

Chapter 16

Mystical Tourism in the Las Huaringas Lagoon Complex (Peru): Rituals That Evoke Meaning

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ABSTRACT

*This research addressed mystical tourism in the complex of 14 lagoons called “Las Huaringas” in the Piura region of Peru, particularly at Laguna Negra (the most visited) and Laguna Shimbe (the largest). These practices are widely embraced by the local population, as well as national and international visitors. The research design was phenomenological, and information was collected through semi-structured interviews with 65 participants. To protect the identity of each participant, the collected information was classified and processed using a code as follows: S (shaman), R (local resident), PTD (public transport drivers), T (tourist), LG (local government), and a number (1,2,3...) according to the order of data collection. Additionally, field observation and participant observation of the interaction between healers and participants at the lagoons were used. Field observations at Laguna Negra were conducted from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. This allowed for the identification of shamans from Huancabamba, various parts of Peru, and foreign countries, along with tourists and participants in diverse rituals. The complete immersion in the natural environment of the lagoons, participation in flowering rituals (including bathing in the lagoons), and ingestion of San Pedro (*Echinopsis pachanoi*) and other psychoactive beverages allowed for experiencing the ritual as both tourists and residents do, thereby acquiring a profound understanding of the study. Data collection ceased once information saturation was reached. After transcribing the interviews, they were analyzed using axial coding. Information triangulation was employed by cross-*

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referencing data obtained from field observations and interviews. The results showed that tourists' search for local cultural expressions, the hope for physical or spiritual healing, and the fulfillment of personal goals and desires generate the meanings they assign to the Huancabamba rituals. The healers play the role of mediators in the quest to achieve the participants' personal objectives, promoting faith in the Christian God and His saints, as they attribute part of their powers of intersection and healing to them. The results regarding the perspective of the residents on mystical tourism in Huancabamba were twofold: on the one hand, they recognize the benefits to the local economy and the healing of illnesses thanks to the medicinal properties of the plants. On the other hand, they highlight the distortion of shamanic practice with the presence of fraudulent healers who take advantage of tourists' needs.

INTRODUCTION

Mystical tourism focuses on spiritual experiences, self-discovery, connecting with nature, and learning about diverse cultures. This reflects the deep human desire to find meaning and transcendence in authentic cultural expressions (Sa, 2024; Shirmohammadi & Abyaran, 2019). Notable examples include the village of “Huasao” in Cusco, known as “the village of healers,” where healers and priests perform various types of rituals for tourists (Pancorbo & Zárata, 2015). In England, mystical tourism is drawn to the legend of the Loch Ness Monster and the summer solstice rituals at Stonehenge (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, Georgian mythology enriches tourists' connection with nature and culture (Piranashvili & Kadagidze, 2016). In summary, mystical tourism globally highlights the importance that cultures place on the ancestral and spiritual, preserving and transmitting their cultural identity through unique experiences for visitors.

In the northern coast of Peru, communities such as Salas, Túcume, or Morropón have traditions of healing and divination practices in rural population centers (Heyerdahl et al., 1996; Joralemon, 1986). According to Praet (2009), healers in these areas conduct rituals with songs accompanied by instruments such as rattles or silver bells, and pre-Columbian ceramics (called “huacos”), creating an authentic ritual atmosphere. These rituals take place on a “mesa” or altar, which serves as a cosmic map for the healer, allowing them to control the ceremony and guide each participant's ritualized experience (Przytomska, 2017). Academically, there are studies on the tradition and worldview of healing practices in Peru, exploring the ritualistic role of objects, sacred spaces, and the therapeutic value of hallucinogenic effects from medicinal plants. The symbolic value of ancestral utensils and the presence of Christianity in healing practices have been extensively analyzed (Joralemon, 1984, 1993; León, 2019; Oseguera, 2008; Polia, 1995). However, the perception of these ritual experiences by tourists has yet to be investigated.

Visitors can access mystical tourism in Huancabamba either as active participants by scheduling their visit and paying to experience the rituals or simply as observers of public rituals. The 14 lagoons designated exclusively for shamanic rituals in this region provide a mystical environment that enriches the tourist experience and offers a deeper understanding of the residents' cultural traditions. This book chapter analyzed the travel experience of tourists who participated in healing rituals in Huancabamba. It specifically evaluated the construction of ritual meaning, the role of healers and the role of the lagoons as sacred spaces for ritual use.

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