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Embedded and borrowed subjectivity in the shamanic practices among Quechua from the Central Andes, Peru

> Pues dime hermano, como as puesto tu esperança en una piedra, como si fuera Dios verdadero; no ves que esta piedra no tiene entendimiento para conocer lo que le pides? No ves que no tiene voluntad para amarte, no ves, que no tiene ojos para verte, ni oydos para oyr lo que pide, ni boca para consolarte y si supiera hablar, te dixera: Indio, loco estas, ciego estas, pues has puesto tu esperança en mi, que no tengo poder alguno, ni te puedo dar nada de lo que me pides; no ves que soy piedra, que los pájaros, y las zorras, se ensucian en mi, si soy piedra como tu lo ves, como puedo ser Dios?
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> Fernando de Avendaño (1648: 27)[1]

Introduction

In the Andes, reality is shaped not only by humans but also by entities such as Pachamama, *apus* (mountains as animate beings), animals, the deceased, stones, or atmospheric phenomena, which are considered agentive beings that

[1] "So tell me, brother, how have you placed your hope in a stone, as if it were the true God? Don't you see that this stone has no understanding to know what you ask of it? Don't you see that it has no will to love you, no eyes to see you, no ears to hear what you ask, no mouth to console you? And if it could speak, it would say to you: 'Indian, you are mad, you are blind, since you have placed your hope in me, who has no power at all and cannot give you anything you ask for. Don't you see that I am just a stone, that birds and foxes soil me? If I am a stone, as you see it, how could I be God?'" (translation by the author).

possess their own subjectivity, emotions, and the ability to influence their surroundings. All these entities, referred to in anthropology as non-human persons, interact with and influence each other, revealing a world in which humans, nature, objects, and the spiritual realm are deeply intertwined and difficult to separate. In this way, Andean understanding of the world transcends the simple dualism of subject and object, matter and spirit, nature and culture, opening a perspective on a more integrated and interdependent construction of reality. Within this perspective, the boundaries between human and non-human subjectivity blur, revealing the unstable and dynamic character of relations that are continually in flux and redefinition.

In the context of Andean ontologies, the discussion of non-human subjectivity is essential for understanding the complex, multidimensional reality in which humans are just one element in a network of dependencies and relationships. Traditional anthropological approaches, focusing on describing non-human subjectivity as analogous to human subjectivity, often prove insufficient to encompass the entirety of these complex and mutual connections. The reality of the Andes requires moving beyond anthropocentrism to understand how various beings coexist, communicate, and influence each other. This poses a challenge for academics, who must focus on human narratives about non-human entities and attempt to think through these entities' perspectives. Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2010; 2013), in her work grounded in transformative experiences, emphasizes that anthropology should recognize the reality of relational ontologies and transpersonal experiences, which can aid in preserving and understanding indigenous knowledge, particularly in the context of shamanic practices. She calls on anthropologists to accept these perspectives as essential cognitive tools.

This text aims to deepen the analysis of the subjectivity of non-humans in the Andes by examining "power stones" (*illas* and *khuyas*), coca leaves, ritual bundles (Quech. *haywakuy*), eggs, and guinea pigs used in shamanistic practices within the framework of relational ontology. At first glance, all these elements seem to be unrelated ritual attributes, but they all embody or duplicate distinct entities, albeit on a different scale or form. This occurs in Andean ritual practices aimed at diagnosis, treatment, or multiplication of animals. In the *kuka qhaway* ritual, coca leaves replicate the patient's body, thereby revealing illnesses to the shaman. Similarly, eggs and guinea pigs are used for diagnosis. In the healing ritual of *haywakuy*, the shaman constructs a ceremonial bundle using coca leaves and other products, which then become both a miniature of the world and the patient's body. The power stones – *khuyas* and *illas* – owned by *paqos* (ritual specialists or shamans) and herders – are miniatures of *apus*. This analysis addresses not only the ontological status of humans and non-humans, but also the context and purpose of the relations that are built between them. As a result, I propose the concept of *shared subjectivity* in ritual practices, which can manifest in two variants: *borrowed* and *embedded subjectivity*. In this way, I hope to explain certain nuances regarding intersubjectivity considered within the context of ritual practices and shamanism. I believe that this analysis will

contribute to the discussion on the ontology of non-human beings, deepening the understanding of their complexity as well as the various forms and modes of their existence.

Ritual practices in the Peruvian Andes (Cusco region)

This article is based on long-term (22 months) ethnographic research conducted among the Q'eros – a high-mountain, Quechua-speaking community residing in the Vilcanota mountain range (Cusco region, Peru).[2] My methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews, detailed field notes, as well as audio recordings and photography. Living with local families, learning Quechua, and participating in daily activities and rituals allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their relationship with nature and spirituality. The study covered various aspects of community life, such as agricultural and pastoral practices, beliefs about the mountain spirits (*apus*), myths and rituals of diagnosis, healing, and sacrifice. Observing daily interactions among community members, their approach to communal life and mutual support, as well as participating in religious ceremonies and festivities were essential elements of my approach. The research required flexibility and adaptation to the mobile lifestyle of Q'eros shamans, who increasingly migrated to cities or travelled to offer their services outside their native villages.

