

The Spiritual Leadership of Sentient Landscapes: Health, Collective Ethics, and Environmental Justice in Peru

Ana Mariella Bacigalupo

As spiritual leaders and environmental activists, sentient landscapes acknowledge the power of both human and sacred and further the development of collective ethics and environmental justice. Expansive humanism and the idea of sentient landscapes interacting with humans have been theorized in multiple ways, although rarely with an eye toward environmental justice, collective ethics, and interethnic communities. Scholars of Latin America have written about the radically different worlds of sentient beings (De la Cadena 2015; Kohn 2013) and the existence of multiple or alternative ways of being in the world (Blaser 2013). Others have criticized the forms of governance implemented by regimes of late settler liberalism (Povinelli 2016). Still others have written widely about values (Robbins 2007; Keane 2015) and moral selves (Laidlaw 2002; Lambek 2010; Fassin 2012). However, none of these approaches addresses the ways in which poor Peruvian mestizos challenge neoliberalism and attempt to reverse their exploitation at the hands of the extractive industries by drawing on their spiritual and religious traditions. Sacred landscapes become co-creators and leaders in movements for environmental justice and collective ethics rather than beings incommensurable with the modern world of politics who remain absent from negotiations with the state or environmental movements.

In my work with poor mestizos in the dry coastal Moche and Chicama Valleys and the highlands of Huamachuco in La Libertad, northern Peru, I analyze how and why they respond to

climate change and environmental contamination by turning to sentient indigenous landscapes for ritual, environmental, and political ends. These mestizos understand *wak'as* as powerful sentient landscapes, and they see monuments built by indigenous ancestors and *apus* as powerful ancestral leaders that take the shape of mountains, lakes, and the sea. Poor mestizos see *apus* and *wak'as* connecting the living with the worlds of indigenous Moche (200–900 CE) and Chimú (900–1470 CE) ancestors, who control access to water (Glowacki and Malpass 2003), life, health, and fertility, as well as floods, mudslides, and death. Like Moche and Chimú divine rulers and contemporary Andean Indians (Mannheim and Salas 2015), poor mestizos feed *wak'as* and *apus* with offerings to receive sustenance and control over resources and to prevent floods.

In both 2014 and 2017, the Moche and Chicama Valleys were decimated by floods and mudslides caused by torrential rains associated with El Niño but exacerbated by climate change. Peruvian leaders believe investment will solve the problem, yet their treatment of the economy, the environment, and human health as unconnected has had disastrous consequences. State-supported industries produce and reproduce nondemocratic hierarchies, structural violence, and environmental degradation; their exploitation of nature mirrors their exploitation of poor mestizo workers.

Andean Huamachuco is one of the poorest districts in La Libertad and has been ravaged by gold-mining companies, which have coerced locals into selling their lands and water as the price of gold soars. Poverty has increased in the Moche and Chicama Valleys as mudslides and flooding have destroyed much-needed irrigation canals and as the crises of the sugarcane industry have led to lost jobs and lower pay (Kus 1989; Klaren 2005). Marginalized mestizos' survival often depends on their ability to work in fishing, agriculture, or extractive industries, but the contamination of their air and water produces a variety of health problems—respiratory

illnesses, cancer, depression, alienation, envy—and destroys the medicinal plants used by mestizo *curanderos* (shamans) to heal them.

In contrast to Peruvian presidents, mestizo *curanderos* and their communities attribute a broader ontological significance to environmental disasters, and they understand how neoliberal policies conflict with the collective good. Since the heavy flooding in 2014, poor mestizos in northern Peru have increasingly questioned mainstream perceptions of “nature” as a resource to be exploited for capitalist gain. They attribute floods and mudslides to angry *apus* and *wak’as*—contaminated mountains, looted monuments, and the polluted sea—punishing the squatters, thieves, and corrupt officials who are destroying their world. Many poor Peruvians recognize places like *apus* and *wak’as* as persons with sentience and agency who act upon humans through cosmopolitics, a kind of emplaced politics that upends Western perceptions of the human (Stengers 2010; Blaser 2013), including the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical, the spiritual and the material, nature and the human (Latour 1993; Descola 2013; Ingold 2000), as well as colonial, capitalist divisions between species, landscapes, and peoples (Haraway 2018).

