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Intercultural expectations and global ambitions: the spatial and temporal dimensions of Indigenous Amazonian adolescence

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This article explores the experiences of Indigenous Amazonian adolescents living and studying in a Peruvian metropolis, as they navigate the complex interplay between ethnic belonging, the older generation's 'intercultural' expectations, and ambitions for the future within a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing society. The article illustrates how adolescence in such a context is shaped not only by its temporal dimension, as traditionally emphasized by scholarly research, but also by spatial factors. Contributing to recent anthropological interest in aspirations, it considers how Indigenous urban adolescents are encouraged by the older generation to transition from local to increasingly global scales – geographically but also temporally – as they pursue their educational and professional goals. This approach offers valuable insights for the anthropological study of adolescence – both within and beyond Amazonia – by highlighting how, despite the well-established culturally contingent nature of adolescence, virtually every society invests significant hopes in its younger generation, deeply shaping their own ambitions for the future.

Since my first days of fieldwork, it appeared clear that the Peruvian Amazonian metropolis of Pucallpa was bustling with youthful energy. Situated in the eastern region of Peru, near the Brazilian border, the city lies within the Ucayali region, traversed by the namesake Ucayali River, a major tributary of the Amazon. This research takes place among Amazonian Indigenous adolescents who live and study in Pucallpa, which hosts no less than five universities and a variety of other higher education institutions, drawing many young Amazonians who are eager to further their education.

Based on 33 months of ethnographic research among young Amazonians who were studying at higher education institutions in Pucallpa, most of my research took place within local universities and higher education institutions, particularly those characterized by intercultural approaches. In Peru, one can generally start attending university at age 17, and Bachelor's degrees last 5 years or more. Hence, at the time of fieldwork, many of my research participants were late adolescents.[1] The social categories of 'adolescence' and 'youth' have become increasingly significant among native Amazonian people, particularly due to expanded access to formal education and a growing indigenous presence in urban areas (Rival 1996; Virtanen 2010). A

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determining factor attracting adolescents to Pucallpa is its provision of 'intercultural' higher education. In the context of Latin American multicultural societies, intercultural education promotes the coexistence and equitable interaction of different ethnic groups, fostering shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect (UNESCO 2015). Both a pedagogy and an ideology, interculturality seeks to adapt educational approaches to the specific needs of Indigenous peoples, while also valuing, incorporating, and leveraging their knowledge systems within academic education (e.g. Aikman 1997; Aman 2015; Lehmann 2016; Valdiviezo 2009; Walsh 2009).

Interculturality in Peru has a complex genealogy. Even though in the 1970s, the Peruvian state emerged as a regional pioneer of multiculturalism (Freeland 1996; García 2005; Valdiviezo 2009), this early leadership was short-lived, and during the following two decades, countries such as Mexico took the lead, eventually coining the very concept of 'intercultural bilingual education' (Walsh 2009: 80; see also Howard 2011). In the Peruvian Amazon, intercultural education began to gain significant traction only in the early 1990s, initially through indigenous organizations and the establishment of local urban intercultural teacher-training programmes and pedagogical institutes. These advances were soon disrupted by the neoliberal turn in the national educational agenda, but in the 2000s, interculturality gradually re-emerged as a structuring principle for the Peruvian state, which began offering intercultural majors and implementing affirmative action policies for Indigenous students, especially in Amazonia (Espinosa 2017). Nowadays, most of the city's universities and higher education institutions integrate interculturality into their curricula in various ways, reflecting Pucallpa's distinctly multicultural setting, marked by the presence of numerous Indigenous adolescents (INEI 2018; Viceministerio de Interculturalidad 2023).

An elusive object: rethinking adolescence through higher education

It has proven challenging to define adolescence as an object of study for anthropologists. Indeed, a concerted interest in adolescence and youth has historically been 'much more evident in other social science disciplines than it was in anthropology' (Vered 2015: 809) for at least two reasons. Firstly, there is often a lack of scholarly consensus on how to draw the boundaries of this life stage, which also has a relevant impact beyond academia – for instance, in the delineation of age categories by NGOs and in international development discourse (Hansen 2008: 5). Secondly, different societies, whether distant in time or space, conceptualize adolescence in vastly diverse ways.

