



# Unlocking Silent Histories in Perú: Confronting colonization

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We would like to acknowledge that this piece honors a shift in research. Namely, it celebrates Indigenous methodologies that include centering Indigenous voices, ensuring that Indigenous communities benefit from the research, and providing equity in presentation and purpose. To that point, Lised and Ruben are lead authors who certify local authorization of the research. Thank you, Lised and Ruben, for co-analyzing and co-writing this piece. Without your contributions and knowledge, we would not be able to accurately share this story.

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Cover photo by Blake Wiggs.



# Abstract

Throughout global history, settler-colonizers have suppressed Indigenous voices and villainized Indigenous communities. The process of colonization has forced assimilation, language loss, and land displacement. Colonizing efforts have also been complicit in projecting destructive misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples. This case study examines a moment in the 2021 adoption of Unlocking Silent Histories (USH) in Perú. Specifically, it focuses on an event of two Indigenous youth leaders who inspire teams of young people to reclaim and revitalize the cultures and heritage and foster cross-generational and cross-cultural conversations. Through co-analysis and co-writing, we present emerging themes from their dialogue. We assert that these themes evidence culturally sustaining pedagogical engagements and highlight how USH contributes to ongoing transformative and decolonizing efforts.

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Lised and Ruben at an archaeological site in Q'eros. Photo by Donna DeGennaro.

## Introduction

Ruben and Lised stand 13,123 feet above sea level. The clouds roll in, seemingly embracing the two young adults. Lised, excited to share her knowledge of the land, smiles and asks, "Have you heard of the Amazon sea?" She describes the rise of the clouds, originating from the Amazon basin and carrying water to nourish the land. The light and the playful conversation quickly turn serious as Lised asks Ruben the significance of this archaeological site. Ruben isn't sure; he is grappling with making sense of a history that has been hidden from him for most of his 26 years.

Lised, on the other hand, has spent the last five of her 20 years studying the Quechua history from Román Vizcarra, the director of Ñawpa Ñan in Taray. A natural teacher and a passionate and proud Indigenous woman, Lised offers her understanding of the Inca ruins surrounding us. Her "lecture" turns into an impassioned monologue illuminating ways Indigenous communities have been suppressed and misrepresented. She describes the villainization of Quechua people within the education system, among exploitative tourist appropriations, and amidst oppressive government practices and policies Lised and Ruben come from the same macro culture, yet unique microcultures. Ruben was born in Chua Chua, one of the five annexes of the Q'eros Nation.



Lised grew up in Mesarumiyoq, a community in the Amazon region of Peru. The two have similar desires for their future, including Andean spirituality and respect for mother nature. Both project the valuable contributions of Peru's Indigenous inhabitants. The nuances of their lived realities could not have been more visible than when the two young leaders challenge one another as they engage in critical discourse regarding the effects of colonization on their communities.

Taking on leadership roles in Unlocking Silent Histories (USH) brought about this opportunity and space for these two young leaders living hours apart to come together and grapple with reality by interrogating the differences in their lived experiences, interpretations, and emotions.

## Program Overview

Unlocking Silent Histories (USH) is a program created to accelerate digital equity by equipping young leaders with the tools to facilitate a technology-enabled, youth-driven learning engagement that culminates in youth-produced documentary shorts. USH provides a leadership and curriculum toolkit that young people can adapt culturally and linguistically in their communities. This program benefits all of us because the documentaries that Indigenous youth create highlight the past, present, and future knowledge and contributions that ancestral wisdom offers to heal our world. Between 2012 and 2020, USH worked alongside Indigenous youth in Guatemala and the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina to develop a curriculum and leadership toolkit that is flexible and adaptable (USH, 2020). As the process unfolds, organizers of USH listen to and learn from youth, who illuminate what culturally responsive and socially just learning looks like in their context.

USH and its Indigenous collaborators have an explicit interest in generating leadership, education, technology, and cultural documentary modules best to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the community. Together, USH solidified foundational yet flexible principles. The pedagogy incorporates underrepresented youth voices into learning design to show what youth know and how they learn.