The Q'eros territory includes five villages: Hatun Q'eros, Marcachea, Quico, Totorani, and Hapu. The Cordillera Vilcanota features three ecological zones – *yunga*, *qheswa*, *puna* – ranging from the damp jungle to snow-capped peaks (altitudes of 1,800–5,000 meters ASL). The Q'eros community, with about 3,000 members, supports its economy through alpaca, llama, sheep, and cow husbandry, as well as potato and corn cultivation. They are also skilled weavers, producing items for personal use and sale. They speak Southern Quechua and some Spanish. Until the 1950s, the Q'eros were culturally and geographically isolated from the broader national society. However, in the past 30 years, there has been increasing migration to urban areas like Cusco, Ocongate, and Paucartambo, driven by road construction, the pursuit of better living standards (work and education), and the impacts of climate change on pastoralism and agriculture. Renowned for their shamanic practices, the Q'eros engage in various rituals, encompassing medicinal, pastoral, and agricultural themes. These offerings serve both their community and nearby city residents, as well as tourists. Frequent interactions with urban environments have gradually intertwined their traditional lifestyle with the capitalist market and modern conveniences. Using terms like "shamanism" or "shaman"

[2] The research that served as the basis for this article was conducted from 2013 to 2017 and in 2022. The initial pilot study, spanning 2013 to 2014, was made possible through a scholarship provided by the Center for Andean Studies of University of Warsaw. The subsequent phase, conducted from 2015 to 2017, was funded by a research grant from the National Science Centre (2014/15/N/HS3/01694).

in the Andean context is subject to debate, as they bring cultural impositions like the term "priest" (*sacerdote*). Let us examine this issue more closely.

European fascination with shamanism dates to encounters in the 16th and 17th centuries through missionaries and travellers. Jean-Pierre Chaumeil (2012: 411) notes that despite five centuries of research, a clear definition of shamanism remains elusive due to its varied cultural roots, historical contexts, and the wide range of theoretical approaches across fields like cultural anthropology, religious studies, and neurobiology. Since the 19th century, shamanism has been variously interpreted as a stage in the evolution of religion or as a timeless and universal concept (e.g. Wierciński 2000; Lewis 1989). Contemporary anthropological work has redefined shamanism, presenting it as a phenomenon that eludes traditional definitions of religion in the social sciences (Hamayon 2003), and demonstrating that it is not a relic that fades with the modernization of indigenous societies. Instead, shamanism is evolving and transforming, adapting to new socio-cultural realities. Mircea Eliade (1964) described shamanism as an "archaic technique of ecstasy" in his comparative studies, viewing the shaman as a "psychopomp" who acts as a priest, mystic, and poet, capable of both healing and performing miracles. While Eliade's work has significantly influenced subsequent research and the practice of shamanism itself (Wallis 2003), later scholars have developed cross-cultural, universal definitions of shamanism that outline its practices. However, recent critiques have emphasized the local differences and historical and socio-cultural contexts as essential to shamanism's development, thus highlighting its inherently local character. The tension between local and universal features remains central to discussions of shamanism, both in its traditional (indigenous) forms and in its contemporary manifestations, including neoshamanism (e.g. Harvey 1997; Ivanescu, Berentzen 2020; Walsh 1990). The presence of shamanism in the Andes, particularly within the context of the Cusco region, hinges significantly on the definition applied to this phenomenon. If shamanism is defined by ecstatic techniques, altered states of consciousness, or specific practices and attributes, its presence may be questioned. However, if defined by the purpose of practices aimed at mediating between humans and non-humans (such as communicating with them and visiting their world) and transforming reality (such as healing, increasing herds or crops, or inducing rain), then discussing shamanism in the Andes becomes justified.

In the Q'eros community, ritual specialists responsible for mediating relationships between humans and non-humans are known as *paqos* (*paqokuna*). The term *paqo* is derived from the word *paqocha*, meaning "alpaca," reflecting the specialists' vital role in conducting rituals related to animal fertility, especially for alpacas. The Q'eros also note a connection between this term and *paqonqa* (*Sigesbeckia jorullensis*), a plant from the aster family used in the Andes to treat colds, pneumonia, digestive issues, and in postpartum care.

The Q'eros distinguish between two levels of ritual specialists: *pampamesayoq* and *altomesayoq*. This analysis explores the etymology of these two hybrid terms, integrating Spanish and Quechua elements. The core term is *mesa*/*misa*, which

means a portable altar, emblematic of the Andean shaman. In Spanish, *mesa* means "table." Xavier Ricard Lanata (2007) links the term to Catholic liturgy, suggesting it reflects the influence of portable altars (*retablos portátiles*) used by Catholic priests in the colonial period. Donald Joralemon (1985: 17) notes a similarity between Catholic and Andean altars, especially their tripartite structure. Harry Tschopik (referenced by Sharon 1978: 82) hypothesized that *mesa* comes from the Spanish word *misa* (mass), phonetically adapted by Quechua speakers (e.g. *misa* instead of *mesa*; *tira* instead of *tierra*). This linguistic phenomenon is known as phonetic adaptation. Mario Polia (1995: 26) argues that the inclusion of an altar in Andean shamanistic practices is not simply cultural borrowing but rather represents a universal concept of separating the ritual space from the profane. He provides an interesting linguistic clue: on the northern coast of Peru, *vamos jugando* ("let's play") refers to performing rituals on an altar, where *juego* ("game") means "altar." In contemporary Quechua from the Ayacucho region, *misa* means "a bet or game," and *misay* means "to win a bet" (Perroud, Chouvenc 1970: 110, qtd. in: Polia 1995: 27). The symbolism of play in the context of ritual practices is widespread in various cultures, where the "sacred game" or "divine game" signifies the creation of the world and relates to divinatory and healing practices.

Polia (1995: 28) describes the northern Peruvian altar as a space for "shamanic play," where battles between good and evil, health and illness, occur. For the Q'eros, the altar is a tool of transformation, allowing to produce changes in reality, such as healing. It represents a microcosm interconnected with the macrocosm, transferring changes powered by non-human entities to the human world. Therefore, all shamanic rituals must be performed on the altar to be effective. Both the altar and other shamanic tools are consecrated during initiation ceremonies, transferring the power of non-human entities (*apus*)[3] to these objects. This indicates that shamanic power is external, originating from the non-human (*apu*) realm and acquired through ceremonies or events – ranging from being struck by lightning, through learning, dreams, visions, and initiation rituals, to collecting power objects. Thus, the altar and the shaman's tools materialize and transfer non-human power into the human world during shamanic rituals. Given that the suffix *-yoq* in Quechua signifies "the possession of something," *pampamesayoq* and *altomesayoq* can be translated as "the one who carries the common altar" and "the one who carries the higher-ranking altar," respectively. These terms combine Spanish words (*alto*, *pampa*, *mesa*) with the Quechua morpheme (*-yoq*), suggesting they originated during the colonial or republican periods.