The cosmopolitics of poor mestizos in La Libertad combines indigenous notions of sentient places, syncretized Catholic *apus*/saints associated with specific shrines, and non-indigenous modern politics. They work through two grassroots environmental organizations they created in 2014 to gain legal personhood for sentient places and to produce legal documents aimed at protecting and recovering lands from invaders, agribusiness, and mining. These poor mestizos also work with *curanderos* to link environmental destruction associated with climate change to systemic violence and human health. During their apocalyptic visions, which are both revelatory and eschatological, *curanderos* meld the agency and morality of *apus* and *wak’as* with

scientific discourses and their own pragmatic observations of the effects of climate change. *Curanderos* show their communities the anger of *apus* and *wak'as* at those who are destroying the health of people and the world, and they also show how community members can work together to build a better future.

Transactional *Wak'a* Cosmopolitics in La Libertad

On the coast and in the Andes, both the earth and *wak'as* and *apus* are thought to have a fertile life-giving side that grants resources and a destructive life-taking side. Humans reproduce the personhood of *wak'as* and *apus* by feeding them with *pagos a la tierra*, and in turn, *wak'as* and *apus* grant humans permission to visit them, as well as sustenance, gifts, and other resources (Mannheim and Salas 2015). If humans do not feed *wak'as* and *apus*, recognize their personhood, and treat them with respect, or if they are exploited, then *wak'as* and *apus* become angry and are believed to cause torrential rains, floods, mudslides, and earthquakes and to inflict illnesses, accidents, bad luck, and death on humans.

The interaction between humans and the life-giving *wak'a* is sometimes imagined as a reciprocal exchange involving respect for nature and the controlled use of its resources, which bolsters the power of the *wak'a* and the well-being of the community. Lucila, a *curandera* from the highland community of Yamobamba, Huamachuco, explains how her community feeds the *wak'a* mountain Siempre Viva and how it grants them resources, health, and well-being in exchange: “The first of May we go up to my mountain and celebrate it. We feed it *chuño* [dried potatoes], alcohol, sweet breads, because we are there all night. We give it pig. We bury it in the earth. Then we do ceremonies to heal and people and make them flourish, to allow them to do well on their path. The mountain gives us abundance, health, and happiness.”

Today, however, exchanges between poor mestizos and *apus* and *wak'as* in La Libertad often relate less to the ideal of reciprocity and more to the human desire for personal gain while avoiding punishment for failure to make offerings, for contaminating *wak'as and apus*, or for overharvesting. Alongside the logic of *wak'as and apus*, mestizos also have internalized Catholic beliefs that humans are superior over nature. According to Catholicism, human exchanges with *wak'as and apus* are a form of eco-centric paganism that undermines “the value of people over and above all other living things” (Vatican City 2009). When *wak'as and apus* punish mestizos for a lack of reciprocity they gain a reputation for being dangerous to humans. Catholic priests and saints often intervene to become protectors of poor mestizos against so called “diabolic” *wak'as and apus*, who make demands, kill humans, or cause illness. However, poor *curanderos* also usurp the hierarchy of the Catholic church by incorporating a syncretized Saint Cyprian as an ambivalent *curandero/apu* and Jesus as a moral one. *Curanderos'* interactions with *wak'as and apus* shape the *curanderos'* instruments, divination, and healing rituals. *Curanderos* today invoke *apus*, *wak'as*, and Catholic shrines through the stones, shells, ceramic fragments, and images of saints from these places on their altars (*mesas*) to heal environmental destruction associated with climate change,

Poor mestizos' multilayered transactional engagements with *wak'as and apus* and their life-giving and life-taking forces allow them to make sense of the structural violence—the poverty, illness, and death—that rules their precarious lives. But poor mestizos also argue that the destructive side of *wak'as and apus* emerges when they are overexploited, and then they try to destroy the world through the effects of climate change. These destructive forces have now acquired moral implications: punishment for those who are corrupt and abuse the environment, poor mestizos, and the community.