Lised working with Besabeth in Amaru. Photo by Melissa Kepen.

Focusing on framing education within the local context, USH’s curriculum and leadership toolkit depart from deficit approaches to Indigenous education. The grassroots approach positions young people as authorities of their learning and expression.

The USH toolkit consists of activities that foster video ethnography skills. Leveraging technology as a tool for investigations, youth document and illuminate Indigenous knowledge systems, heritage, and resilience. This video ethnography approach is organic, allowing stories to emerge from the context. Foregrounding local actor(s) in video ethnography becomes a form of “visual sovereignty,” centering on observations and insights of one’s natural surroundings from within the social context (Streeck & Mehus, 2005).

To further ensure that local voices and knowledge drive the process, USH employs youth leaders. These leaders draw from a curriculum and leadership toolkit to facilitate workshops after co-constructing the program vision,



adjusting activity language and examples, and considering the best forms of engagement. Leaders and young storytellers become co-researchers to inform and revise the implementation of the program. Participants assert that USH illuminates moments of sovereignty, agency, social inclusion, and healing as emergent from this community-connected and youth-directed approach to learning.

## Foundational Principles

1. Local voice and knowledge are foundational to authentic learning,
2. Community-connected themes inspire critical and creative expression, and
3. The capacity of youth to direct their own learning and author their own stories



Pisac Group Working on Theme Development. Photo by Blake Wiggs





# Design Process

The process begins with identifying youth leaders and introducing them to the USH toolkit. Leadership workshops include opportunities for the youth to define leadership, craft a vision and purpose for the program, and practice learning activities.

## Invite/Prepare



We receive invitations from community partners. These local stakeholders identify youth leaders who receive production kits and begin to culturally and linguistically adapt the curriculum materials. Mutual visioning and decision-making immediately create a distributed leadership structure.

## Engage/Implement



Next, youth leaders recruit young people in their communities and begin engaging them in critical media literacy, technology skill development that leads to youth selecting themes, interviewing elders, and finding the emerging stories.

## Debrief/Refine



Regular check-ins bring to the surface nuances to implementing the curriculum. Through ongoing reflexivity, confronting, and navigating power structures that inhibit or enable youth participation. Together we co-analyze our process highlighting emerging patterns that assist in making necessary refinements.

## Release / Re-engage



We cultivate the leadership skills that youth need to continue the program upon their exit. Our Indigenous youth partners become lifelong collaborators in our emerging global network. and remaining connected via a virtual platform, which provides a space to share and discuss films.



Q'eros Nation. Photo by Kaylan Ganus

## Situating the Case Study

During the month of April, Lised and Ruben began their leadership roles. They met on weekends to review and begin adapting the curriculum. Lised selected media content, while Ruben focused on facilitating workshops in Quechua. The nuanced visions they created centered on the communities in which they would work.

### *Ñawpa Ñan Cultural Center*

The Ñawpa Ñan Cultural Center in Pisac is a project connected to the Kusi Kawsay school, a member of the UNESCO Associated Schools, grounded in Waldorf pedagogy and Andean values. Ñawpa Ñan means 'Ancient Path' in Quechua and serves as the strong foundation for Sumak Kawsay (good living), centering and preserving ancestral Indigenous culture.

### *Chua Chua Annex of Q'eros*

The Chua Chua is situated 4,292 meters above sea level, six hours from the city of Cusco. Chua Chua is one of the annexes of the Nation Q'eros. With a population of approximately 160 people, the community strives to maintain its customs and traditions. While the older generations practice many customs and traditions, the majority of the young people find it difficult to remain connected to their pasts and live in Western society. Young people often leave their community to go to school, which requires that they shed their languages and customs.



## Exploring Similarities and Differences

The interactions between Lise and Ruben at the top of the Inca archeological site compels us to write this case study. The unfolding conversation held by the youth leaders of the USH implementations in Ñawpa Ñan Cultural Center in Taray and the Chua Chua annex of the Q'eros Nation, make up this case study. According to Stake (2005), "case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 438). Alternatively, a case arises from the research process and, more pointedly, from the interactions within the research, which guides the study's focus.