Andean shamanism is defined by four foundational elements: *yachay* ("knowing"), *qhaway* ("seeing/looking at"), *waqyay/rimay* ("calling/talking"), and *tukuy* ("transforming"). A *paqo* possesses extensive knowledge (*yachay*) of the non-human world and reality. They can interpret signs from the non-human entities (*qhaway*),

[3] The term *apus*, commonly used to refer to "sacred mountains," is a hybrid form derived from the Quechua word *apu* combined with the Spanish suffix *-s*, which indicates the plural. In Quechua, the correct plural form is *apukuna*. However, in this text, I use the form *apus*, as it is widely adopted in Andean studies literature.

facilitating a direct communication (*waqyay/rimay*). These skills allow a *paqo* to transform reality (*tukuy*) through rituals aimed at healing, divination, influencing weather, improving crops, and aiding animal reproduction. Shamanic practices are rooted in reciprocity, where relationships established by *paqos* with the non-human world involve mutual exchange. A *pampamesayoq*, a lower-ranking specialist, serves as a diviner (*watuq* or *qhawaq*) and healer (*hampiq*) who engages with the non-human world indirectly through rituals like *phukuy* (ritual blowing) and *kuka qhaway* (coca leaf divination). These kind of specialists do not directly interact with non-humans and cannot see, hear, or converse with them. *Pampamesayoqs* diagnose illnesses using coca leaf divination and urine analysis, call back lost *animu* (soul) of the sick (*animu waqyay*), and perform cleansing rituals (*qollpay*) with healing stones and herbs. Their primary role is to conduct sacrificial rituals (*haywakuy*) for healing and other purposes. Each *paqo* specializes in certain areas, like crop or animal fertility rituals or herbal medicine, predicting the future and interpreting the past, and possesses extensive knowledge in astrology and nature. Given the range of specializations and individualized ritual practices in Q'eros shamanism, what distinguishes a *pampamesayoq* from an *altomesayoq*? *Altomesayoq* is chosen by an *apu* through a lightning strike (*illapa*). Beside possessing the skill set of *pampamesayoqs*, they can communicate directly with non-humans, seeing and conversing with them, and are able to heal advanced illnesses and transform reality. The abilities of contemporary *altomesayoq* – also called *rimachiq* ("one who makes them speak") – closely resemble the powers of *camasca*, the ritual specialists (and some rulers) of the Incan Empire. Like the modern *altomesayoq*, they could make the *huacas* (*wak'as*)[4] speak (Staller, Stross 2013: 197), indicating their ability to directly communicate with non-human entities. According to Q'eros narratives, there are three ways to become an *altomesayoq*: being struck by lightning, inheriting the position, and choosing the path independently.[5]

[4] *Huaca* refers to a person-like entity that manifests as specific places or objects (e.g. mountains, rivers), man-made structures (e.g. temples, shrines), ancestral tombs, and ceremonial artifacts (e.g. vessels, textiles, carved figurines). It is believed that these beings have a direct impact on the life of the community, intervening in social, economic, or political matters. These entities are treated with respect and often participate in local rituals, serving as key elements in Andean religious and social practices.

[5] Individuals struck by lightning (*illapa hap'isqa*) are chosen by the *apus* to become *altomesayoq*, a calling often foreshadowed by a dream or vision. Shamanic callings are also often inherited across generations (*linajes*), with potential shamans identified by signs in childhood or particular predispositions. Additionally, some individuals choose the shamanic path out of personal interest or an inner calling. Typically, this decision leads to the rank of *pampamesayoq*; becoming an *altomesayoq* requires passing challenging trials set by a master shaman or the *apus*.

Relational ontology: Body, materiality, and subjectivity

This text follows the relational ontology approach, developed within the framework of the "ontological turn." In recent decades, this perspective has led to a profound redefinition of concepts such as materiality, subjectivity, and agency.[6] The ontological turn redirects attention from epistemology to fundamental questions of entities' ontological status, ways of being, and interconnections among diverse kinds of beings. Contemporary cultural anthropology increasingly pursues novel theoretical frameworks that highlight the intrinsic reliance of human existence on dynamic interactions with the environment. At its core, this viewpoint posits that the relationships between entities hold greater ontological significance than the substantive attributes of those entities themselves. Tim Ingold's works (2011; 2015) play a crucial role in this evolution. Ingold, building upon extensive criticism of traditional anthropological paradigms, interprets culture as a process of "weaving paths" within a network of mutual dependencies. In his view, "being in the world" is understood as participation in an open, dynamic process in which humans, their tools, places, and the natural environment co-create a web of life. This web is not static; it is a continuous process where humans and non-human elements define and redefine each other. Ingold's concept of "meshwork" describes this complex interaction essential for understanding cultural phenomena.

Adopting a more radical stance, relational ontology posits the absence of any pre-existing elements prior to relational dynamics (Barad 2007). According to Christina Toren (2012) and Tim Ingold (2008), relational ontology emphasizes that humans are not static beings with a fixed essence. Humans do not exist in isolation; their existence, identity, and way of perceiving the world are continually shaped in a process of becoming through our social connections and contexts. This approach extends beyond humans. All entities, both human and non-human, are constantly changing or coming into being, and their identities, perspectives, properties, or habitus are defined by their relationships (Herva 2009: 388). This means that becoming human "involves a process of becoming with non-humans," and "becoming with" is an exploration of the evolving relationships between humans and non-humans (Ingold 2011). Therefore, it is these connections that trigger the metamorphosis of the body in everyday life and rituals. The relational approach to ontology causes significant re-evaluations in the understanding

