that are rich and deep in symbols, signs, languages, meanings, knowledge, and memory, as well as encourage reflections on the way researcher and participant relate to each other at this time within a system of representation and public sphere that is, to a larger extent, Awajún-dominated. This led to a secondary sampling technique, convenience sampling, to mitigate the social, political, geographical, and financial challenges that might arise in the research process.

The journey to some of the Awajún communities can take up to a day, and the difficulty thereof is largely determined by the changing weather, terrain, and traffic conditions of the Northern Amazon. The stretch between the town of Bagua and Condorcanqui (the latter being the province where Cayamás and Mamayaque are located) is particularly rugged, rough, and uneven. Moreover, this journey almost always includes an overnight stay at Imacita, a community on the Marañón River, or at Santa María de Nieva, where the Nieva River meets the Marañón, before continuing by boat along the river into the Amazon Rainforest. Apart from geographical challenges, access to an Awajún community is contingent on respecting, learning, and adhering to local social norms and institutional rules. In the semiotic space of the Awajún, the mostly non-Awajún researchers are represented as 'mestizos', or as external to the community, to say the least, hence the understanding of doing fieldwork in this case is not limited to data collection per se but involves the employment of ethical and methodological factors fundamental in intercultural communication.

Only the Apu, that is, the Chief with the maximum authority within the community, and other related local authorities, can grant access to external individuals. Hence, for a research field trip to take place, it must be designated as an official visit. In our case in particular, the coordination of these visits was facilitated by existing networks of trust built with Awajún students at the Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza National University of Amazonas (UNTRM) and by the support of a professor already working in the region for Peru's Ministry of Education. All of them mediated the contact with Awajún authorities. Once access is granted, the next step is obtaining permission to conduct interviews and other research activities within the community. This involves the presentation of the researchers and their project through a series of meetings with local leaders. The process described above translates into additional costs, of which the financial one is only a part, hence the choice of convenience alongside purposeful sampling.

Next, fieldwork took place in three different phases. The first six in-depth interviews were conducted in August 2024 in Cayamás, a community located at the Cenepa and Nieva rivers basin of Peru's North-Western Amazon, and the Condorcanqui province of the administrative region of Amazonas. The criteria for our choice of location were the community's small size (166 inhabitants, Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026) and the minimal presence of external institutions (national or other) within it. While the interviewees understood Spanish, the various parties agreed that the interviews were to be carried out in Awajún, the first language of the participants and 98.62 percent of the community members (Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026). Three of the interviewees were local actors or institutional leaders, including a nursing technician and an expert on medicinal plants, and the other three were community members with no reported positions of authority, among them two women. The next five interviews took place in July and August 2025 in Mamayaque, one of the largest Awajún communities with 264 inhabitants (Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026), and one with the highest presence of external institutions in the Cenepa basin. The interviews were conducted in Spanish with three community leaders, among them a university lecturer, and two community members identified in gender terms as a man and a woman. An additional interview was conducted with an Awajún educational consultant (*gestor educativo*) at the Pagkintsa community at the Nieva basin. This interview was conducted remotely by means of voice messaging using social media, instant messaging, and the Voice-over-IP application WhatsApp, due to logistical limitations.

Fieldwork was conducted in the company of two Awajún university students, who were trained in July 2024 and participated as interpreters and intercultural mediators, in pursuit of more culturally sensitive linguistic and epistemological mediation, as well as an interpretation better situated within the semiotic frameworks of the Awajún people. Besides this, the interviews in Awajún were translated into Spanish, maintaining, to the extent possible, the original narrative and oral structure. Once in Spanish, they were translated into English for the sole purpose of dissemination by means of publications, conferences,

and other deliverables. Despite these attempts at successful intercultural communication, as researchers, we are fully aware that our 'translation' process is subject to limitations related to facial and other expressions and specific performative elements, among others. Finally, in accordance with research ethics, all interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewees, including voice recording and the administration and distribution of personal data. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the transcribing and analysis of the data, and in the delivery of the results.