Lised and Ruben worked side-by-side with us to code their conversations, explicate their perspectives, and write this story. Listening to and learning with we share how they negotiate their identities and the identities of their ancestors. Keeping their voices central to the conversation exemplifies their agency and ensures this case study accurately captures how they both entered into and navigate the conversation.

As a result, the case study demonstrates how Lised and Ruben socially construct, negotiate, and share their perspectives through unique lenses of local context, language, tradition, and culture. Their unique assertions and points of contestation provide insight into the need for transforming existing structures that continue to oppress Indigenous communities. We assert that participating in USH offers fissures in colonizing structures, showing how these youth leaders leverage cultural, social, economic, and political capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

## Emerging Themes

We did not record the original conversation between Lised and Ruben. To revisit it, we audio-recorded each of their recollections of what took place. Next, we translated the interviews and read the transcripts for emerging themes. Finally, we worked in both the English and Spanish documents to co-decide on the emerging themes. These include critical consciousness, self-determination, and self-representation. We define these terms and vignettes that Lised and Ruben identified as examples of these.



## *Critical Consciousness*

We define critical consciousness as recognizing and critiquing inequalities and injustices in the world (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Critical consciousness often arises in times that challenge our habits of thinking about the world, leading to opportunities for deepening our understanding and shifting our perspectives. Throughout the program, Lised and Ruben express the personal, communal, and societal effects of colonization.

In that critical moment when Lised and Ruben talk at the top of the mountain in lower Q'eros, an example of critical consciousness emerges. During the intense discussion, Lised passionately discusses the many examples of Inca intelligence. She further shares evidence of the Quechua's connectedness to the Maya, the Apache, and the Mapuche, to name a few. Ruben expresses that he fully realizes to what extent his education in Cusco misrepresented Andean and Indigenous history for the first time.

"I left the community when I was six years old. I studied in a traditional school, I did not have the teaching from an Andean perspective, I received education from a Western approach and I did not have the opportunity to deepen and analyze the true history of the ancestors (Inkas) and it is the first time that I am hearing that the Quechuas arrived to North America, and they were connected to other nations."  
-- Ruben

The conversation continues with explanations of history that Lised learned through books written by Carlos Milla (2011, 2007), an architect, archaeoastronomer, and Indigenous activist. Ruben asks questions, offers stories from his elders, and the critical dialogue and deliberations of what "is" continues. Lised and Ruben engage in an ongoing negotiation of meaning, which unearths the power structures that persist in oppressing their Andean culture. Lised holds a position that political structures elicit discrimination within the Andean community.



"We don't tell our stories. There are many chroniclers who have documented our stories, but they are not from here. From this, we have been taught to discriminate against each other rather than value our culture. Our culture is very diverse in agriculture, engineering, astronomy and architecture. We are not free, but neither do we want to be free because we act together in community and we all need each other, the only thing we want to be free from is colonization."  
-- Lised.

Rubén affirms, however, that economic status maintains the difference in power between people (influence of discrimination).

"...the reason why we are not equal is in social status and economic power. Governments create laws that favor millionaires and owners of the largest companies in the world. Likewise, they try to make us believe that we are receiving the same opportunity in education and that we are free. However the education we receive ensures that we are always low level workers, without the opportunity to grow, because for them it is easier to manipulate us. We are not free because of their regulations, and this is worrisome.  
-- Ruben

The communication is an example of young leaders externalizing their ideas, beliefs, and thought processes. As the conversation continues, it is evident that Lised and Ruben are beginning to find places of agreement. Despite this, the dialogue opens spaces for reconciling different perspectives as each interprets and reconciles their experiences. Essentially, each is finding their way within this interchange to create their realities, rules, and definitions versus conforming and confining themselves to externally imposed ideas.