[6] In Andean studies, this approach has been developed by researchers like Catherine Allen, Marisol de la Cadena, Bruce Mannheim, Óscar Muñoz Móran, and Resaleen Howard, among others (see: Muñoz Móran 2020). In other contexts, relational ontology has been advanced by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, co-creator of anthropological theory of Perspectivism, and Philippe Descola, who proposed four ontologies: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. Anna Tsing examines relationality as it impacts human and non-human worlds within global economic and ecological networks, specifically in the context of the matsutake mushroom trade. The approach of actor–network theory, developed by scholars such as Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich, Bruno Latour, and John Law, has significantly influenced anthropology. It emphasizes that communities form networks where both human and non-human entities participate equally.

of fundamental anthropological categories, indicating the necessity to reconsider and reformulate many existing theories and methods. Ingold's works pose theoretical challenges and invite new research paths, blurring boundaries between traditionally separate fields. In essence, relational ontology proposes a new vision for understanding human being and becoming.

Noteworthy in this context is the work *Thinking through things* (Henare et al. 2007), which is a pivotal text on materiality within the ontological turn. This collection of essays argues for reconfiguring anthropology's approach to understanding and theorizing material objects. The authors challenge the classical view of objects as passive carriers of cultural meaning, advocating instead for seeing them as active participants in social relations. In this book, subjectivity is understood as distributed and shared between humans and objects. Rather than viewing subjectivity as solely human, the authors propose that objects, too, can be treated as subjects that co-create reality. This approach challenges traditional boundaries between "someone" and "something," proposing that our concept of subjectivity should expand to include diverse forms of existence and interaction.[7]

Reflections on corporality and subjectivity among the Quechua of the Central Andes (Cusco region of Peru) build on my previous research on human and non-human relationships (Przytomska 2015; 2020; 2023). Drawing from narratives and observations of daily and ritual practices, I define the human body in Andean communities (Q'eros) as both individual and dividual.[8] Each being is composed of individual substances, shaped by elements circulating through human and non-human relations. One example is *animu*, the foundation of personality, whose loss leads to illness or death. In contrast, *samay*[9] (Quech. breath, blowing) emerges during rituals and interactions between humans and non-humans. This element brings the world to life, revealing itself through movement and action. *Samay* circulates within the human body – seen in Andean ontology as a microcosm – and throughout the universe as a macrocosm. In other words, *samay* has a dividual nature, forming the basis of exchange relationships between humans and non-humans.

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[7] Likewise, Tim Ingold offers a critical analysis of Alfred Gell's work, particularly in *Art and agency: An anthropological theory* (1998). Gell proposed a theory where art objects function as agents within social relationships, attributing agency to artworks. Ingold contends that Gell's approach is overly object-centered and mechanistic, treating agency as an attribute that can be assigned to objects. Instead, Ingold emphasizes a more relational and processual view of agency, where agency emerges from the dynamic interactions among humans, non-humans, and their environments.

[8] The concept of dividuality that I use in my analysis was developed in the Melanesian context by Marilyn Strathern (1988). Her definition fits perfectly into relational ontology, showing how humans are linked to a network of interactions where boundaries between the person and the world are fluid. She emphasizes that agency is not inherent to the individual but emerges from interactions within a broader social and material environment.

[9] This term refers to a type of force or life essence that animates all entities (humans, animals, plants, etc.) and manifests their agency and subjectivity. It is subject to constant exchange between humans and non-humans in various aspects of life, including healing practices, pastoral and agricultural rituals, travels etc.

Analysing bodily substances (visible and invisible) allows us to define the body as a divisible, unstable, and distributed space, undergoing continual transformations. This implies that its various elements can accumulate, be lost, and recovered. Moreover, human subjectivity is not fixed; in cases of illness or cultural transgressions, individuals may undergo dehumanization, losing their human status (*runa*) and adopting non-human subjectivity. The fluidity of the body, or the body-flux,[10] prompts ongoing concern in Andean communities for preserving bodily equilibrium. This concern is heightened by a continual anxiety regarding predatory non-human entities seeking to usurp the essence of their victims. As a result, interactions with non-humans or strangers are marked by fear, distrust, and a persistent sense of vulnerability. The instability of the body in Andean ontology also has a positive dimension, essential to both individual and community reproduction. As mentioned earlier, certain bodily substances can serve as objects of exchange relationships (e.g. blood or *samay*, which is life energy) among different classes of persons. The mutual and balanced exchange of bodily substances, occurring between humans and non-humans, such as in the *haywakuy* ritual or in ritual fights (*tinkuy*), contributes to the reproduction of both the individual and the community by expanding their resources.[11]

In the following section, I explore how, within the context of Andean ritual practices, boundaries between humans and the non-human world are seen as fluid, permeable, and dispersed. The examples analysed illustrate that the subjectivity of these entities is not only formed through relationships but, at certain moments, also arrives at a synergistic merging. In specific contexts, this reveals a shared subjectivity that may be temporary or permanent.

Embedded subjectivity in shamanic rituals: Stones of power

María Apasa, an *altomesayoq* from the village of Quico, was struck by lightning (*illapa hap'isqa*) at the age of sixteen. According to her account, it was a calm, sunny day when, as she herded sheep, the weather suddenly changed. Fierce winds brought a storm, darkening the sky with clouds. Unexpectedly, María heard a loud thunderclap and found herself engulfed in blue flames. When she regained

[10] I propose the term "body-flux" to describe the body as a dynamic entity subject to continuous changes, transformations, and fluctuations. In this framework, the body is not stable and immutable but a process in which its components may detach, combine, or undergo various alterations. The term "flux" refers to the fluidity and continuity of changes, indicating that the body is in constant motion and evolution.