4. Analysis, Results, and Discussion

The State's effective absence in the Amazon region during the pandemic validated the respective narratives of suspicion. The first public health directive was approved by Peru's Ministry of Health (MINSA) in July 2021, after the health crisis had already reached many of the communities. The presence of intercultural brigades was limited, the exercise of the right to prior consultation (*consulta previa*) for indigenous communities was insufficient, and dialogue with the Awajún authorities was inconsiderate. In this context, and as most of our interviews show, locals tried to mobilize narrative and cultural resources in order to make sense of COVID-19 and the changes in social relations that it entailed. As we will see below, the most important articulation found in their voices was that of ontological translation, equivocation control, and religious boundary blurring. Next, manifestations of ontological insecurity, accompanied by a demographic narrative of fear of population control, were more commonly found among the interviewees from Cayamás, which is not only the smallest community visited for the purpose of this study, but also one that exemplifies well the unequal relation between the State and the Awajún. Finally, the few interviews with local or institutional actors were useful in the understanding of identity politics and self-reliance on formal and informal institutions at the local level.

4.1. Ontological Translation, Equivocation Control, and Religious Boundary Blurring

De la Cadena (2015, 134-135) explains that mutual understanding between entities grounded in different ontological systems requires the translation of their different rationalities and, more concretely, the control of the equivocations that emerge in the interpretation of each other. For Viveiros de Castro (2024), equivocations are the misunderstandings that occur in communications across worlds, as the different meaning-making practices that emerge from each of these worlds are also connected to different natures (De la Cadena, 2015, 212-213). In dealing with this, De la Cadena (2015, 116) proposes 'controlling the equivocation':

> *Controlling the equivocation means probing the translation process itself to make its onto-epistemic terms explicit, inquiring into how the requirements of these terms may leave behind that which the terms cannot contain, that which does not meet those requirements or exceeds them. More prosaically, controlling the equivocation may produce awareness that something is lost in translation and will not be recovered because its terms are not those of the translation […] And just to clarify, I am not talking about different cultural perspectives on the same entity, but about different entities emerging in more than one and less than many worlds and their practices.*

In other words, and drawing upon De la Cadena's research in the Andean region, this transformation, or translation, involves how, for example, 'earth-beings became geographic features – mountains, rivers, lakes, lagoons, paths, boulders, and caves: markers of a territory, the inhabitants of which were indigenous peasants, the sole members of ayllu' (2015, 134-135). This process was also evident in our interviews, especially when the participants explained the difference between the Awajún concepts of *iyash* and *wakan*. In relation to the pandemic, Interviewee 7, an educational consultant based at Pagkintsa, the population of which is comparable to that of Mamayaque, describes the former as 'our body,' or as one's 'full anatomy,' and the latter as 'the soul':

> *For me, they are different things, because the COVID disease directly attacks the human body, the respiratory systems, the immune [system], the white and red blood cells, the plasma, the blood; it purely affects the human body. The soul is what we feel [and] have, but […] the soul in fact is, let us say, has never been seen, right? The soul is intact, something that cannot be seen, that cannot be touched, that, let us say, not even the disease can attack, right? For me, it [the soul] would be merely a vacuum, an air. [The] terms are different.*

In controlling equivocation, a particular object, such as a virus or a vaccine, can emerge as a central legal concern for both the State and the Awajún in parallel. This, of course, also involves the local community's recognition of COVID-19 as a virus within the global or national healthcare language. Through ontological translation and the control of equivocations, the testimonies of the Awajún community members then operated outwardly as epistemic practices for the restoration of order in relation to the hegemonic knowledge system of the State and other powerful national and international actors, while at the same time maintaining the ontological system through which the Awajún relate to each other inwardly. This understanding was widely present in the approach taken by the participants, and according to them also by other members of their communities, as was evident in the employment of medicinal plants during the pandemic as part of an ontological space where the latter – among them, *kaip*, *sugkug ajeg*, *tunchi ajen*, *kushnan ajen*, *yonque* (an artisanal sugarcane spirit), coca leaves, lime, lemongrass, garlic, ginger, and *matico* – coexist alongside *wakan*, *iyash*, God, the Holy Spirit, the community, its ancestors, globally and nationally authorized (essential) medicine, and other humans, nonhumans, and gods: 'I only bought medicine in the pharmacy, then my husband and I prayed to God asking him to give strength to the medicine, and only [thus] we were able to move forward' (Interviewee 6).

