

Moral dilemmas among individuals from three indigenous groups in the Peruvian Amazon

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The purpose of this study was to identify moral dilemmas specific to three Amazonian indigenous cultures, highlighting the universality of the human moral experience while emphasizing that this recognition does not detract from the importance of acknowledging and appreciating our cultural diversity. Participants included four indigenous peoples – three men and one woman – from the Asháninka, Awajún, and Shipibo-Konibo indigenous groups, from the Ucayali region, in Perú. Using a qualitative methodology and taking into account the complex relationship between reason, rationality, and worldview, this study distinguishes between universal and particular elements. It presents examples of dilemmas shared by individuals from the Shipibo-Konibo, Asháninka, and Awajún Indigenous peoples, highlighting their moral concerns related to cultural issues as well as their engagement with universal moral principles.

Keywords: moral dilemmas, Amazonian indigenous peoples, moral reasoning, universality and particularities

Dilemas morales en individuos de tres grupos indígenas de la Amazonía peruana

El propósito de este estudio fue identificar dilemas morales específicos de tres culturas indígenas amazónicas, resaltando la universalidad de la experiencia moral humana, enfatizando al mismo tiempo que esta universalidad no resta importancia a la necesidad de reconocer y valorar nuestra diversidad cultural. Los participantes incluyeron a cuatro personas indígenas —tres hombres y una mujer— pertenecientes a los pueblos Asháninka, Awajún y Shipibo-Konibo, de la región de Ucayali, en Perú. Utilizando una metodología cualitativa y teniendo en cuenta la compleja relación entre razón, racionalidad y cosmovisión, este estudio distingue entre elementos universales y particulares. Se presentan ejemplos de dilemas compartidos por personas de los pueblos indígenas Shipibo-Konibo, Asháninka y

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Awajún, destacando sus preocupaciones morales relacionadas con cuestiones culturales, así como su compromiso con principios morales universales.

Palabras clave: dilemas morales, pueblos indígenas amazónicos, razonamiento moral, universalidad y particularidades

Dilemas morais em indivíduos de três grupos indígenas da Amazônia peruana

O objetivo deste estudo foi identificar dilemas morais específicos de três culturas indígenas amazônicas, destacando a universalidade da experiência moral humana, ao mesmo tempo em que se enfatiza que esse reconhecimento não diminui a importância de reconhecer e valorizar nossa diversidade cultural. Os participantes incluíram quatro pessoas indígenas — três homens e uma mulher — pertencentes aos povos indígenas Asháninka, Awajún e Shipibo-Konibo, da região de Ucayali, no Peru. Utilizando uma metodologia qualitativa e levando em consideração a complexa relação entre razão, racionalidade e cosmovisão, este estudo distingue entre elementos universais e particulares. São apresentados exemplos de dilemas compartilhados por indivíduos dos povos indígenas Shipibo-Konibo, Asháninka e Awajún, destacando suas preocupações morais relacionadas a questões culturais, bem como seu compromisso com princípios morais universais.

Palavras-chave: dilemas morais, povos indígenas amazônicos, raciocínio moral, universalidade e particularidades

Statements

Funding

This research was funded by Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú under [grant number FONCAI-2017].

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our special thanks to our informants, who very generously shared their knowledge with us. They are Susy Diaz and Gamaniel Monteluisa of the Shipibo-Konibo people, Benigno Vicente of the Asháninka people, and Alejandro Paati of the Awajún people.

Peru, marked by extensive cultural diversity (Ministerio de Cultura del Perú, 2024), coexists with notable inequality, persistent social conflicts, racism, and documented violations of the rights of indigenous peoples (Delgado, 2023; Espinosa, 2022, 2009; Vigil, 2010). In this complex social context, it is unsurprising that Peru has exerted significant efforts to implement intercultural bilingual education (EIB, as it stands in Spanish) to strengthen indigenous peoples and their cultures, educate new generations to uphold democracy and cultural diversity, and equip indigenous citizens for active participation in the public sphere.

Peru has public policies and a legal framework for EIB, which align with international human rights treaties that protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly the right to education. Undoubtedly, in democratic and pluralistic societies, EIB is a fundamental tool for ensuring equality, social justice, respect for diversity, the strengthening of identities, and the holistic development of individuals and communities.

However, several scholars have critiqued Peruvian Intercultural Bilingual Education for its deficit-oriented conceptualization, which diminishes the agency of Indigenous peoples and disregards the dynamic nature of their cultural evolution. Furthermore, they argue that it has historically reinforced a reductive and static association between language, culture, identity, and territory, thereby promoting an essentialist perspective that construes identity, community, and language as immutable phenomena (Zavala, 2019; Zavala & Franco, 2020; Vigil, 2022; Vigil & Sotomayor, 2022; Vigil et al., 2019).