***Wak'a* Moral Cosmopolitics, Prophetic Critique, and Climate Change**

After the devastation of communities by mudslides and floods in 2014, poor mestizos in the Moche and Chicama Valleys broadened the scope of their work with *wak'as* and *apus* to include morality, conservation, collective ethics, and environmental justice. They began to speak of *wak'as and apus* not as self-absorbed entities, but as superior spiritual leaders who critique human corruption and greed and to include them as intentional actors in the struggle to counteract the environmental devastation caused by neoliberalism and climate change. Omballec, a *curandero* from the coastal Chicama valley told me:

The clouds and lightning accumulated on the mountain, and the water came down in waves. The *apus*, they threw the rain to cleanse themselves. . . . The water came down with such anger to teach us to respect nature, *apu wak'a*. People came to ask me to calm the Cuculicote Mountain and tell it to stop. But this is not something that we should try and stop. *Apu* and nature cannot be dominated. It is nature and superior powers telling humans to change their behavior and to develop a higher consciousness, to think collectively. We humans need to work collectively with our communities and with our leaders. Our *apus* and *wak'as*.

Mestizos draw on indigenous *apus* and *wak'as* not only because they play a central role in their identities and lives, but also because *wak'as and apus* offer the only viable strategy for counteracting environmental devastation in the long run. Poor mestizos now see *wak'as* and *apus* as those who punish humans with the effects of climate change—deluges, mudslides, warming

waters—in order to force them to reach a higher consciousness that focuses on the collective good and the environment, as well as contest the unequal distribution of ecological costs and benefits.

In 2014 poor mestizos came together in the fishing town of Huanchaco to create two grassroots environmental movements: the Asociación de Rescate y Defensa del Apu Campana (Association for the Protection and Defense of Apu Campana) and the Colectivo Comunidad Consciente (Collective of Community Consciousness). The Asociación defines Campana—the tallest mountain near Trujillo—as “an *apu*, the highest spiritual and gnostic authority of our indigenous past who nurtures our collective and ecological values”; it is “central to our collective health as our healers invoke it and use its medicinal plants to heal” and is a “fundamental natural and cultural patrimony of the region” (Escritura Pública de Constitución de Asociación Civil Denominada Asociación de Rescate y Defensa del Apu Campana, Santuario Ecológico y Arqueológico de la Libertad-4056-2012). This organization demanded the legal recognition of *apu* Campana as a person and the protection of its land and resources.

The Colectivo seeks to counteract the disastrous consequences of climate change and neoliberalism, challenge corruption through collective decision-making, and assist with recovery from ecological disasters by recruiting *wak'as* and *apus*. Percy Valladares Huamanchumo explains:

Wak'as and *apus* are our sacred ancestors, imbued with power, who give organizing principles for the lives of all human and non-human people and stress morals and respectful relationships between themselves, humans, the environment, and collective well-being. El Colectivo's goal is to use these principles to create a platform for collective decision-

making on issues that have to do with regional environmental agendas, natural and cultural patrimony, and anticorruption campaigns in the management of disasters. We value the collective good, transparency, and democratic co-governance and are against corruption, exploitation, and abuse by extractive industries and the government. We seek to improve the environmental laws to protect green spaces and work with environmental organizations, people who defend natural and cultural patrimony, natural people, *wak'as* and *apus*, and authorities who are committed to El Colectivo's goals to create a better world.

By incorporating spiritual and moral factors into plans for growth and development, poor mestizos try to manage natural, social, and spiritual capital for the welfare of future generations and re-create a world of value under the guidance of moral *apus*. Valladares told me, “El Colectivo has been involved in the protection [of], respect [for], and conservation of sacred spaces, such as Cerro Campana, Quebrada Santo Domingo, Cerro Cuculicote, Cerro La Virgen, Chan-Chan, [and] *wak'a* El Brujo. El Colectivo defends these places not only as structures, but also as spiritual entities with power and energy that flow from each *wak'a* and *apu* toward the inhabitants.” *Curanderos* like Omar Ñique from the coastal Moche valley and Omballec, in turn, engage *wak'as* and *apus* for ritual healing purposes and as political actors in the collective. They use the collective to educate their communities about the connection between climate change, morality, floods, and mudslides, as well as the actions of *wak'as* and *apus*.

El Niño Predictions through Visions and Observations

In the past, Peruvians often mocked *curanderos*' predictions about El Niño phenomena, which were based on a local science they could not understand. Today, *curanderos* predict floods, mudslides, and tsunamis, and they use different discourses of authority to legitimate their predictions and to make them accessible to a large interethnic audience. *Curanderos* meld the agency and morality of *apus* and *wak'as* as expressed through dreams and visions with scientific discourses and biometric readings: their own observations of rising temperatures and changes in the movements of currents, winds, and animals and in the blooming patterns of plants.