The language of religion operated as a powerful tool for a type of translation that enabled cohabitation among different worlds – worlds that, as De la Cadena indicates, 'make ontological distinctions between humans, nonhumans, and gods as well as worlds that do not make such distinctions' (2015, 206). The interviews conducted in the Awajún communities reveal an interpretation of the pandemic as divine intervention: it was understood as a liminal experience that triggered social practices such as praying, confessing, pastoral care, and the reaffirmation of the spiritual over the physical. It is in relation to this experience that the idea of the divine shapes the original local understanding of the pandemic as a warning and a sign of retribution. In the words of Interviewee 8: 'This is one of the signs sent by God the Creator to the world to alert us that the end of the world was near.' Interviewee 4 more specifically represented the voices of those identifying the phenomenon of divine retribution: 'We believed that this disease was divine retribution so that we could [intended to make us] reflect upon our actions.'

Furthermore, the meaning-making process through which the virus was signified shaped the interpretative frameworks that determined how, for example, treatment or care were carried out (see Kleinman, 1978). The ontological divisions between God and the devil, humans and nature, and soul and body – to employ some of the dichotomies identified by De la Cadena (2015, 206) – were also enacted in how Awajún people reacted to this global health crisis. Hence, the recurrent articulation of the idea of divine salvation as part of the Awajún community's 'first-aid kit':

> *In our Cayamás community, we are profound believers in God, hence our faith has always been our strength. Due to this, we decided to initiate a chain of payers, and so God's Holy Spirit filled us with hope and relieved us. With God's help, many of us managed to recover. Before we turned to medicinal plants, we raised our prayers to ask God to strengthen his healing powers, trusting that, with his blessing, our health, as well as that of others, could be recovered. Our ancestors also shared this faith in God and firmly believed that He is our salvation. To avoid their souls being lost, they decided to praise God with devotion. (Interviewee 3)*

These religious meaning-making practices thus constituted situated rationalities that provided symbolic coherence and enabled collective responses in contexts of uncertainty and neglect. Furthermore, the way in which religious beliefs and practices were articulated in the narratives of our interviewees is also a sign that, much beyond the ethno-racial structure that affects them, the latter also belong to a larger religious community. More than exposing their subjection to the dominant culture, this articulation reveals a subjective sense of belonging to a nationwide, even global, community of believers. From the perspective of identity politics, this can also be conceived as a strategy for cultural recognition, or more specifically, a form of religious boundary-blurring that provokes a more symmetric relation between the collective categories of indigenous and non-indigenous.

4.2. Ontological Insecurity, Fear Of Population Control, and COVID-19 as a Structural Problem

Giddens (1984, 63) describes minority 'ontological insecurity' – Edensor (2002, 187) understands it as 'disorientation' – as a sense of losing one's space of national existence (see Kong & Yeoh, 1997, 214; Skey, 2011, 70-71). This term applies to the Awajún and other indigenous peoples of Peru. Institutionalized forms of existence among the Awajún, whether as indigenous people, an ethno-linguistic minority, or a First Nation (e.g., Awajún Autonomous Territorial Government – GTAA), or as a racialized or minoritized group (e.g., Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest – AIDESEP), are characterized by a high level of ontological insecurity. This materializes in their unequal relations with Peru's dominant (ethno-)linguistic (e.g., native Spanish speakers), socio-geographic (e.g., urban coast dwellers), and sociocultural (e.g., non-indigenous) majority or core group. While Peru's policy regime for indigenous people (*pueblos indígenas u originarios*) recognizes their 'collective rights' (*derechos colectivos*) (Base de Datos de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios, 2026), it does not offer formal guarantees of political or ethno-linguistic power sharing (e.g., the *consulta previa* does not involve veto power) or official Awajún-language use. The narratives collected through our interviews reveal a form of ontological insecurity among the Awajún. This was manifested most clearly in the widespread perception of the pandemic as a demographic tool for population control.