This perspective is reinforced by a widespread assumption among intercultural educators and the broader public that Indigenous cognition and moral frameworks are fundamentally incommensurable with Western epistemologies, values, and worldviews, making them unsuitable for integration into Indigenous education (Frisancho & Delgado, 2018). It is often presumed that in culturally diverse regions such as the Peruvian Amazon, moral dilemmas—if they

arise—are approached in entirely distinct ways due to differing value systems. This belief stems not only from the assumption that Indigenous peoples possess inherently different cognitive and emotional processes but also from a romanticized view of their communities as virtuous and untouched by moral corruption (Calavia, 2006; Delgado, 2023; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022; Krech, 1999; Narvaez, 2020). This idealization contrasts sharply with the frequent portrayal of urban areas as centers of vice.

As a result, despite EIB's stated objectives of promoting justice and citizenship (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2013, 2016), the pedagogical proposal of Intercultural Education in Peru does not include citizenship or moral education, nor does it explicitly address intercultural moral conflicts and dilemmas. We argue that this omission is rooted in the widespread belief in the incommensurability of Indigenous cognition and morality—the notion that Indigenous values are entirely distinct from those of the West, with no possible point of comparison—and the idea that Westerners cannot and should not “impose” their values on Indigenous peoples. As we will see below, these ideas are not only inaccurate but also counterproductive to the Indigenous agenda and its educational initiatives.

Theoretical point of departure and previous research

Every human being encounters moral dilemmas because, as part of life's experiences, people will face situations where their values conflict. Extensive literature demonstrates that individuals confront moral dilemmas within their own sociocultural values and contexts (Delgado & Frisanchó, 2021; Frisanchó & Delgado, 2014, 2017; Good et al., 1999; Hedayati et al., 2017, 2019; Lock, 1995; Magendzo & Toledo, 2009). Research in psychology highlights that all human individuals experience moral concerns and develop their own viewpoints on social and cultural matters. While cultural contexts shape moral life, they do not entirely determine it. Studies by Wainryb and Recchia (2014), Wainryb and Turiel (1993) and Wainryb (1991) have demonstrated that informational assumptions, which encompass beliefs about

factual matters and ideas about how the world functions, contribute to the variability in moral judgement. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds independently form moral judgments but integrate their experiences and cultural beliefs into their reasoning processes (Wainryb, 1991). This implies that people, even when coming from vastly different cultural contexts, make moral judgments and encounter ethical dilemmas related to their life experiences, power dynamics in their communities, issues of duties and rights, and more. So, following Wainryb (2006), we hold the perspective that cultures do not possess the ability to dictate individuals' feelings, thoughts, or behaviors. Instead, individuals have the capacity to contemplate social interactions within the frameworks of their cultural practices and traditions.

A moral dilemma is a situation that challenges the person with conflicting moral values or duties. Such dilemmas force individuals to make decisions in which any course of action risks compromising or violating important moral principles. The key characteristics of a moral dilemma include the obligation to perform two or more actions, the capacity to perform each action, but the impossibility of performing both simultaneously (Zalta & Nodelman, 2024). In genuine moral dilemmas, decision-making involves judgments, evaluations, and response options within the moral domain, encompassing issues like justice, harm, fairness, and care (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983). Moral dilemmas have been widely used and have demonstrated effectiveness in moral education (Clare et al., 1996; Huo et al., 2023; Joh, 2002; Lozano et al., 2006; Rybash, 1980; Sosevsky, 1980; Schuitema et al., 2008). Drawing from Lawrence Kohlberg's psychology, dilemmas contribute to the development of subjects' reasoning capacities (Kohlberg et al., 2008). By placing evaluators in a position of impartiality, moral dilemmas encourage the rational exercise in making moral decisions.

In this context, the objective of this study was to collect and present a set of moral dilemmas proposed by four individuals from three Indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon, in order to illustrate the complex relationship between culturally specific moral experiences and universal moral principles.

Reflexivity and researchers' positioning

As researchers, we position ourselves philosophically and politically within the framework of critical interculturality (Frisancho & Delgado, 2018; Tubino, 2015). This means, first and foremost, that we understand our academic work as part of a broader project of collaboration with Indigenous peoples and the advancement of their rights. For nearly two decades, we have maintained intercultural relationships based on collaboration and mutual learning with Indigenous organizations, leaders, and educators. Within this framework, we conceive the present study as the result of an intercultural dialogue. However, adopting a critical interculturality perspective also entails recognizing the existence of inequitable social structures that affect intercultural dialogue. Accordingly, we acknowledge our position as non-Indigenous researchers affiliated with a high-status university in our country, which necessitates a continuous exercise of reflexivity to ensure that power dynamics do not lead to distortions in the interpretation of data relative to the perspectives of our collaborators. The consistent use of the members' reflections procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Tracy, 2010), which involves a joint reflection between the researchers and the study participants, has been fundamental in this regard and aligns with our non-positivist epistemological approach, which informs our qualitative interpretation of the study's dilemmas.