The understanding that adolescence and youth are culturally and historically contingent life stages is now widely recognized in the social sciences (Durham 2004), connecting anthropological, historical, and archaeological research. When we turn our gaze towards communities that are either chronologically or geographically distant, it quickly becomes evident that some of them experience and think about adolescence as a much less neatly distinct life stage than it is understood to be in the contemporary West – from the early days of human history (Nowell 2021) to modern societies (e.g., Mead 1928).

Due to the 'delayed timing of role transitions', the liminal period from childhood to adulthood today encompasses a greater share of the human life course than ever before – arguably until the age of 25 (Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne & Patton 2018; see also Arnett 2007; Brookman 1995). Recent neuroscience research on brain topology in Western populations suggests that 'adolescent' neurodevelopment may extend even into the early thirties (Mousley, Bethlehem, Yeh & Astle 2025). If we adopt such expansive

definitions, it becomes evident that the significance of adolescence cannot be overstated, as – thus defined – today's adolescents represent the largest cohort in human history (Patton *et al.* 2018). Notably, one of the primary aspects of the 'delayed timing of role transitions' is the completion of education, which is the focus of the following discussion. This article, in fact, broadly defines adolescence to include the experiences of young individuals up to their mid-twenties who are engaged in higher education.

Among scholars studying adolescence as a biologically, socially, and culturally significant developmental stage, there is a growing consensus that adolescence represents a 'critical period' and a 'window of opportunity' that significantly shapes an individual's entire life span (Dorn, Hostinar, Susman & Pervanidou 2019; Larsen & Luna 2018; see also Johnson-Hanks 2022). Researchers across various disciplines emphasize that the processes of self-concept development during adolescence are essential for an individual's self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. Thus, adolescence is deemed to be particularly crucial for identity formation, with the cultural influences of society playing a vital role in shaping identity and belonging, as acknowledged by numerous studies across various disciplines (e.g., Amit-Talai & Wulff 1995; Cole & Durham 2007; Flores 2021; Hansen 2008; Iwasa *et al.* 2023; Meeus 2011).

In the present paper, I examine Amazonian adolescents' struggles to acquire a sense of present and future self. In particular, I focus on the intersection between ethnic identity, which has been identified as crucial by previous research on adolescence and youth – both in Amazonia (Espinosa 2012; Steele 2018; Virtanen 2010, 2012; Walker 2013) and elsewhere (e.g., Safa, Umaña-Taylor & Martinez-Fuentes 2024; Schlegel & Hewlett 2011; Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan & Grimes 1998; Shrake & Rhee 2007; Verhoeven, Poorthuis & Volman 2019) – and adolescents' ambitions, aspirations, and imaginings of their future (Robertson, Cheng & Yeoh 2018; for Peru, see de la Cadena 2000). I consider how ethnic belonging significantly influences the experience of adolescence in Amazonia, particularly regarding the expectations placed upon young Indigenous Amazonians by the older generation. Unlike their non-Indigenous peers, these Indigenous youth bear unique responsibilities. As we will see, influential social figures frequently depict Indigenous youth as the future of their ethnic groups – if not of Amazonia itself – embodying a dual mission: to preserve their authentic ethnic and ancestral heritage while simultaneously emerging as modern, professional, and cosmopolitan Peruvians. This vision represents an idealized future for Peru in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. For young Indigenous Amazonians, stepping into the city marks the beginning of their journey to integrate and distinguish themselves within a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing society. The city represents a place where they can acquire social skills and education, yet it also generates new ambitions. Indeed, while experiencing life in an intercultural urban context, these adolescents often come to believe that expanding their horizons is essential to achieving true success.

This article contributes to the longstanding anthropological discourse on human aspirations, focusing on 'bifocal' experiences of success and failure (Alexander 2023; Appadurai 2016; Long & Moore 2013). It examines this bifocality in light of the prevailing ideology of interculturality, which profoundly shapes the aspirations and ambitions of Amazonian youth. To assess the bifocal quality of achievement within the Amazonian adolescent context, I consider how interculturality pushes young Indigenous people to transition from their local *scale* to increasingly more global ones as their ambitions also *scale up* (Blommaert 2010), shifting from local to progressively wider realms, both spatially and temporally.