[11] Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2006), through her research on shamanism in Peru, employs an approach that highlights the concept of "co-essence," or shared being, essential for transformative healing processes. She describes how northern Peruvian shamans, particularly female healers, use metaphors of motherhood, shared suffering, and compassionate love to shape both their patients' perspectives on health and their understanding of their own role as healers, creating a relational framework that underpins shamanic healing and transformation.

consciousness, she realized she was unscathed. To her, it was clear – she had been chosen to be an *altomesayoq*. The concept of being struck by lightning is widespread in the Andes, with roots in Incan times (Ziółkowski 1997). While Western culture sees lightning as a powerful electrostatic discharge, the Q'eros view it as a personal entity and an emissary of the *apus*. Andean *paqos* communicate with *illapa* just as they do with the *apus* or *pachamamas* (Rösing 1996). In Andean culture, lightning symbolizes duality within natural and cosmological orders, encompassing light and sound as well as the ambivalence of life and death (Classen 1993: 18), which may relate to shamanic initiation. A chosen one struck by lightning, selected by the *apus*, undergoes death and rebirth. In Quechua, *illa* means "light" and *apay* means "to transport" (Rosat 2009: 182). In shamanic practices, lightning, as a bearer of light, kills the chosen one to give new life. *Illapa* has transformative properties, initiating a reciprocal relationship between humans and *apus*. In sacrificial rituals (*haywakuy*) directed at non-humans, humans initiate the exchange; however, here it is the non-humans who initiate the relationship.

"Power stones" play a crucial role in the initiation process. *Paqos* discover them shortly after being struck by lightning, during initiation rituals, or on mountain hikes. During the *qarpay mesa* (initiation ritual), the master also passes their *illas* (power stones) to the adept. The Quechua regard these stones as gifts from the *apus* to the chosen one, calling them "children of the *apus*." Charged with power from non-humans, *illas* serve as their material embodiment. These stones are shrouded in mystery and must never be shown or given to others. *Paqos* place them within their folded altars (*mesa*) and guard them closely. Jorge Flores Ochoa (1974: 249) notes that they are often stones such as quartz, granite, or basalt, either in their natural form or carved into shapes. Dating back to pre-Columbian times, *illas* are known by various names across Andean regions: *khuya*, *kanta*, *inya*, *inkaychu*, *enqaychu*, *enqa*, *conopa*, *hispa*, *kawsaq*. Andean *paqos* use them in healing rituals and for practices such as increasing livestock herds. These stones endow the *paqo* with healing power that reveals itself in therapeutic rituals, during which he (or she) rubs the patient's body with a folded altar, known as a *huch'uy mesa*, inside which the *illas* are kept. A similar process occurs during the soul-calling ritual (*animu waqyay*), the final stage of healing. The shaman presses the folded altar (with the stones inside) to the patient's head, where the *animu* (soul) enters and exits (e.g. during illness or dream journeys). As part of this ritual, the shaman blows on the altar three times while reciting invocations to summon the lost soul. Through the *illas*, the shaman remains connected to non-humans, as the stones serve as their miniature, power-charged incarnations.

Illas are not exclusive to Andean shamans; although it happens rarely, ordinary shepherds may also possess them if discovered in the mountains or pastures. These stones are typically passed down through generations. Some *illas* have zoomorphic forms, resembling Andean livestock such as llamas, alpacas, sheep, or cows, while others have floromorphic shapes, resembling cultivated plants like corn. For the Quechua people, *illas* are animated beings that sometimes emerge from the ground on sunny days, grazing on mountain meadows as miniature

animals. Hearing their soft bleating, people search for them and bring them home, believing they bring good luck. Flores Ochoa (1974: 251) quotes a story from a man in the Canchis province (Cuzco region):

> The *enqa* [illa] is found in the highest parts where there is perpetual snow, you must walk for many days to find it. You endure hunger, thirst, and cold, there is no place to rest or eat. (…) To find the *enqa*, you must go alone, without any company. You should look in the most uninhabited places where no one lives, in the highest altitudes where there is only fog and near the snow. In the highest places, far from where people live, and which are already deserted. (…) When walking through such places, you can hear the sound of animals eating, and you need to start looking for them before they enter the water, the mountain springs, or the lake. You must watch carefully and quickly throw something over them, like an *inkuña* [woven cloth], where coca leaves are stored, or a *ch'uspa* [woven bag]. If aimed correctly, the animals disappear, leaving behind white or black stones that still have a pulse and are warm. That is when it is best. When they are warm, it is best. That is why I call the person who found them *qoñi runa* [warm person]. A person who owns many animals is also called *qoñi runa*.[12]

Most *illas* are found between January and February and again in August, when Pachamama is open. They emerge from *w'akas* – places of power like mountain springs, caves, and rocks. According to Andean narratives, if a person notices, steps on, or throws a bag over them, the miniature animals harden and turn into stones, which people then keep. These stones can also be unearthed during agricultural activities. Finding these "amulets" is not straightforward; they choose their owner, staying with them willingly and guiding the shepherd with subtle clues, like quiet bleating (Ricard Lanata 2007; Bolin 1998; Gose 1994; Sillar 2009). *Illas* are highly valued talismans that bring luck, health, and abundance (Flores Ochoa 1974: 218).

These "power stones" play a role in animal fertility rituals, where they must be fed with coca leaves and given alcohol (such as corn beer or rum) to maintain their power. When fed, *illas* follow the principle of *ayni* (reciprocity) by protecting livestock, ensuring their health, and aiding reproduction. The Q'eros usually feed the *illas* in February and August, during animal fertility rituals (*pukhllay*, or carnival) and Pachamama month, when numerous agricultural rituals are performed. During household ceremonies, shepherds express their desires and make requests for the coming year. They may ask for specific coat colours, sex, or number of young animals. When requests are made sincerely and with intensity, the *illas* respond with a strong breath – *phaq!* – animating the herds and imparting the desired traits (Ricard Lanata 2007: 211). The moment of invocation is crucial, as the future forms of the herd animals are born within the *illas* stones. The Q'eros believe that *altomesayoqs* have greater power and can multiply herds through their *illas*,

[12] Author's translation.

which emerge from mountains or caves. The promise of fertility and prosperity makes *illas* highly valuable. Flores Ochoa (1974: 227) notes that if people stop feeding and caring for the *illas*, the stones become hungry, posing a danger to humans. Hungry stones begin to feed on nearby people. Thus, the reciprocal relationship between *illas* and their owners can turn predatory due to neglect.[13] This ambivalence – marked by reciprocity and predation – reflects the complex emotions shepherds feel toward these mysterious "objects", ranging from joy, love, admiration, respect, and gratitude to fear and anxiety.