Lised and Ruben working with Q'eros youth. Photo by Blake Wiggs

## *Self-Determination*

As Ruben and Lised struggle with each other's perspectives on their history, they exhibit tenets of self-determination. We define self-determination as the ability to work within your governing principles, not allowing outside forces to determine your inquiry's trajectory, which is critical to developing Indigenous sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005). Each conveys a challenge to the externally-imposed influences, specifically around education.

"The schools here are devastating to us, both in its culture and teaching processes. Our national schools simply teach by giving homework, books, and data for us to digest and memorize. Our memories only capture so much. But more than that, the information that they give us isn't complete. The history books teach one reality, one perspective. They teach us we were warriors, we were evil, and we killed our neighbors through sacrifices. They saw we were a hierarchical society with a king who ruled over the poor. What schools fail to teach is that our society is communal, with leaders taking turns to lead, and that our ancestors were intelligent people who created complex trade, hydraulic, and architectural systems. Our vision is to create an educational experience based on our values and strengths."  
-- Lised

According to Ruben, Unlocking Silent Histories is an example of an education that affords Indigenous youth to connect with their values and strengths and develop their voice.

"The program is not something boring, for me it is fun. At the same time I learn a lot, because I want to understand and know about the subject I chose, in order to explain to my classmates in the easiest and most understandable way, the program helps me to discover and understand in my own words. For us to progress is not a specific set of steps to follow or learn by heart, it is a different experience from what I am used to studying and learning. I have the opportunity to analyze the customs, traditions and problems of my community because I choose the different themes to explore in the USH program. It is a program that allows me to advance through self-learning and self-analysis of topics."

-- Ruben

The convergence of how Ruben and Lised discuss the negative implications of the national education system on Quechua youth translates into a vision of resolve. Lised expresses her emerging vision of a future of Indigenous education.

"With them [the videos we create], it is no longer necessary for us to seek knowledge outside of ourselves. We do not need information from others to tell us about the history of our culture. We know that there are community members and other Indigenous communities who can teach us. So all children know that they have someone like them who will provide them with material so that they can support their knowledge of our culture. For example, in our videos there will be many people from Amaru, Q'eros and the Amazon or from different parts of Peru who will share their knowledge and wisdom. So we have all the material we need to do our work. By looking inward, the process also supports and encourages children to do more research and that their projects will serve future generations."

-- Lised

During this part of the conversation, Ruben and Lised employ their agency. Each outwardly challenges the education system and externally leverages how they can shape their own future for their education and community. What we see is resistance to conforming by catalyzing their cultural, social, economic, and political capital to transform educational structures (Bourdieu, 1986).

## *Self-Representation*

As part of shifting an educational vision that more readily aligns with Indigenous values and voice, Lised and Ruben begin to tackle the ongoing desire for self-representation. Commonly, outside entities, and most frequently Westerners, attempt to control the representation of Indigenous communities and history, particularly in education (Pewewardy, 2003). As youth choose their themes, interview their immediate community, and have the authority to author their own stories, they are creating internally crafted depictions and thus securing power over-representation.

The authenticity of this representation endures as USH relies on Lised and Ruben to guide the youth. Ruben highlights that technology is what makes access to and sharing of knowledge that his community holds possible, particularly for those who don't pass stories in normative Western ways.

"How beautiful this is because young people express their personal truths. Young people have the opportunity to express their ideas and knowledge of the community, at the same time they can express the past and present through technology. Technology makes it possible because many of our grandparents do not write. We can take advantage of technology to record your voices and share your stories through interviews.

-- Ruben

Ruben asserts that interviewing elders provides a space for younger generations to discover and accurately document their knowledge before it





passes away with older generations. Whereas, Lised discusses the overall impact of creating internal self-representation.

"I see the value of this program because we can fully talk about our culture. We can also get to know and share our knowledge. At the same time, we continue to learn more about our communities and about our ancestors. Now we have a tool for youth and education. We don't just work for ourselves; we are benefiting the younger generations who in the future have historical material that comes from us. With the tools, these younger generations can continue to do more research and build a library of videos that are from here. And you can be sure, yes, these videos are true.  
-- Lised

In both cases, Lised and Ruben share an emerging vision that includes learning as creative expressions that afford future generations to reclaim control of their identities and representations.