Coming from Latin *adolescere* 'to mature', adolescence is traditionally conceptualized in *temporal* terms, emphasizing maturation over time. After all, virtually all scholars would agree on the basic fact that adolescents are defined as such by the chronological age they inhabit, whether thirteen, nineteen, or twenty-five. Nevertheless, my data highlight the importance of adding spatial dimensions in researching this stage of life, particularly in terms of adolescents' aspirations within increasingly urban and globalized contexts. I maintain that a nuanced understanding of adolescence requires an examination through the lenses not only of time but also of *space*.

This interest in space, I will argue, begins with the city, which I will show to be the primary site through which Amazonian adolescents seek to assert themselves both professionally and personally. A city like Pucallpa, however, soon proves to be only the initial stage of a broader trajectory, as their ambitions increasingly extend to a global scale, partly informed by the ideology of interculturality, as interpreted and promoted by key figures from earlier generations. I will conclude the paper by arguing that this attention to space – alongside time – as a dimension of analysis in the study of Amazonian youth provides a privileged perspective on intergenerational ambitions and the widely held notion that young people represent *the future*, yielding insights whose relevance transcends the Amazonian context.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous adolescence in Amazonia

Coming of age by engaging with formal higher education and urbanization can be challenging for young Amazonians like Esaú. Esaú told me once that it is a big accomplishment for him to be able to 'set foot in the city' (*pisar la ciudad*) at such a young age. Esaú studies at one of the local universities, and he occasionally works as a mototaxi driver (*motocarrista*), borrowing his classmate and friend Segundo's mototaxi (*motocar*). Segundo and Esaú have been good friends since the first lectures they attended together. Being a bit less in financial need than Esaú, Segundo often lends him his *motocar*, so Esaú can scrape up enough money to pay for his clothes, laptop, and photocopies of textbooks. Esaú, in return, does many of Segundo's assignments. Esaú, in fact, is curious and clever, and he doesn't mind doing some of his classmates' assignments in exchange for money or favours. Life in the city is expensive, and money is never enough.

While Esaú is of indigenous heritage,[2] Segundo self-identifies as '*mestizo*' (meaning 'mixed' or 'non-indigenous'). This makes the two friends' coming-of-age trajectories fundamentally distinct. This is because, within the intercultural context in which Amazonian adolescents grow up, ancestry is the key factor that shapes their public identity. In an attempt to compensate for the historical marginalization and denial of the indigenous component of Latin American societies, professors and schoolteachers who are committed to interculturality encourage Indigenous adolescents to fully embrace their ethnic roots. For instance, lecturers encourage Esaú to proudly self-identify as Indigenous, praising him for any word he is prepared to speak in his native language, and compelling him to learn more and more about his native culture, affirming that his ethnicity contributes to the cultural richness of the classroom, the region, and the whole country. As time went on, moreover, Esau joined his Indigenous peers in growing proud of the fact that foreign researchers like me were coming 'all the way here to the Amazon to study *us*'.[3]

Segundo, on the other hand, is not seen as ethnically unique, but 'simply *mestizo*', an expression often used by Peruvians. While Indigenous people like Esaú stand out as

somewhat special or atypical, Segundo is immersed in an ideology that equates *mestizos* with Peruvians (de la Cadena 1998). Segundo and the other *mestizo* adolescents in his social circle stand for a generalized cultural hybridity which does not usually attract the attention of their professors or foreign researchers. Shortly after I met him, Segundo asked me: 'You are an anthropologist, right? You study *culture*, right? Why are you interviewing *me*? I have Indigenous friends, I can introduce them to you'.

This also means that Segundo's and Esaú's ethnic statuses entail different social responsibilities. Being the first one in his district to win a government scholarship, Esaú's fellow *paisanos* (villagers) place great expectations on him, as one day he could become the very first Indigenous schoolteacher in his native community. More generally, professors and other pivotal social figures constantly portray Indigenous youth as *the future* of their ethnic groups, the future of Amazonia. Esaú and his Indigenous friends are expected to 'salvage their *culturas* [meaning ethnic groups] from cultural loss', as lecturers often put it. They need to become not 'just' professionals, but *intercultural* professionals (*profesionales interculturales*), meaning that they are expected to enhance their most authentic ethnic, ancestral core while at the same time becoming modern, professional, and cosmopolitan Peruvians. Such an intercultural professional embodies the idealized vision for Peru's future within an increasingly globalized world that is constantly expanding its horizons.