Method

In this qualitative study, an exploratory approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was adopted to investigate moral dilemmas in indigenous communities.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, specifically criterion-based case selection (Patton, 2015), drawing on prior knowledge and connections within Indigenous communities to identify individuals considered capable of sharing moral dilemmas that are typical

of their cultures. The participants—three men and one woman—belong to the Asháninka (1), Awajún (1), and Shipibo-Konibo (2) peoples and are between 35 and 45 years old. At the time of the study, they all lived in the city of Pucallpa, situated in the Ucayali region within the Peruvian Amazon basin. Their professions included primary school teaching, teacher training, and advocacy for indigenous rights.

These three different indigenous groups belong to three different ethnolinguistic families. The Asháninka people belong to the Arawak ethnolinguistic family and represent the most populous indigenous Amazonian group in Peru. The vast majority of the Asháninka reside in Peru, primarily in the Central Forest region within the Amazonian area of the eastern Andean foothills. Nevertheless, there are Asháninka communities currently situated in Brazilian territory, notably in the State of Acre. These groups originally migrated from Peru to Brazil in the late 19th century due to pressure from Peruvian caucheros (latex collectors). Throughout Peru's internal armed conflict (1980-2000), the Asháninka people faced significant hardships inflicted by the Maoist group, the Shining Path. According to findings from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) tasked with investigating this period, the Shining Path unleashed a campaign of brutal terror specifically targeting the Asháninka. Experts estimate that out of a population of 55,000 at the time, 6,000 Asháninka lost their lives, while 10,000 were forcibly displaced. Additionally, between 30 and 40 Asháninka communities vanished as a result of this violence (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003).

The Awajún indigenous people, previously known as Aguarunas, belong to the jíbaro ethnolinguistic family and are originally located in the north of Peru, near the border with Ecuador. The Awajún people represent the second most populous indigenous Amazonian group in Peru. On 5 June 2009, the infamous Bagua massacre, also known as the Baguazo, occurred near the town of El Reposo, close to the cities of Bagua and Bagua Grande in the Amazonas region of Peru.

Amid this conflict, the police and army clashed with Awajún and Wampis indigenous groups who were protesting against land privatization, as well as oil and mining investments. They were also opposing the

continuation of neoliberal economic policies under the administration of Alan García, which heavily favored extractive industries. Utilizing the rhetoric of progress, the government promoted the appropriation of indigenous territories and the exploitation of the Amazon's natural resources. According to government sources, 23 police officers and 10 indigenous people were killed, and one person was reported missing. This event has left a lasting impact on the consciousness and memory of the Awajun people (Benavides, 2015; Romio, 2021; Yóplac, 2023).

The Shipibo-Konibo belong to the Pano ethnolinguistic family and are the third-largest Amazonian indigenous group. The current Shipibo-Konibo people are the result of the fusion of three ethnic groups, Shipibo, Konibo and Shetebo. While they originally inhabited the Ucayali River basin and its tributaries, Shipibo-Konibo communities can now be found in various cities, including Lima, the capital city of Peru (Ministerio de Cultura del Perú, 2024). The Shipibo-Konibo have great visibility in the cities where they are found, being well known for the geometric designs (*kené*) that they incorporate into clothing and ceramics, which are highly in demand in the cities. In fact, the Shipibo-Konibo people have adapted and maintained their own culture in a new spatial context, striving to live as indigenous people in the city of Lima (Espinosa, 2019).

Procedure

Participants were informed that the study aimed to gain an understanding of the moral dilemmas experienced by members of Amazonian indigenous peoples in their daily lives and signed an informed consent, allowing the researchers to share the information they provide. The participants received an explanation of what constitutes a moral dilemma, defined as a situation in which conflicting values are present, making it challenging to choose one course of action. Following this concise explanation, participants swiftly identified moral dilemmas within their own cultural and life experiences, promptly sharing them with the researchers. This recognition served as an evaluation of their comprehension of the concept of a moral dilemma.

Following this, participants were asked to reflect on the dilemmas they had personally encountered or were aware of within their indigenous communities, document them, and then share their reflections with the researchers. Subsequently, virtual meetings were conducted with each participant to inquire about the dilemmas and seek clarifications on any unfamiliar language or situations specific to life in Amazonian indigenous communities that the researchers were not familiar with. It is worth noting that participants received monetary compensation for their time and contribution to the study. Certainly, in the psychological literature it is possible to recognize that giving or not giving compensation to the participants of a study is a subject of ethical debate (Chambers, 2001; Grady, 2005; Roth, 2012); however, the researchers of this study considered this action as a way of recognizing the contribution of a cultural group that has often been instrumentalized and stripped of its ancestral knowledge. From the ethical perspective of the researchers of this study, providing financial compensation not only responds to the principle of justice, but also to the principle of beneficence and non-maleficence, as it allows the time given by the interviewees not to be economically detrimental to them.