Lised guiding Q'eros youth. Photo by Blake Wiggs



## Discussion and Implications

Participating in USH provided a space for Lised and Ruben to enter into a dialogue about critical issues facing their communities. In this opportunity, their similarities of confronting colonization and differences in cultural identity descriptions are chances for them to engage in critical consciousness assert self-determination, and stimulate self-representation. In sharing this story, Lised and Ruben show us an example of a culturally sustaining pedagogy that values lived experiences, community assets, and cherishes culture.

One of USH's aims is to support cross-boundary conversations. Conversations across realities bring about but do not essentialize, what it means for each to be Indigenous. Each takes aspects of their identity into conversations that fuel a vision of an Indigenous-inspired education supported by USH.

"When talking to my grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles and aunts, they all tell me about our stories. They talk to me about our spirituality, how our connection with nature and the earth works, and our relationship between living beings, but in school I learned our history in a different way. When I connect with Lised and her participants, I continue to understand more about my community. I am more proud to be Indigenous. It inspires me to continue working with the community because I know that many of them, like me, continue to lose their culture and identity. The program, USH, is a great opportunity for us to talk to young people and discuss together what is good in the community and what we, as a community, want for ourselves.

-- Ruben

According to Lised, education is disconnected from the intellectual, spiritual, and local capital of Indigenous communities. Learning in a way that is culturally connected resonates with her vision.



In national schools, we believe rigidity is expected and we work to get the job done. But following a model, young people do not have that opportunity to learn, because the methodology is not efficient both for the teachers and much less for the student, each student has their way of learning and seeing the world.

But education is not linear. Education can be based first on what the Andean culture is, without forgetting its roots or changing the thinking of children, why not learn more about fabrics? Or how to plow the land? How to thank Pachamama? know more about us and strengthen our roots. USH lets us do that.

-- Lised

Lised and Ruben remind us to take a good look at colonization and its implications for learning. These conversations resonate with Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2004) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). First, Ruben and Lised make numerous references to the importance of land and spirituality. They call for learning that connects to both and that sees their customs and histories as assets. Second, in this process, Lised and Ruben practice culturally sustaining pedagogy by engaging in ongoing critical reflection (Howard, 2003) and develop a fierce commitment to decolonizing one's practice (Gorski & Dalton, 2020). They remind us that the home and culture of students are "resources to honor, explore, and extend" cultural ways of being (Paris, 2012, p. 94). Finally, they engage in an unyielding confrontation and deconstruction of dominant power structures to center their own worldviews.

When thinking about initiating these approaches to learning, we provide cautions. Educators cannot reduce such pedagogies to simple, scripted, and linear steps. To do that, we would no longer grapple with important epistemological questions and social justice aspirations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sleeter, 2012). The process is emergent and complex. Contexts are unique and require the participation of partners within them, particularly our students of color.





Filming Elders in Q'eros youth. Photo by Blake Wiggs

To these points, Lised and Ruben offer a future of teaching and learning that requires a dramatic shift in our practices. If educators genuinely value cultures and aim to sustain them, we as educators must critically examine constructs of culture, race, and ethnicity that inhibit this possibility. We must let go of control in our teaching, respect, listen to and learn from cultures, confidently embrace discomfort and ambiguity, engage in perpetual critical reflection, focus on cultural assets, and be open to creative possibilities (Paris & Alim, 2017).

When situated in the context of education and social justice, this approach unlocks the potential for liberatory schooling that refutes white supremacy, centering the experiences of historically marginalized students and communities (Freire, 1973; Yosso, 2006). In the case of Indigenous communities, these experiences will include relational connections between land, humans, and spirituality (Grande, 2004). We all invite educators to let go, to release attempts to continue the unyielding grips of colonization, and allow leaders such as Lised and Ruben to generate a momentum of ongoing transformative and decolonizing efforts.



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