These cases demonstrate that in my analysis of contemporary Amazonian adolescence – particularly in urban areas and among adolescents engaged in higher intercultural education – becoming an adolescent as an Indigenous person, as opposed to a non-Indigenous one, constitutes two markedly different processes. The ethnic factor emerges as a key determinant shaping the experience of growing up.

Dreaming of the city: idioms of ambition

As anticipated, space is a crucial dimension in understanding how Amazonian adolescence takes shape today. To begin with, there is one space that holds central significance for most young Amazonians: *the city*. Experiencing the city is the dream of a lifetime for many adolescents in contemporary Amazonia. When interviewing first-year students during their early weeks in Pucallpa, most of them were often repeating, in a deeply emotional way: 'I can't believe I made it', 'I can't believe I am finally in the city'. Setting foot in the city – both physically and metaphorically – is the first step towards fitting in and standing out. Esaú once explained his desires for the future to me, which reflect the aspirations of many Amazonian adolescents: 'I will become a well-prepared teacher, build a concrete house with my TV, gigantic speakers and so on. I'll travel everywhere, like you do. I am not like others from my community, who are *conformistas* and have never set foot in the city or in the university'.

The language that Amazonian adolescents, their families, and their educators use daily helps shed light on how being a *conformista* (to settle)[4] is socially stigmatized, especially within educational environments – as expressed by Esaú – as it means not to be ambitious and to settle in life. Being '*conformista*', in the view of contemporary Amazonians, is something extremely negative. But how can one avoid being considered a *conformista* by others? From what Esaú explained above, not being a *conformista* means being familiar with the city, as an educated professional who, as a result of their ambition and effort, is able to afford certain material goods and experiences as status symbols. Yet, this aspiration to raise oneself above one's peers is not to be understood in a mere financial sense. Being educated, reaching the prestigious status of 'professional'

('*professional*') by at least completing a five-year Bachelor's degree is a crucial step to make progress in life (*progresar*).

Intriguingly, pursuing a professional career can also significantly help in finding something that is understandably central for many Amazonian adolescents: *love*. Many of my interlocutors reported a desire to engage in romantic relationships with 'an ambitious partner' – as Segundo once told me – often meaning a professional or at least a university student. In fact, contemporary Amazonian adolescents' criteria for choosing durable romantic partners appear to be 'somewhat stratified by educational attainment', as the Ucayali-born Shipibo[5] anthropology PhD, politician, and educator Miguel Hilario Manënima writes:

> [Young Shipibos increasingly] choose or attempt to choose, rationally and romantically their wives and husbands. […] For instance, an educated person will not marry somebody who […] does not have formal education. Teachers will marry among teachers, and university students will marry other students (Hilario 2010: 44).

If *conformarse* (to settle) is seen as undesirable for all stages of life, it is considered to be particularly disappointing for adolescents. Adults, especially teachers at all levels, support these views of the social world rather explicitly. For instance, whenever students didn't pay attention in class, cheated during exams, or failed to submit an assignment on time, professors' reprimands often ended with: 'Do not be a *conformista*! Here at the university, one comes to exceed oneself (*superarse*), improve oneself (*mejorarse*)'; 'Why do you come to the city? Why are you all making sacrifices? Because you are planning (*te estas projectando*) to become a professional one day!'

Achieving and failing … a matter of ethnicity?

We previously established the importance of ethnic heritage for Peruvian Amazonian adolescents. As per the ethnographic data offered above, the Amazonian intercultural educational setting is one in which aspirations of professional achievements are held in the highest regard. Indeed, what follows in this section is a consideration of how the ethnic factor significantly influences how these adolescents are perceived by key social actors when it comes to emic views of personal and professional success. Some educators, for instance, would make it explicitly clear to me that they were doing their best to encourage students to be ambitious, but some of them were irremediably '*conformistas*':

> The truth is that only some students have a self-improvement instinct [*un instinto de superación*] and, unfortunately, only a few of them are indigenous, very very few … many of them have no competence [*no son competencia*] (Professor Quiroz).