As poor mestizos have seen the connections between actions of *apus* and *wak'as*, *curanderos*' observations, and environmental science, they have also understood the consequences of overexploitation simultaneously in environmental, moral, and social terms. Omballec also told me:

I knew that El Niño was coming in 1983, 1988, 2017, and at other times because the *apus* showed me through visions and the animals, and the plants showed me through their actions. The termites began to crawl out of the wood and the dragonflies would feed on them, so there were many dragonflies of all colors. The spiders, insects, and snakes came down from the mountain and into the streets and houses, seeking refuge so that they would not drown. There were a huge number of herons . . . and the birds and animals were alarmed. I lit a candle and it sputtered, a sign that there was a lot of human evil and immorality and the *apu* would punish that with water. The *pacay* and *guaba* trees bloomed early and lost their flowers and got new ones. The *zapote* tree, which is small and grows in the ravines, started growing really tall and getting a lot of green leaves on

top because there was a lot of water accumulating underground. It was getting a lot of underground water.

Biologist Carlos Quiroz commented, “Omballec is right. When the rain begins in the highlands, the first thing that fills up is the phreatic water layer underground, and once those are saturated, then the river flows above. Many small springs can also emerge, and the seeds that were underground sprout, . . . and the whole desert then becomes green with running water, frogs, insects, deer, so it is clear that a big rain is coming.”

Many *curanderos*, poor mestizos, and even mestizo scientists talk about climate change in terms of messages sent by *apus* in dreams and visions *and* scientific predictions. Quiroz describes scientific measurements alongside his own experiences with the *apus*:

People dream about have visions about *apus* being angry because of environmental devastation and *apus* as causing earthquakes and exploding with water to destroy the world. These experiences have a scientific basis. As temperatures rise because of El Nino phenomena, the atmospheric pressure over the mountains falls and then wind moves in from areas of high pressure to areas of low pressure to compensate. The mountains of the coastal range are affected by the tropical rain that saturates the aquifers under the rocky surface. The low-pressure areas generated by the high temperature of the atmosphere make the water in the water tables rise and reach the surface of the mountains, dramatically increasing the water volume of the ravines. Earthquakes exacerbate this effect and therefore often occur together because of the water pressure produced by rain infiltrated under the surface. *Apus* also show you things that science cannot. We took the

San Pedro cactus brew with a *curandero* named Julio, and he saw the Apu Campana as a mountain of crystal. The next day, we found ancient Moche crystal mines that Moche artisans used to make marvelous necklace beads.

A man from the area offered a prediction of regional destruction by combining scientific discourses with local narratives about *apu* ancestors:

There are two mountains who will destroy this area in the next five years: San Ildefonso will empty its water on Trujillo and Chan-Chan, and the ravines from Campana will flood and destroy Huanchaco. San Ildefonso is the mother: she is receptive to all the mountains and has no tensions with any of them. . . . San Ildefonso, the mother, loves her children, but she also teaches and punishes them. The Campana is the great-grandfather and the warrior, and it has tensions with all the mountains. . . . Before, the winds on Campana ran from north to south; now, they go from south to north. . . . The hot and cold air will clash and create cyclones. Campana becomes drier while other mountains are green, filled with water. . . . The clash of the cold Humboldt current with the warm waters from El Niño will cause cyclones in the Pacific, and tsunamis of more than thirty meters [will] come from the sea [and] flood the area all the way to Chocope and Ascope.

Or, as Omballec said almost a year earlier, “Humans will eat disasters and anguish today and tomorrow.”

Conclusions

Poor mestizos create new models for political mobilization that are not based on the divisive identity politics of indigenous versus non-indigenous people, but on the sense of a shared interethnic world that combines indigenous and Catholic religions. Their appropriation of the powers of sacred landscapes moves us beyond academic distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous, human and non-human, nature and culture, ontology and political activism. Because poor mestizos are unconcerned with the Western dichotomy between spirit and reality, they view *apus* and *wak'as* simultaneously as moral and spiritual authorities, angry sacred landscapes, and metaphors for environmental justice movements. Through ritual and political engagements with *wak'as* and *apus*, mestizos ground a collective ethics in place and grapple with resource overexploitation, climate change, and greed as a single problem. They define “community” and “well-being” as humans-in-relationship-to-places-as-persons and thus re-signify nature as a spiritual leader and an anchor for human and non-human values. The morality and agency of *apus* and *wak'as* and the actions of *curanderos* and communities thus shape the well-being of people and the planet.