On one hand, population control was perceived in terms of class, and meta-geographical selectivity: 'Most of us knew that it was coming from the city. [People] were also commenting that the virus was created to reduce the size of the world's population' (Interviewee 1). On the other hand, it made sense, in ethno-linguistic and racial terms, to attribute responsibility to powerful political actors that are also dominant in cultural terms. Interviewee 3 located this type of actor in a global context, labeling them 'gringos': 'We already had some knowledge of the illness. Some commented that it had been created by the gringos. Thus, among us, the Awajún, we got to the point of thinking that this was the work of an evil power.' Interviewee 5 did this at a national scale instead, attributing the power to 'mestizos': 'There were many comments referring to this disease as [having been] created with the purpose of exterminating us. However, when doing so, the mestizos also ended up losing their lives.' Both 'gringo' and 'mestizo' are terms used here to bracket together the condition of being an outsider to the respective ethno-linguistic and socio-geographical setting, with the former understood as having multiple forms of power over the Awajún.

An important aspect regarding the narratives based on ontological insecurity is that they were more commonly found in the voices of the interviewees coming from Cayamás, the smallest of the communities visited for research purposes, and one characterized by its reduced access to basic services, especially in the domains of education, healthcare, and transport. The members of this community have, therefore, limited contact with 'mestizos' or with external individuals and institutions in general, and often rely on services provided in Mamayaque, which they access primarily by boat. Unlike Cayamás, Mamayaque has had a stronger presence of state institutions over the years, especially after being targeted by Peru's National Program PAIS (Platforms of Actions for Social Inclusion), a program that, while aiming at facilitating more equitable access to public services, has also provoked more interactions between the community and external individuals and institutions. While fear or insecurity may stand out as responses to the pandemic within the Awajún discursive sphere, factoring in their historical-structural relations with the Peruvian State and the societal majority and other core groups also allows us to read this as a way for the Awajún to identify the causes of a virus that go far beyond the domain of health.

4.3. Self-Reliance: Formal And Informal Institutions, And Grassroots Activism

During the pandemic, Awajún communities also underwent an increase in their autonomy, or a decrease in their dependence on the acceptance of the majority or core culture, through formal and informal techniques of self-management (see Lamont et al., 2016) and grassroots activism. Regarding the first aspect of self-reliance, the operability of local, ethno-linguistic, or indigenous institutions grew, thus provoking a higher degree of ethnic bonding and groupness:

> *The Apu summoned us to an ordinary meeting in which four hundred of us locals got together and agreed upon the way in which we should avoid and prevent [the virus]. One of the agreements made according to internal regulations and law was that no foreign people [gente extranjera] or [those] from outside [the Awajún communities] should intervene in the communities without permission because they could suddenly bring the disease. In this way, we expressed in the accord, in the internal regulations, that these [decisions] should be respected, and so we closed the entrance for small boats at the port, via the roads, with the intention of avoiding the disease. (Interviewee 7)*

Ethnic bonding was consolidated as an inward process as much as an outward one (see Jenkins, 2008). Interviewee 3 gives testimony of the former:

> *We, the Awajún, are not afraid of ourselves. The idea of [medical] isolation with the purpose of avoiding contagion had never been present here before. On the contrary, we opted for mutual support, even if that meant getting infected, because our main objective was to avoid [anyone dying]…if we had been fully isolated, there would not have been anyone to take care of those who were seriously ill.*

As for ethnic bonding as an outward process, this took place in relation to the presence of state institutions in the region as much as it did vis-à-vis any individual who did not belong to the community. Interviewee 8 attested to this in reference to the military and its role in the control of human mobility: 'They [community members] helped each other. When the armed forces got here, they [the armed forces] tried to prevent this from happening. But, what for? This was not helping. […] They were trying to break the dynamics of mutual help [*la dinámica de cómo ayudarse*]. That's a different way of seeing it, right?' The same participant would later describe their community's perspective of the Peruvian State as a 'threat.'