Some dilemmas were ‘cleaned up’ by the researchers, as they contained additional information that did not add anything to the story and would rather serve as a distraction, making the reading of the story confusing. Out of the 16 dilemmas collected, the top 12 were selected. Four were discarded as they represented social situations outside the moral domain.

Results and discussion

Tables 1, 2 and 3 showcase moral dilemmas derived from the contemporary life experiences and traditional ancestral knowledge of the indigenous leaders who took part in the study. Acknowledging that the interactions between principles and values are highly complex and not always easy to distinguish, in all tables, (p) denotes principles and (v) denotes values.

Table 1

Asháninka's moral dilemmas

Dilemma	Dilemma Summary	Values/principles at conflict
The sachavaca hunter	José, a highly skilled hunter, is sought after for his hunting secrets. However, he adamantly refuses to share them. In an attempt to extract this knowledge, a friend, eager to become as skilled as José, contemplates the idea of making him drunk to coax out his hunting secrets.	This dilemma revolves around taking advantage of a person's vulnerable state to fulfil personal desires and get social recognition (p), as opposed to respecting their freedom and autonomy (p).
The fake hunter	Víctor appears to be a skilled hunter, a source of great pride for him. However, he hunts animals using traps rather than arrows. To maintain his reputation as a proficient hunter within his community, he resorts to telling lies. When his wife questions him, Víctor grapples with the decision of whether or not to reveal the truth.	This dilemma is about honesty (telling the truth about the hunting technique) (p) versus the desire for community recognition (v).
Illegal logging	This dilemma revolves around Eduardo Jones, an illegal lumberman, who offers a bribe (two engines and 5,000 soles) to Juvencio, the president of an indigenous community, in exchange for permission to cut trees in communal territories. Juvencio, facing financial hardships due to his wife's illness, is tempted by the money. Eduardo attempts to persuade him to accept the deal, despite its unfairness to the community and the potential harm to its resources.	The dilemma revolves around the conflict between solving one's own economic problems through a bribe (p) or ensuring the rights and well-being of one's community (p).
The sick woman	A bedridden woman has been diagnosed by a shaman as suffering from an illness caused by witchcraft, and her life is believed to be in imminent danger. Only one sacred plant can potentially save her life, but identifying it poses a challenge as they all look similar. The shaman, who can recognize the specific plant, demands two cushmas (the Asháninka dress) as payment for revealing which plant can save her. The husband, unable to secure two cushmas, proposes to provide one immediately and the other later, but the shaman refuses to share his knowledge. Faced with desperation, the husband contemplates the option of stealing the sacred plant from the shamani plot.	This dilemma confronts the values of the right to life (p) and the right to property (v).

Table 2

Awajún's moral dilemmas

Dilemma	Dilemma Summary	Values/principles at conflict
Returning home	A man returns empty-handed from a hunting trip but encounters a large fish caught on someone else's fishing hook. Faced with the need to provide food for his family and maintain his image as a reliable provider, he contemplates taking the fish for his family.	This moral dilemma involves weighing the value of honesty (p) against the desire for community recognition as a reliable provider (v).
To share or not to share	In an Awajún community, an indigenous leader is grappling with the erosion of cultural practices such as reciprocity, mutual aid, and solidarity due to external influences. When a father urgently needs money to care for his sick child, he turns to the community leader for support. Despite having the means to assist, the leader hesitates, citing recent personal expenses and fearing the man's inability to repay. The leader is conflicted, recognizing the potential impact on his standing within the community.	This dilemma revolves around the cultural mandate to support those in need (solidarity) (p), believed to be negatively affected by the learning of non-indigenous values, versus the desire not to lose one's own money (v).
The change money	The head of an Awajún family is attempting to sell bananas to both indigenous and Hispanic buyers. A Hispanic man mistakenly pays S/. 50.00 instead of S/. 20.00 for two bunches. The seller notices but chooses not to return the extra money, justifying it with the belief that Hispanics have historically taken advantage of indigenous people. The individual is conflicted because, although he understands his community's disapproval of cunning and theft, he finds no reason to feel guilty.	This dilemma involves doing the right thing (returning the change) (p) or not doing it because Hispanics have always abused indigenous people (p). In other words, the dilemma shows different ways of understanding justice.