Here, we examine the function and ontological status of *illas*. Previous studies (Allen 2016; 2020; Cadena 2015; Stensrud 2010; Sillar 2004) have interpreted *illas* as involving dimensional play, fractal structures, or *pars pro toto* synecdoche, representing parts rather than wholes. These interpretations, however, have proven insufficient for capturing the relationships between *apus*, *illas*, and livestock. While these studies clarify the part–whole relationship in terms of construction, they do not fully address subjectivity. On the one hand, these power stones are imbued with the essence of the *apus*, rendering them both part of and an embodiment of these animated mountains. On the other, they serve as miniatures of livestock, embodying resources belonging to these non-human entities. The concept of "distributed personhood," first applied to *illas* by Catherine Allen (2016; 2020) and borrowed from Alfred Gell (1998), provides a more adequate interpretive framework. Gell defined distributed personhood as a phenomenon in which artworks carry the subjectivity of their creators, becoming distinct entities. In a comparable way, the *apus* extend their essence, subjectivity, and agency through small stones, which then become part of a shaman's equipment or an Andean shepherd's household when found. The key to understanding the *apus*–*illas* connection lies in the Andean concept of the body as divisible, unstable, and dispersed. Thus, these stones are carriers of the *apus*' subjectivity and power. However, a unique particularity emerges in the range of emotions people feel towards *illas*, but not towards *apus*. A close emotional bond with *illas* is possible because they merge the subjectivity of the stone (representing the animal) with that of the *apus* (mountains), becoming distinct entities. Victor's testimony from Quico village suggests that the subjectivity and power of the *apus* and *illas* are distinct. This difference becomes evident in the ability to see or observe (*qhaway*) *illas*, which is not possible with *apus*. Victor's testimony describes a healing session during which the *apus* materialized in the form of small stones:

> When my first daughter was being born, Maria's great-granddaughter, my wife couldn't… she couldn't give birth, for almost two days… She almost died, so I went all the way to Saqarara… to find Mrs. Maria, and I gave her coca leaves, a bottle of alcohol, and I said: "My wife is not doing well." And I told her everything. And she gave me her poncho and said: "Cover yourself, boy. I will call the *apus*," she said. It was around 10–11 in the morning, there was a cave there. But I saw

[13] For further discussion on this model of predation in the Andes, see: (Przytomska 2020; 2023).

> something, they came as stones, small like dwarfs, and birds, and they spoke strongly: "Son, do not look / *Ama qhawankichu*. You will have sick eyes / *Ñawikita onqonchiranku*." She sat there with her open altar. "Your child has already been born. It's a girl," Maria told me. "The *soq'a wayra* [wind of ancestors] came and grabbed her and didn't let her give birth. They already took it away. Some *machula* was crying and saying – 'I want to take her,' but the *apus* found out and took him away."

The prohibition against ordinary people looking at the *apus*[14] holds profound ontological significance. It underscores the ontological differences between *runakuna* and *apus* and reinforces the reliance on shamans, who mediate between these domains. In the Andes, relationships between beings are complex and can become dangerous if not carefully managed. Shamans regulate these interactions to ensure the community's safety. Uncontrolled contact with non-human beings can lead to illness, seen as a form of dehumanization where the afflicted individual loses their integrity as a human (*runa*).

Beyond the emotional bonds people form with *illas* and the ability to look at them, we can further explore the significant correlation between these stones and the *apus*. *Illas*, often called the "children of the *apus*," share a common physicality and power, though in different proportions. At this point, it should be noted that the concept of a dispersed or divisible body does not fully capture this relationship, as it does not encompass the effect that acting upon a miniature has overall, as is the case with *illas* and *apus*. The belief that ritually feeding the *illas* simultaneously nourishes the *apus* reveals a feedback loop between these two entities. Interaction with the part or miniature (*illas*) is equivalent to engaging with the whole (*apus*). Additionally, *apus* compete for power and influence within their respective territories. Notably, these non-humans select individuals to receive *illas*, indicating their interest in establishing and reinforcing reciprocal relations with humans. *Illas* function as connectors between *runakuna* and non-humans, facilitating closer interactions and access to non-human resources, provided that people maintain exchange relationships rooted in mutual feeding. This relationship is mutually beneficial: non-humans expand their influence and power, while humans enhance their well-being by increasing their livestock. Additionally, if a person from another region finds an *illa* while traveling, they can establish a reciprocal relationship with the local mountain (the ruler or creator of the *illa*). This implies that territorial proximity is crucial for establishing a relationship with a specific *apu*. Thus, *illas*, as "children of the *apus*," serve as tools for expanding influence by incorporating more people into the network of human–non-human relations. This suggests that *apus*, through *illas*, aim to expand their social networks much like humans do through *chukcha rutuy* (hair-cutting ceremonies) – to enhance their well-being and prestige. The more people included in the network of reciprocity, the greater the flow of life essence (*samay*), thereby enhancing the power and agency of these non-humans.

[14] The case described here is not isolated. During healing sessions in which *altomesayoq* summon the *apus*, patients are unable to look at them.

With this perspective, we see how these small, mysterious stones fit into the flow of life essence and the exchange patterns that organize the world. If *illas* are material extensions of the *apus*, then the alpacas and llamas born through these rituals are also expressions of this connection. These animals are gifts, allowing the *apus* to share a part of themselves – or their resources – with humans. In this reciprocal feeding process, humans sustain the exchange by feeding the *illas* and performing offering rituals for the *apus*. In turn, non-humans reciprocate through livestock reproduction. This cycle of exchange helps maintain a balance of resources between humans and non-humans.