Regarding the second aspect of self-reliance mentioned above, that of the mobilization of community-led grassroots activism, it was mostly conducted by local actors, including the *Apu* and other educational and health mediators, and materialized in the domains of family-driven urban planning, ethno-linguistic minority bonding, indigenous medicine, personalized delivery solutions, and medical visits. At the beginning of the pandemic, community members engaged in the relocation of primarily their homes:

> *The moment this was known, the indigenous dwellers, from that moment on, started building their houses on the hills, on the island, on their land lots, to relocate to a place where they could meet their families again, with the intention of avoiding the disease, to not be infected with it. (Interviewee 7)*

Later during the pandemic, a group of local actors coordinated the gathering of knowledge on indigenous medicine and developed a rather personalized system of delivery solutions. This partly involved building an inventory of medicinal plants; learning their preparation; making them; and making home deliveries and administration during scheduled visits:

> *To be able to protect ourselves from COVID, without having to wait for the State, we turned to our indigenous knowledge [conocimientos ancestrales], because depending on the symptoms of the disease, and according to certain recipes [recetas, here meaning both prescription and recipe] published by them, we disposed of [i.e., used] medicinal plants such as ginger, lime, and other medicinal plants. I remember that [when I worked] back then as an educational consultant [gestor educativo], we used to get together to prepare the recipes; we collected and prepared the medicinal plants, and did home delivery so that we could administer them. That made an impact [Eso daba efecto]. Besides, to avoid contagion, every household kept track of the visits. We almost never made regular visits, given that the disease is highly contagious. In this way, we avoided [contagion] and […] washed our hands regularly – hygiene above all. (Interviewee 7)*

Finally, in the absence of resources, the same group also organized fundraising:

> *Patients were hungry, and we had no food supplies for them; we didn't have enough medicine, there was no firewood at home, no water, let's say [no] basic services, nobody who could finance these necessities. However, we looked for a way out of this; we met and raised funds, and in this way, we supported each other [during] the recurrent predicament [problemática] of the disease called COVID. (Interviewee 7).*

5. Conclusion

5.1. Concluding Remarks: an Onto-Epistemic Crisis in the Peruvian Amazon

In his understanding of 'crisis,' Yılmaz (2016) includes 'moral panic' as a specific situation and period during which a group of people is demonized and presented as 'a threat to society's moral values and interests' (Cohen, 2011). This phenomenon presents itself as if decreed by the unified voice of political, economic, and other influential actors (Hall et al., 1978, 16); has the media as its main source of psychological and emotional effects, auxiliary to its cause (Krinsky, 2013, 1); and may lead to more coercion (Yılmaz, 2016, 95). Regarding 'indigenous people' in Peru, the series of public controversies, moral panics, political stalemates, and other sources of the experience of an ongoing crisis led to their representation as 'domestic enemies of development,' or specifically, of 'neoliberal development,' as an abstract cultural category in opposition to 'Peruvians' (of course, alternating with the moral panics around urban security that have criminalized Venezuelan nationals especially over the past decade). In the Peruvian public sphere, development is thus conceived of in economic as well as in cultural terms. The best illustration of how particular instances of social conflict have been used to characterize an entire ethno-linguistic category of Peruvians is the 2009 political crisis that unfolded due to the Bagua massacre, or *Baguazo*, one that epitomizes how the onto-epistemological disadvantages of 'indigenous people' generate their material disadvantages, and vice versa (see Johnson, 2007).

In the context of the signing of a Free Trade Agreement with the United States and following the government's decision to support legislation granting significant access to companies to the Amazon (De la Cadena 2015, 276-278), in June 2009, Alan García's regime declared a state of emergency and sent in the military to stop Awajún demonstrators from protesting what the latter considered to be an extractionist state agenda. The massacre, *per se,* and the trauma that lives on in Awajún collective memory and oral history were but the tip of the iceberg of what has thus far been called merely a political crisis. According to Drinot (2014b), García's capitalist revolution involved bracketing 'communism' together with protectionism and environmentalism, stigmatizing the protests based on this grouping, externalizing and attributing to Peru's indigenous people an 'inherent racial and moral backwardness' and recalcitrance, igniting 'racialized fear' and finally attempting to overcome indigeneity or de-Indianize Peru by means of violent sovereign power (172-173, 178-181). De la Cadena (2015, 275-276; see also Trouillot, 1995) adds that what García in fact experienced, and what he reacted violently to, was more fundamentally an 'epistemic disconcertment' provoked by the Awajún demonstrators as their perspective of the world broke 'the ontological order of what is (thinkable) through modern politics or science.' Hence, García's description of their struggle as 'absurd,