Table 3

Shipibo-Konibo's moral dilemmas

Dilemma	Dilemma Summary	Values/principles at conflict
The yoashi man	In Shipibo-Konibo culture, families traditionally embody solidarity by sharing possessions and providing mutual assistance. A person who hoards belongings and refuses to share is labelled as <i>yoashi</i> , meaning stingy, and is socially rejected by the community. When such an individual comes to visit, a family contemplates deceiving and expelling them from the house due to their perceived meanness and lack of generosity. However, they are doubting because they are afraid that if they do, other families in the community will know and will consider them bad people.	This dilemma involves a conflict between resorting to deception to expel an individual due to their perceived stinginess and selfishness (v), versus not doing so in order to keep a good image in the community (v).
A fight between women	Two women are going to physically fight over a man (the husband of one, who has the other as a lover), and one of them is considering using a secret powerful plant to weaken her opponent and win the fight, but she has doubts because that plant could seriously harm her rival.	This dilemma addresses a conflict between means and ends—the desire to win a fight that the person considers fair (v), using a means that can harm her rival (p).
The couple in love	A woman falls in love, but her parents are aware that the person she has chosen is lazy and doesn't like to work, which could affect their daughter's well-being. Consequently, they oppose the union of the couple. Undeterred, the lovers decide to escape from home. Concerned for their daughter's well-being, the parents contemplate seeking the services of a shaman who possesses the power to separate them.	This dilemma revolves around the conflict between the parents' duty to protect their daughter (p) and the duty to respect her decision and freedom (p).

Dilemma	Dilemma Summary	Values/principles at conflict
The Meraya dilemma	José, a Shipibo man with healing powers based on medicinal plants, has ceased his healing activities after converting to an evangelical church. The church considers traditional plant healing sinful and against God's commandments. When a woman arrives with her seriously ill one-year-old baby, José informs her that he can no longer provide healing due to his religious conversion. Faced with the dilemma of the baby's imminent death and the absence of another healer in the area, José grapples with the decision of whether to resume his healing activities in this critical situation or prioritize his religious beliefs.	This dilemma tackles the conflict between saving a life (p) and not doing so, adhering to one's own personal religious beliefs (v).
The two cousins	A man catches several species of fish. When his cousin asks him where he had fished, the man mentions a different place because he doesn't want his cousin to be considered as good a fisherman as him. When the cousin realizes he has been deceived, he becomes very upset and contemplates confronting him publicly. However, he fears that if he makes this public, his cousin will be seen as a liar or selfish, which is not appreciated in Shipibo culture, and he will not be welcome in the community.	In this dilemma, the value of exposing a deception that could impact the deceiving person's reputation (v) is weighed against keeping it private to protect their image (v).

The dilemmas illustrated in the tables underscore the clashes among conflicting principles and values. However, it's important to note that some dilemmas pit principles against other principles, some pit values against other values, and others confront principles against values. To comprehend the dynamics of these dilemmas, it's crucial to clearly define the distinction between principles and values.

In essence, both principles and values serve as ethical guidelines that help answer the question: “What is my obligation in this particular situation?” However, principles are primarily formal, universal, and more general than values (Habermas, 1990). Examples of principles include justice and fairness. Conversely, values possess a substantive nature and are closely tied to the social context, as what is deemed valuable varies based on the individuals within a specific culture. Examples of values encompass homeland, community, family, and beauty, among others. The emphasis on the social character of values allows us to articulate the philosophical difference with the proposal of domain theory, which understands moral principles as “prescriptive principles concerning others” such as welfare, rights, equality, fairness, and justice (Killen & Dahl, 2021, pp. 2–3)

Drawing on Turiel’s (1983) domain theory, it can be inferred that values are more oriented towards elements within the conventional domain (for instance, being a socially recognized hunter), while principles are linked to elements specific to the moral domain (for instance, justice, welfare, and rights). Therefore, when a dilemma presents a scenario where a value is in conflict with a principle, the ethical decision typically involves prioritizing the principle over the value.

In analyzing the three tables, we can discern that the moral dilemmas presented by the participants delve into a range of issues pertinent to their daily lives. Given their familiarity with small, close-knit communities characterized by face-to-face interactions and strong kinship ties, notions of self-image and prestige carry significant weight. Many of the dilemmas center around these themes, reflecting the protagonists’ keen concern for recognition within their community. Regardless of context, individuals universally seek acknowledgment from their peers, although the means and contexts for obtaining it may differ. For instance, in a Western urban milieu, professional competence garners esteem akin to the respect accorded to skilled hunters in small Amazonian communities. This discrepancy in activities highlights not only a difference but also underscores the nuanced significance attached to recognition within diverse environments.

In an urban setting, the absence of recognition in one sphere may be compensated for by acknowledgment in another, illustrating the adaptability of individuals to seek validation in various domains. This differs from smaller Amazonian communities, where collectivist cultures prioritize interdependence and relational attributes, such as social roles and status (Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). However, despite these general observations serving as broad characterizations to contextualize the presented dilemmas, it's essential to acknowledge the inherent diversity within and between cultures, even though this characteristic may impose less flexibility in people's roles.

