

Coexistence in Kay Pacha:

Rethinking Leadership through Andean Indigenous Practices

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Andean Cross, or Chakana, is a significant symbol in Ecuadorian culture, representing complementarity and duality. Each direction of the cross corresponds to one of the four fundamental forces of the natural world. The east, where the sun rises, signifies fire. The west represents water as its counterpart. The fertile land of the south symbolizes earth, while the north stands for wind. We gathered materials from the lands surrounding our community, such as grass, flowers, water, and fire, to assemble our own version of the Chakana. Afterwards, a festive celebration took place. We formed a tight circle to stomp our feet around the cross in harmony with the music. However, we were not merely dancing. We were performing an obligation to Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), notifying her of our presence. As the music played and I looked around at the faces of my peers and the locals, I came to the realization that leadership is about circular connection, not a lone climb to the top.

The Leadership in Action (LiA) program in Ecuador was a meaningful exercise in examining my Westernized worldview and readjusting my approach towards future goals. According to the Gallup CliftonStrengths report, my talents are characterized as Intellection, Input, Deliberative, Relator, and Harmony. I have always navigated the world by building deep, one-on-one relationships. My specialty has been gathering detailed information that is easy to overlook and analyzing situations from multiple angles. This approach led me to pursue personal depth and precision while offering tailored guidance to individual members. On the other hand, it meant that my leadership was often exercised through individuals than through the collective.

The Andean philosophy, specifically the revelation that the fundamental unit of the universe is not an individual but relationships, encouraged me to reflect on the very core of my mechanism. Through this essay, I plan to revisit my top strengths identified in the CliftonStrengths report to assess how my application of these strengths has improved with the LiA program.

My strength in Input indulges me to collect perspectives and knowledge, while Intellection compels me to process them into meaningful insights. On our second day in Quito, the cohort visited the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado, which housed Pre-Columbian artifacts organized around Indigenous Andean worldviews. Unlike the Western Christian cosmology that rigidly divides existence into heaven, earth, and hell, Ecuadorians' interpretations of the realms stem from continuity and reciprocity. What struck me most was a sculptural representation of this worldview. Presented as a cube, this six-sided structure held four vertical faces symbolizing earthly masculinity and femininity, with the top face representing the celestial realm and the bottom face the underworld. When the sculpture is rotated, the distinctions between male and female, ancestor and deity no longer exist. Rather, they become a single harmonious whole.

Ukhu Pacha, the underworld, is understood as the realm of the ancestors not as a site of punishment, intimately tied to the living world of Kay Pacha. The Kay Pacha exhibition had interwoven roots extending from Ukhu Pacha, reinforcing the idea that the worlds are entangled without certain hierarchies. The final exhibition presented Hanaq Pacha, the celestial world. The space was filled with ever-growing plants, once again evoking a sense of continuity. In this cosmology, the universe and humanity, humans and nonhumans, life and death, gods and people, the organic and the inorganic are mutually corresponding forces. The fundamental unit of existence is not the independent, self-contained entity, but the relationship itself (Apgar et al.,

2009, p.261). Elements that appear oppositional, such as sky and earth, sun and shadow, day and night, masculinity and femininity, are understood as complementary forces that sustain balance.

As a leader, this knowledge prompted me to reevaluate my previous knowledge which has been heavily influenced by individualism. I realized that independently tending to my team members was a flawed approach. We are shaped by our relationships, similar to how the sun needs the shadow to define light. This breakthrough taught me that effective leadership requires understanding the invisible web of reciprocity that binds a community together.

My third strength, Deliberation, was reinforced when I engaged in a Critical Moment Dialogue on religion. One insightful conversation between an indigenous Ecuadorian and our program facilitator, Daniel, has provoked this dialogue. The Ecuadorian shared, “I don’t believe in God but I am not an atheist.” “How is that possible?” Daniel asked. The response came, “Do you know your mother?” Daniel replied, “Yes.” The indigenous person countered, “But do you believe your mother,” asking if he had religious faith in his mother. Daniel answered, “No.” The response held profound wisdom of the Andean culture. “Exactly, I know God, but I do not believe in God.”