Here, ambition can certainly be cultivated, but it needs to be already present, to some extent, in the student's makeup. Being *conformista* is seen as a personality trait, a character flaw, usually ethnically associated with the lowest social group, which is Indigenous Amazonians. This well-known Amazonian trope of 'the indolent native' often finds its way into local adolescents' slang: a recurrent joke is to address each other as *indio* (or *india*) when they haven't done their homework, forget to bring a notebook or book to class, or take too much time to memorize something. The ethnic status of Amazonian adolescents appears to be even more crucial for our analysis, particularly because the intercultural project and the ambitions that it fosters do not target all young Amazonians in the same way.[6]

Interculturality is often presented as a project from which the whole country – if not humanity as a whole – might potentially benefit. The combination of different forms of knowledge would, in principle, result in an optimistic future social and epistemological synthesis, bringing together what are seen to be the best products of Western and ancestral cultures and knowledge systems. Still, ethnicity appears to be crucial when it comes to conceiving individual and collective ambitions from an intercultural point of view, for at least two reasons. On the one side, the intercultural ideology impacts *mestizo* and Indigenous adolescents quite differently, as interculturality originates first and foremost from the need to salvage indigenous ancestral knowledge from oblivion and from its historical marginality vis-à-vis dominant forms of knowledge. As mentioned above, Indigenous Amazonian adolescents are invested with intercultural duties in a way that *mestizos* are not.

On the other side, however, Indigenous Amazonian adolescents often interact with influential social actors who consider their ethnicity to be an element of disadvantage for their success in life. Some figures of authority seem to believe in a 'theory of predestination' that reminds us of the Weberian reading of Calvinism's influence on the historical development of capitalism. This ethos promotes a sort of value and ethical ranking of Indigenous populations, with Indigenous Amazonians always at the bottom.

Ethnic ancestry turns out to be a feature that distinguishes the kinds of people destined to success and the ones for whom reaching success and economic prosperity will be much more difficult, if not impossible. Like in the case of Professor Quiroz quoted earlier, only a few Indigenous adolescents are considered to have that necessary 'self-improvement instinct' that can lead them to success. And this belief goes even beyond academic life. Once, a civil servant of a local municipality who just took on an Indigenous intern – a brilliant recent Shipibo graduate who was top of his class – expressed his concern: 'I wasn't too sure about getting an Indigenous guy. They might graduate, but will they make it as professionals?' When I asked him to tell me more about his concerns, the civil servant added: 'Will Indigenous guys be able to fit well into the pace of working life? [*¿se acoplarán al ritmo de la vida laboral?*] Are they ambitious enough?' Herein lies a central contradiction that complicates Amazonian youth's transition to adulthood: by virtue of that same ethnicity that interculturality exalts, young Indigenous people constantly risk *failing*. It looks like even when these adolescents have already achieved a lot, they are always at risk of failure.

Expanding ambitions

Recently, anthropologists have considered aspirations and achievement (Long & Moore 2013) but also failure (Alexander 2023; Appadurai 2016) as ethnographic categories in their own right. This body of research has focused on the complementary character of achieving and failing, highlighting an inherent *bifocality* of achieving, as 'what looks like winning from one perspective can be contested as losing from another' (Long & Moore 2013: 25). After all, failure and success can well be two sides of the same coin (Alexander 2023: 10).

The privileged space where young people can learn the rules of the dominant social game is the city. Therefore, the only way to avoid becoming *conformista* seems to be to move spatially. Yet, Esaú's social standing as a university student in Pucallpa symbolically places him and other Indigenous adolescents at the very bottom of the city's social pyramid. Many Indigenous university students I had the occasion to meet during fieldwork reported how, not long after the initial enthusiasm of living in

Pucallpa, the city made them acutely aware of their marginal place in society. Most Indigenous people live in makeshift houses in the swampy and polluted outskirts of the city, often with limited running water, sanitation systems, and electric infrastructure. As Segundo once noted, it could be said that in the city, 'the lower one's status, the closer one lives to Indigenous people'.