Within Asháninka communities, akin to other Amazonian indigenous groups, hunting prowess holds considerable significance, evident in several of the collected dilemmas. Specifically, among the Asháninka, hunting has long been regarded as a distinctly masculine pursuit. Similarly, fishing is also traditionally considered a masculine activity within Asháninka culture and many other Amazonian indigenous peoples. Consequently, being acknowledged as a proficient fisherman or hunter holds considerable significance, with expertise in using arrows often valued more than proficiency in using traps. The dilemma "The Fake Hunter" addresses this issue.

Being a good person holds significant importance for Amazonian indigenous peoples, as their indigenous identities are often intertwined with the values upheld within their communities. For example, embodying the qualities of a *jakon joni*, or a good Shipibo, entails possessing a specific set of ideal characteristics, including a willingness to share, collaborate, and offer support, all of which are highly valued (Delgado, 2016; Espinosa, 2012). Conversely, being perceived as mean or selfish (referred to as *yoashi*) is strongly rejected among the Shipibo-Konibo. This rejection is underscored by the mythical tradition of the good Inca (Cori Inka) and the bad Inca (Yoashico Inka), which is widely known among members of these indigenous communities. The good Inca is a civilizing character who shares with human beings the benefits of culture such as drinking, cultivation, or fire, while the bad

Inca is characterized by being a hoarder, petty, and not sharing with human beings what he possesses (Bertrand-Ricoveri, 2010; Bertrand-Rousseau, 1984). This tradition serves to emphasize the significance of these ideals within their cultural framework, as exemplified in the dilemma “The Yoashi Man.”

Due to space constraints, the subsequent paragraphs will delve into three dilemmas: one from the Asháninka people, one from the Awajun people, and one from the Shipibo-Konibo people. Each dilemma will be presented in detail, followed by an analysis of the specific cultural context to provide a comprehensive understanding of its nuances.

The sachavaca hunter (Asháninka dilemma)

Every week José hunts a sachavaca (tapir), which is not easy and demands many skills. He hunts so often that visitors wonder why José hunts a sachavaca every week. One day Mateo went to visit José to ask him for the piri-piri to hunt the sachavaca. Mateo said, “I want you to give me the piri-piri to hunt sachavaca the way you do!” But José replied, “I do not know any piri-piri for hunting sachavaca. I hunt them at the colpas.” Mateo insisted, but José categorically denied it. So, Mateo was thinking of preparing masato for José, to make him drunk. Mateo’s wife prepared masato in a small cosho. In about three days, when the masato was ready, Mateo told his wife he would give a lot of masato to José until he was drunk, so he would declare and give him the secret piri-piri to hunt a sachavaca. Will it be good to get the person drunk to teach us their knowledge?

Specific cultural context for this dilemma:

The lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*), commonly known as the “sachavaca” in Peru, is the largest land mammal in the Amazon basin. Tapirs are hunted by indigenous people in the forest due to their availability and nutritional value, making them a significant protein source in many regions.

Colpa refers to a location with groundwater and salt, where animals gather to drink and eat in herds. Cosho is a vessel made from the trunk of a tree where masato is prepared. Masato is a fermented drink made from yuca, also known as cassava or manioc. Among the Asháninkas, social relations often involve partaking in masato (masateada), an activity closely associated with welcoming neighbors. The process of making masato begins with going to the farm to harvest the yuca, which can be done individually or as a group involving several women. Once back at home, the yuca is peeled, washed, and chopped before being boiled. After cooking, the yuca is mashed until it forms a thick paste. The following steps are crucial: as the yuca is mashed, part of the dough is chewed and then returned to the pot to ferment. This task is typically assigned to adolescent girls and younger women. Depending on the fermentation period, the resulting beverage can vary between the taste of sweet yoghurt and that of an intoxicating beer.

Hunting stands as a primary activity for the Asháninka people, crucial for their sustenance. Embedded within the Asháninka worldview is the belief that animals are akin to relatives or allies, underscoring the profound interconnection fostered by Asháninka individuals with their natural surroundings. Historically, certain animals were deemed sacred, their killing forbidden. However, in contemporary times, scarcity of meat and pressing needs have compelled some individuals to hunt these sacred animals despite traditional prohibitions (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, 2012).

In this scenario, it's noted that due to the tapir being a large animal requiring skillful hunting, the character assumes that the hunter uses an herb, *piri piri*, to enhance strength and skill. *Piri-piri*, known as *Ibenki* in the Asháninka language, belongs to the *Cyperaceae* plant family, which encompasses about 36 genera and approximately 128 species of *Cyperus*. Indigenous peoples of the Amazon region attribute magical properties to *piri-piri*.

As it is crucial for him to uncover the hunter's secret, and since the hunter refuses to share his knowledge—a very important cultural

value for the Asháninka people—the character in the story contemplates resorting to deception, namely, coercing the individual into doing something he does not wish to do by using masato to induce unconsciousness. The situation constitutes a dilemma because, for the Asháninka people, the correct thing to do to be a good Asháninka is to share their belongings and their knowledge (Rojas, 1994, p. 237). Not doing so goes against deep cultural values. However, even though sharing is a deep cultural value, they still perceive a conflict between it and a moral principle because the Asháninka know it is not right to force someone to do something they do not want to do, especially not by resorting to intoxication. Taking such actions infringes upon individuals' freedom and autonomy.