Borrowed subjectivity in shamanic practices: Coca leaves, guinea pigs, and eggs

One November evening in 2013, a *paqo* (ritual specialist) named Nicolas from the village of Marcachea wrapped coca leaves in an *unkhuña* – a consecrated, ritual cloth. He invoked the *apus* by ringing a small bell over the bundle, then asked me to blow on it three times, explaining that the *samay* (life essence) in my breath would transfer to the coca leaves and the *apus*. After I complied, Nicolas declared: *Ya te tengo aquí* [I have you here now]. To my surprise, I realized that through my breath, the coca leaves were capturing information about the patient during the diagnostic ritual known as *kuka qhaway*, or coca leaf reading. The next step in the *kuka qhaway* ritual is to unfold the *unkhuña* and interpret the coca leaves' configuration based on their condition (damaged, torn, rotten, discoloured, etc.) and arrangement. After assessing the general health and condition of the patient, the divination process continues. The patient can ask more detailed questions about their illness (causes, treatment, chances of recovery), their future, past, and any other concerns, including those about family members.[15] *Samay* is a life force or essence that manifests in action through rituals like *samincha*, *ch'allay*, *phukuy*, *kuka qhaway*, and *haywakuy*. In all these cases, *samay* is transmitted through movement, such as by blowing, in steam rising during cooking, or by pouring a drink onto the ground. Rituals involving *samay* centre on communication and interaction between human and non-human entities. In the diagnostic process, the *apus* rely on *samay* to identify the patient and know whom to respond to. Breath (*aliento*) serves as the carrier of *samay*, or as *samay* itself, facilitating non-verbal communication with non-human entities. In the *kuka qhaway* ritual, *samay* separates from the human body and is transmitted to other beings for diagnostic purposes. It embodies or reproduces the patient's image, enabling a temporary duplication or recreation of the human body represented by coca leaves. For the Quechua people, coca is a person-like entity that plays a significant role in shamanic practices. Known as *Mama Kuka* (Mother Coca), this plant acts as a connector,

[15] For more information on *kuka qhaway*, see: (Przytomska 2013/2014; 2023).

facilitating communication between humans and non-humans (*apus* and *pacha-amas*), and fostering reciprocal relationships between them.

A similar motif appears in the healing ritual of *haywakuy*, where coca leaves represent the patient's illness. The treatment involves creating a ritual bundle, understood as a dynamic microcosm for complex ritual actions.[16] The *paqo* selects crushed, broken, rotten coca leaves, which embody illness, ailments, pain, fears, worries, and problems. During this stage of the ritual, the selected leaves are placed on tufts of rainbow-coloured wool, topped with raisins, brown sugar, beans (*Phaseolus lunatus*), and anise seeds (*Pimpinella anisum* L.). These sweet elements, together with the rainbow, transfer the patient's illness – materialized as damaged leaves – to the *ukhu pacha* (underworld), a place of transformation and regeneration. The *paqo* then sprinkles the entire bundle with quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa Willd*.), thoroughly covering the arranged ingredients. The quinoa acts as a barrier, preventing the illness, now transferred to *ukhu pacha*, from returning to the patient's body. This description highlights the dynamic, processual nature of healing, where diseases, represented by damaged coca leaves, are separated from the human body, and transported from *kay pacha* (the middle world, or realm of human existence) to *ukhu pacha* (the underworld). Other diagnostic rituals involving eggs and guinea pigs reflect the same underlying logic. In Andean healing practices, the guinea pig (*cuy*) serves as a living "scanner" for the patient's body. The baby animal, typically a few months old, is moved across the patient's body to absorb the illness and reflect its symptoms. Following the ritual, the guinea pig is sacrificed and thoroughly examined by the shaman, who analyses its internal organs. Abnormalities in the guinea pig's organs – such as discoloration of the liver or the presence of tumours – are interpreted as manifestations of the patient's illness. Through direct contact with the patient's body, the guinea pig serves as a temporary vessel for the patient's condition, creating an integrated whole for diagnostic purposes. This process enables diagnosis in a manner otherwise inaccessible.

The egg, another ritual object used similarly, symbolizes life, rebirth, and fertility, and is commonly employed in the Andes as a diagnostic tool. Traditional healers, or *curanderos*, gently roll the egg over the patient's body from feet to head in a clockwise direction. The egg is believed to absorb illness and negative energies. After completing this process, the healer cracks the egg into a glass of water and analyses its contents. Interpretations focus on the shapes and colours of the yolk, as well as the presence of bubbles or clots, which are viewed as indicators of specific diseases or spiritual issues. Serving as a miniature of the patient's body, the egg becomes a medium to externalize and examine the illness.

Unlike "power stones," which maintain a constant subjectivity, coca leaves, guinea pigs, and eggs temporarily take on the subjectivity of the patient. These objects often recreate or duplicate another being, albeit on a different scale or in a different form. In other words, these objects act as miniature versions of the patient's body, enabling the transfer and external examination of illness,

[16] For a full description of the ritual, see: (Przytomska 2023).

as they manifest the patient's internal states. These practices highlight the temporary integration of shared bodies within a ritual context, where the patient's body and the diagnostic tool merge into a single entity for the purpose of healing. It is essential to note that objects like eggs, guinea pigs, and coca leaves are not merely passive tools; they play active, influential roles in diagnosis and healing. I refer to this type of subjectivity as "borrowed subjectivity," highlighting the temporary transfer of subjective qualities to ritual objects.

Conclusions

The examples of ritual practices described in this text, involving ritual objects such as power stones, coca leaves, guinea pigs, and eggs, illustrate the concept of shared subjectivity. In my proposed framework, this concept suggests that the subjectivity of one being is either "transferred" or "shared" with other entities in two modalities: borrowed and embedded.