pantheistic ideologies,' and his proposal to resolve the issue with 'more education' (quoted in Adrianzén, 2011). This exposes the culturalist onto-epistemology so characteristic of the non-indigenous core or majority group: for 'both the left and the right, mountains are nature, and earth-beings – entities that exist ahistorically – are impossible as matters of political concern, unless they exist through what is considered cultural practice' (De la Cadena, 2015, 276-278). It is within a context shaped by this kind of rationality that the Awajún and all Peruvians minoritized as 'indigenous people' experienced a crisis that extended much beyond the material level, tending to simultaneously endure this crisis at its onto-epistemological level. For the Awajún, this applied to the *Baguazo* as much as the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2. Our Contribution

At this point, we are able to respond to our research questions. Concerning the first question, we need to turn to the historical-structural conditions that determine the said relations. While progressive concepts and the discourse of social justice have permeated Peru's official and public debate, they have been employed, on the one hand, to avoid direct discrimination and to broaden formal access to the workforce. On the other hand, and most importantly, they are being deployed for the systematic legitimization and internalization of a neoliberal utilitarian model of development and liberal multicultural vision of a political community almost entirely based on the perspective of the Peruvian state and its mainly urban, coastal, and Spanish-speaking elites and middle-classes. This is at the epistemological level. Now, at the ontological level, the relation between the Peruvian state and mainstream society and 'indigenous people' is premised on a cultural(ist) ontology, which guides, in cultural terms, the opposition between indigeneity and non-indigeneity, and on a middle-class ontology grounded in the relation between a 'worthy' and deserving self-attributed 'middle class,' and 'unworthy' and undeserving Others.

Regarding the second question, under the circumstances stated above, the Awajún people responded to the pandemic by first attempting to identify the main agents and causes of the global health crisis. While at first the Awajún voices we listened to pointed to demographic narratives about fear of population control as they tried to make sense of the pandemic, they later revealed that they were firm in their view that the causes were historical and structural. In other words, their minority condition was part of the reason for their ontological insecurity vis-à-vis the pandemic, and at the same time part of the reason for the development of a more complex perspective of it. Besides that, during the pandemic and in the interviews, the Awajún engaged in ontological translation and the control of equivocations. Their testimonies in this way may operate outwardly as aimed at restoring epistemic justice; that is, as claims for their recognition as 'knowers' (Fricker, 2007) before the hegemonic knowledge system in the form of the State and other powerful national and international actors. At the same time, they acted to maintain the ontological system through which they relate inwardly to each other. Moreover, from the perspective of identity politics, ontological translation and equivocation-control processes enabled forms of cultural recognition, specifically, religious boundary blurring, which fostered a more symmetrical relationship between the collective categories 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous.' Finally, the Awajún voices that have been heard are also a testament to the fact that, during the pandemic, the communities in which they are embedded increased their autonomy while decreasing their dependence on the majority or core culture. They did this through formal and informal techniques of self-management and grassroots activism.

5.3. Implications And Future Research

We believe that the present analysis is relevant in a country like Peru, where there is an urgent need to expose the tensions between the rationality of the modern state and indigenous systems of knowledge and existence. While the long-term implications of our study's results are now unpredictable, we can point to some ramifications and their significance. In Peruvian academia, there has been a rather limited expansion of research by scholars such as De la Cadena and Drinot on the ontological and epistemological aspects that continue to divide Peruvian society into 'worthy' and 'unworthy' in relation to 'non-indigenous' and 'indigenous,' respectively. Besides contributing to a still largely unaddressed field, in Peru's current socio-political context, where once again a second round of the presidential elections ignites precisely such a divide, this type of critical research proves useful. Moreover, our study does not limit itself to Peru but extends to contribute to the understanding of epistemic justice, epistemologies of the south, and public health policy in their fuller complexity at a global scale. It is in the interest of powerful mainstream global and national actors that the dichotomy 'non- indigenous' versus 'indigenous' maintains a logical equivalence with 'worthy' and 'unworthy,' respectively. It is in our hands to contest such a widely unquestioned rationality and so begin to think much beyond modern politics and science.

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