Returning home (Awajún dilemma)

Mr. Tuyas, a teacher and family provider, returns empty-handed from a hunting trip. While tying his canoe, he sees a large fish called gamitana caught on a fishing hook that belongs to a humble father in his community. The hook is on the verge of breaking, and the fish might escape. Mr. Tuyas faces a dilemma: take the fish home to feed his family or give it to the father who owns the hook. Mr. Tuyas faces pressure to provide meat for his family's meal to maintain his image as a reliable provider. If he returns empty-handed, his wife might label him Pagkiakachu or afañil implying he is lacking and unreliable, potentially eroding his role as the family's provider and protector. Taking the fish could preserve his image as a provider, but he recognizes the rightful owner's need. Should he take the gamitana fish home to share with his family, or should he give it to the father, the owner of the fishing hook? Why?

Specific cultural context for this dilemma

This dilemma presents many cultural elements. The scientific name of the gamitana is *colossoma macropomum*; it is a tropical fish native to the Amazon and Orinoco river basins and is a popular food

among indigenous peoples. It is an omnivorous fish that feeds on vegetation or small aquatic organisms. It is recognized by its color, which varies from silver-grey to dark brown. This fish is highly desired as food by those who catch it, as it can measure up to 1.5 meters and weigh 40 kilograms, boasting nutritious and tasty meat.

Pagkiakachu is a character from an Awajún story (refer to: "Ancestral Stories of the Awajún People: Tales, Myths, and Legends", Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2019). Pagkiakachu was neither skilled nor lucky in hunting animals. It is said that Pagkiakachu was an *afasil* person in the art of hunting wild animals. *Afasil* is a colloquial term meaning a bad fisherman or useless in Amazonian Spanish, a Spanish dialect.

The traditional Amazonian tale recounts that one day Pagkiakachu asked his mother to prepare some cassava for lunch and informed her that he would hunt a monkey to accompany the meal. Upon entering the forest, he encountered a herd of monkeys and, purely by luck, managed to hunt one using a poisonous blowgun. However, aware of his lack of skill in hunting, he decided not to bring the monkey home. Instead, he paraded with the dead monkey in front of the houses of the women in his community. He then left the dead monkey in a container of water near his house and collected it day after day to give the impression of being a great hunter to the single women in his community. One day, a lady approached Pagkiakachu's mother to inquire if her son was single and if he could marry her daughter, as she considered Pagkiakachu a great monkey hunter. However, Pagkiakachu's mother revealed to the lady that her son had never caught a monkey. When confronted, Pagkiakachu, filled with shame, had to show the ladies the already rotten monkey that he had been parading.

To fully grasp the complexity of this dilemma, it is essential to recognize several factors: Firstly, the conflict arising from stealing other people's work, which generates distress for an Awajún, as in the case of the fishing product (the *gamitana*) produced by another member of the community. Secondly, the strong aversion to being perceived as a poor provider, akin to being a Pagkiakachu in one's own eyes and in

the eyes of others. This directly contradicts the deeply cherished values prevailing among the Awajún people and other Amazonian indigenous communities. It is important to highlight that although these are very important and deep communal values that form Awajun identity, especially masculinity, the dilemma still arises for Awajun people when these cherished social and cultural values conflict with a moral perspective. In this manner, it becomes apparent that this dilemma embodies a conflict between the social value of being acknowledged as a good provider and the moral principle of appropriating other people's belongings.

A fight between women (Shipibo-Konibo dilemma)

A woman finds out that her partner is with another woman and decides to confront her by hitting her, in a tradition called chobeo. However, she knows that the other woman is strong and can overpower her. She is unsure whether to physically confront her or simply address the situation through conversation. If she does nothing, her partner will likely continue the relationship with the other woman. So, she decides to use a secret remedy (a tuber, known as "taya" in Shipibo) to weaken her rival with plants. In the ensuing fight, the wife emerges victorious, leaving onlookers astonished and murmuring, "She must have used some secret; it can cause harm." People begin to wonder if it is acceptable to resort to secret remedies to defeat someone instead of relying on one's own strength. Is it good to solve the problem of infidelity with violence? Why? Is the strategy employed by the woman good? Why? Should she have resorted to this kind of practice? Why?

Specific cultural context for this dilemma

The primary festival of the Shipibo-Konibo people was Ani Xeati, which encompassed a series of transition rites lasting several days. Among its various components were competitions of strength and combat. For instance, instances of jealousy or infidelity would often lead to confrontations where women would pull each other's hair, a practice known as bachinananai in the Shipibo language (Ruiz, 2016).