Borrowed subjectivity involves the temporary transfer of subjectivity from one being to another, such as to a ritual object used for diagnostic or healing purposes. In this process, objects like coca leaves, guinea pigs, or eggs become carriers of the patient's subjectivity. They absorb the illness and act as "miniatures" of the patient's body, allowing shamans to identify and treat the disease. While ritual objects may appear ordinary at first glance, they are not passive tools in the shaman's hands. Instead, they actively shape and influence the diagnostic and therapeutic process. The merging of the patient's subjectivity with the ritual object creates a new quality, a synergistic combination crucial for the success of the ritual. Once the ritual is complete and the subjectivity is "returned" to the patient, this state of "sharing" dissipates, existing only for the duration of the ritual and being closely tied to its intended purpose.

Embedded subjectivity, on the other hand, refers to a permanent extension of subjectivity, where non-human entities, such as mountains, extend their essence to humans through embodiment in specific objects (like stones). Stones become permanent carriers of subjectivity and act as intermediaries between the *apus* and humans. I understand that in this way, non-humans expand their influence, power, and dependencies. It is also important to note that power stones are not exact replicas of the *apus*. The Otherness and often predatory nature associated with direct encounters with the *apus* (which may cause illness or even pull one to the underworld) are "tamed" through miniaturization and the closeness that generates feelings of love and familiarity. In this form, the power of the *apus* becomes less threatening to humans. Thus, we see that in this process of "becoming," there is a synergistic combination of subjectivities among stones, *apus*, and humans (expressed through acts of feeding, intimacy, emotional ties, etc.).

Table 1. Examples of shared subjectivity

Embodied subject	Channel of embodiment	Embodying subject	Embodiment effect	Subjectivity change	Subjectivity type
patient	touch	guinea pig	disease diagnosis	temporary	borrowed
patient	touch	eggs	disease diagnosis	temporary	borrowed
patient	blowing	coca leaves	disease diagnosis	temporary	borrowed
patient	blowing	ritual bundle	healing	temporary	borrowed
apu	water bodies	*illas*	animal fertility	permanent	embedded
apu	*illapa* (lightning)	*khuyas*	healing power	permanent	embedded

Source: Own elaboration.

In this light, shared subjectivity reveals how each entity – whether a stone, plant, human, or element of the landscape – can engage in complex relational networks, forming a collective identity and agency. This perspective offers insights into diagnostic and therapeutic methods, while also illustrating how distinct cultures understand the concepts of body and subjectivity within a healing context. In my analysis, I aimed to emphasize the nuanced distinctions that reveal how representation, miniaturization, synecdoche, or even distributed personhood are insufficient concepts for explaining the cases examined in this text. By proposing the term "shared subjectivity," I particularly focus on the phenomenon of body-flux – the fluid boundaries between human and non-human entities – and the resulting synergy. When the subjectivities of two distinct entities – such as a patient and a ritual object or an *apu* and a stone – merge, they produce a new quality. The embodiment of the patient within a guinea pig (or coca leaves or eggs) creates a dual space for diagnosis and healing, facilitating the transformation from illness to health. In the context of the embodiment of the *apus* in stones (*illas* and *khuyas*), the Otherness of these non-humans is embedded in the stones, thus reducing the level of threatening predation that characterizes the *apus* towards humans. Furthermore, in the context of shamanic practices, borrowed subjectivity can be a valuable analytical tool for conceptualizing shamanic journeys, in which one of the shaman's souls merges with the subjectivity of an animal (bird, puma, etc.) and travels with it, also acquiring some of its characteristics. Differentiating between borrowed and embedded subjectivity as an analytical tool enables a deeper understanding of non-human ontology in Andean culture. These models reveal that relationships between humans and other beings are not uniform but diverse and multi-layered – they can be both temporary and permanent. Borrowed

subjectivity demonstrates how objects can assume the functions of the human body for healing purposes, while embedded subjectivity highlights long-term relationships where objects serve as carriers of the power of non-human beings.

Within the framework of relational ontology, subjectivity transcends individual beings and emerges as a shared vibration or interaction within human and non-human relationships. This shared subjectivity becomes fundamental to understanding Andean ontology, which is not static but constantly evolving through relationships and the flow of substances. These beings not only coexist and enter into various relationships but also participate in the process of shaping personalities, both human and non-human. The examples analysed in the text show that, at certain moments, the integration of subjectivities from different beings can occur to meet specific needs, such as healing or reproduction. It is important to note that this kind of integration of subjectivities is not merely a functional aspect of interaction but also reflects deeper ontological processes. Rituals in Andean culture reflect ontological fluidity by creating temporary and changing states of reality. In this context, Andean ontology can be seen as both relational – defined by becoming through relationships – and fluid, with multiple or recurring becomings, where the ontological status and identities of beings are dynamic and changeable. The process of becoming oneself is not fixed once and for all but is repeatedly reenacted. In the context of shamanism, in specific contexts, beings can dynamically change their ontological statuses and boundaries depending on the context and interactions.

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SUMMARY

Embedded and borrowed subjectivity in the shamanic practices among Quechua from the Central Andes, Peru

The article explores the concept of "shared subjectivity" in the shamanic practices of the Quechua people in the central Andes of Peru. It reveals the interconnection between humans and non-humans in Quechua shamanic practices, where various ritual objects (stones, coca leaves, guinea pigs, and eggs) play active roles in rituals and in the process of synergistic becoming and building subjectivity. The analysis of these practices allowed for the identification of two different types of shared subjectivity: (1) borrowed subjectivity (where a person's essence temporarily transfers to ritual objects for diagnosis and healing); and (2) embedded subjectivity (where non-human agency permanently resides in objects such as power stones). These practices emphasize the fluid boundaries between humans and non-humans, as a foundation for Andean ontology, which can be defined as relational and fluid.

Keywords: non-humans, relational ontology, shared subjectivity, agency, Quechua, Andes