To acknowledge the existence of God yet choosing not to worship him challenged my Christian understanding of religion. The Andean people deeply respect Pacha Mama, the Mother Earth. When entering natural spaces such as mountains or waterfalls, one is expected to ask for permission from the spirits that inhabit them by offering fruits or flowers as gestures of gratitude. However, these practices are distinct from religious rituals of Western Christianity. While Nature lives alongside the Andean people and is honored, it is not worshipped as an omnipotent moral authority that demands faith from its followers. This significant difference between worship and

respect compelled me to question my natural acceptance of the Christian worldview that permeates the Western world.

If an omnipotent, all-knowing God exists, prayers become one-directional pleas. Followers of god often request prosperity and blessings to a being of absolute power. This hierarchical relationship is in contrast with the Andean belief that humankind coexists with the divine, occupying the same natural space. Unlike Catholic traditions that emphasize dedicating one's life to God, the Andean people appreciate Pacha Mama as children who are grateful to their mother, with the attitude of responsibility and care, not absolute submission. Significantly, nature is not external to humanity. Humans are understood as fragments of fire, water, and stars, which shows the penetrating insight that we are composed of the same elements as nature. Eventually, we are comprised of everything, and everything is comprised of us. Nature is humanity.

This newfound consciousness induced me to reflect on the anthropocentrism embedded in Christianity and Western culture. According to the biblical explanation of creation, humans were created on the last day to be presented as the most significant beings on earth. Other forms of life, from animals to insects, are considered morally inferior as they are unable to reach heaven. Christianity's role as an ideological foundation for environmental exploitation and colonization is clear. When scripture positions humans as intellectually and morally superior, the justification of the belief that nature exists to be developed and used for human benefit is strengthened. Western philosophers such as John Locke specifically bolster this logic by invoking God. He argues that it is humankind's obligation in fulfilling God's will to cultivate the land and mix labor to the earth, which becomes the foundation for property rights (Locke, 1689, p.21). This reasoning was later mobilized to justify colonial expansion, due to the narrow definition of humankind that excludes people of color.

Looking into the agricultural practices of Amazonian communities, I gained another significant lesson in leadership. My host father in Mushulaktah would cultivate crops with the expectation that wild birds and animals would share the harvest. A bird pecking at cacao fruits or a monkey taking the plantain produce is not considered theft. He believed that such occurrences are natural consequences of shared existence and that the land's yield belongs to all who inhabit it. I learned a valuable lesson that abundance is not secured through accumulation but through relational balance. Leadership is not rooted in hierarchy or control but emerges from coexistence and reciprocity.

In the final section of the essay, I plan to review my strength of Harmony to reflect on its redirection through the LiA program. The injustice that I have encountered in Ecuador, particularly the environmental devastation caused by oil companies in the Amazon, shows what a society lacking harmony looks like in gritty reality. Not only have the polluted rivers and contaminated land caused severe health issues, but they have deprived communities in Lago Agrio of the ability to sustain themselves. Traditional medicinal plants and fish that have enabled indigenous people to thrive are no longer available, while corporate-manufactured products and systems are imposed on them. Relationships between people and the land have been destroyed.

Visiting Lago Agrio pushed me to reconsider what Harmony actually asks of a leader. I have long understood harmony as the ability to ease tension and enable smooth teamwork. However, learning about the works of activists against Big Oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon led me to recognize how avoiding conflicts can engender silence that allows injustices to continue. The suffering of indigenous communities is repeatedly pushed aside by corporate and governmental interests. In this context, pursuing harmony must take the form of directly facing the imbalance and refusing to accept a version of peace that depends on erasure, not the absence of friction.

Witnessing hope in the Mushulaktah community and Lago Agrio activists has reaffirmed my commitment to pursuing justice through action. Mushulaktah is a small Quechua community committed to preserving ancestral knowledge and practicing sustainable permaculture farming. Although limited in size, its successful operation imbues hope and tangible efficacy for community-based organizations. The activists of the Amazon are relentless in documenting the truth despite ongoing threats. Although their efforts with court rulings and international attention have not resulted in clear land and water in the Amazon, these acts keep memories alive.

I come to rethink leadership to be grounded in coexistence. Coexistence is an active commitment to responsibility and care. It resonates with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 15, Life on Land, which calls not only for environmental protection but for the preservation of communities whose lives are inseparable from their ecosystems. Moving forward, my goal is to act where I stand, to amplify voices, to remain in relationship, and to practice leadership that refuses to retreat into comfort or silence. If leadership has a direction, it is not upward, but outward, toward coexistence as a lived, ethical practice.

References

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