Although Ani Xeati is no longer practised, the tradition of chobeo persists, as exemplified by the testimony of Agustina Varela, a renowned Shipibo-Konibo artisan (Valenzuela & Varela, 2005, p. 101). She recounts how her niece was “chobeadá”, meaning she was attacked by having her hair pulled by another woman who had been involved with the niece’s husband, resulting in a physical altercation between them, albeit not within the ritual context of Ani Xeati. It is crucial to highlight that although this is a commonplace practice in contemporary times, it does not imply approval. The normalisation of a practice does not preclude it from being subject to scrutiny or sanctions. In Agustina Varela’s testimony, it is recounted how, following the chobeo, community authorities imprisoned the woman who initiated the altercation and later, when she attacked Varela’s niece again, demanded an apology from her.

This ethnographic contextualization is imperative for comprehending the dilemma and the various conflicts it presents. First, the protagonist’s attempt to “chobear” her romantic rival serves as a culturally ingrained mechanism for addressing conflict within the couple. However, as previously indicated, this mechanism is simultaneously normalised and questioned, leading to a dilemma that questions the morality of resolving an issue of infidelity using a culturally rooted practice involving physical violence. Nonetheless, the dilemma has further complexities. One of them is the inquiry into whether it is morally permissible to utilise a resource that “may cause harm” to diminish the strength of the female rival, understanding this harm to be more serious than that caused by the chobeo. Inflicting severe harm thus implicates the moral domain, representing an ethical principle rather than merely a value. Lastly, another facet of the dilemma pertains to whether it is just or unjust to gain an undue advantage within a cultural practice (the “chobeo”). This involves a principle akin to doping in Western sports competitions.

Conclusions

The results of this study highlight the complex interplay between universal and culturally specific aspects of moral experience, demonstrating that Amazonian Indigenous peoples encounter moral dilemmas within the framework of their own cultural values and traditions. While these dilemmas are shaped by distinct cultural perspectives, their underlying structure parallels that of Western moral dilemmas, eliciting similar internal conflict and turmoil. This finding reinforces the universality of moral experience, even as it is molded by diverse cultural contexts. For instance, the need for social recognition is evident in both Indigenous and Western societies. However, in Western contexts, individuals often navigate multiple social environments, allowing them to seek recognition across different settings. In contrast, smaller Indigenous communities, where mobility is more restricted, constitute a person's entire social world, making communal recognition more central to one's identity. This dynamic helps explain why the inability to fulfill the role of a good provider emerges as a significant source of moral conflict in many of the dilemmas discussed.

This challenges both relativistic interpretations of morality (Williams, 1972) and the common perception of indigenous cultures as entirely distinct from the West, with ethical principles seen as exclusively Western constructs (see for instance Carmona Caldera, 2009; Garzón López, 2013; Varese, 2018). As other studies have shown (Delgado & Frisancho, 2021; Frisancho & Delgado, 2017, 2014), indigenous Amazonian populations exhibit, albeit to varying degrees, a concern for justice and engage in critical analysis of their cultural practices through a moral lens.

Second, our research reveals that moral reasoning does not necessitate the abandonment of one's culturally rooted informational assumptions. As we can see in the dilemmas provided by the participants, strong cultural beliefs and traditions are embedded in these stories. Consequently, this study contributes to the body of literature that explores the diverse moral conflicts and dilemmas existing within a

single culture (Frisancho & Delgado, 2017; Killen et al., 2015; Turiel, 2002; Wainryb, 2006).

Based on the conclusions of our study, we suggest that integrating the moral dilemmas encountered in the daily lives of Indigenous communities into the school curriculum and adult educational programs is essential, as these dilemmas provide valuable, culturally relevant material for moral reflection. In Peru, this need is particularly urgent given the absence of moral and citizenship education programs specifically designed for Indigenous populations (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2013, 2016).

The primary objective of engaging with moral dilemmas in education is to cultivate essential moral and democratic competencies, such as the ability to uphold shared moral principles even in the face of opposition—whether from majority opinions, traditions, prejudice, abusive authority, or personal challenges like apathy or discouragement. While conventional wisdom and many educational programs frame moral development as socialization into prevailing values and norms, it is essential for both children and adults to learn to distinguish between social conventions and principles of justice. This distinction enables them to critically analyze and challenge unjust social structures rather than passively conforming to them.

An educational approach that prioritizes mere assimilation into societal norms risks perpetuating existing inequalities and injustices. Thus, intercultural education must include moral education—but a moral education that resists reductionism and essentialism (Frisancho & Delgado, 2018).

For future research in this area, it will be important to broaden the participant pool to include not only individuals from Indigenous communities with higher levels of formal education, as in the present study, but also those with more limited educational attainment or no formal schooling. The relatively narrow composition of the sample constitutes the principal limitation of this study.

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Recibido: 22/04/2025

Revisado: 16/03/2026

Aceptado: 04/04/2026