Amazonian adolescents who study at the university either live inside the university campus or in the low-income neighbourhoods nearby, far from the city centre. Some of them rarely leave their accommodation and get to visit what they call 'the city' (meaning the city centre) only twice a semester or less, for bureaucratic paperwork, to collect parcels, send money to their families, or run errands. Esaú once told me

> We don't live in Pucallpa [referring to the city centre]. It's too expensive. This neighbourhood [we live in] is all mud and dirt, worse than my native community. Does it look like a city to you? One day I'll set foot in a *real* city, like Lima, or Paris, or Dubai!

Thus, if, when Esaú was younger, moving to the city was, in a sense, enough – a sign of having reached a desirable level of accomplishment – after living in Pucallpa for a while, he realized that he hadn't quite *made it* yet, and that the urban world he aims to conquer is much bigger than he had imagined.

As anticipated, Esaú's reflections point to the conflicted position Indigenous and rural Amazonian adolescents find themselves in. To some extent, they are already quite successful socially. Setting foot in the city, navigating it, and studying at the university make them 'achievers' in their own eyes and in those of others. However, studying and living in the city may also mean being confronted with a sense of failure. Living in the city is very challenging: Amazonian adolescents can only afford to live in the more marginal areas and need to juggle multiple jobs alongside their studies. Their position in society and in the city is not exactly one of 'winners'. Furthermore, most young Amazonians – especially Indigenous ones – do not feel confident in the university classroom, because they do not believe that the education that they have received in the past makes them very prepared. In fact, repeatedly failing a university course is not infrequent, and most of the students I met were satisfied with passing their courses and didn't worry too much about grades. Moreover, while Pucallpa is a growing *metropolis* – with a growing population (INEI 2022) and a growing social and economic influence over the region – after living in it for a while, it appears 'all mud and dirt'. 'Real cities', 'like Lima, Paris, or Dubai' are the cities young people like Esaú would prefer to study or work in, to feel truly successful. It could thus be said that Amazonian adolescents in a city like Pucallpa are, simultaneously, both 'achievers' and 'losers'.

According to Long and Moore, a focus of this bifocality must be 'integral to any study of the social life of achievement' (2013: 25). And yet, with notable exceptions (see, for instance, Fordham 2013), the bifocality of achievement, or of failure, has not constituted the explicit primary focus of most ethnographies. My article responds to such a scholarly interest in human aspirations, and in the resulting bifocal experiences of success and failure, by making sense of this bifocality in light of a dominant ideology – interculturality – which acts as a shaper of Amazonian adolescents' aspirations and ambitions.

Achieving and failing … a matter of scale?

Attending a university in the city is an unquestionable achievement in itself for an Indigenous young man who comes from a remote community and an uneducated

and financially unstable background like Esaú. Nevertheless, Esaú and his Indigenous friends are expected to become not 'just' professionals, but *intercultural* professionals, which represents the epitome of the future of Peru; a figure that historically has been the exception but now needs to become the norm, to 'save Indigenous cultures'. Within an increasingly globalized world that is constantly expanding its horizons, an intercultural professional not only needs to be knowledgeable of different cultural and knowledge systems, but also has to be able to productively combine them.

The linguistic anthropologist Jan Blommaert's concept of *scale* provides a useful framework for thinking about the bifocal quality of achievement (Blommaert 2010). Since the intercultural ideology pushes young Indigenous people to transition from local to more global scales, achievements can turn into 'failures', depending on the scale at which they are conceptualized. Drawing on Blommaert, the concept of scale has recently been used in the regional literature by Oakdale, who has described her main research interlocutors, two Brazilian Amazonian Indigenous Kawaiwete leaders, as 'mediators of scale' within a 'globally connected Amazon' (2022: 6).

Blommaert (2010) defines scales as 'spatiotemporal frames interacting with one another'. The bifocality of Esaú's achievements, or failures, configures essentially as a matter of scale. Contemporary Amazonian adolescents like him who aspire to become – and are on their way to becoming – intercultural professionals are required to achieve success on multiple scales. As Greene puts it 'the Peruvian Amazon is a margin of the third order: marginal to the Peruvian Andes, which is marginal to the Peruvian coast, which is marginal to the great world power to the north' (2006: 338). As such, the more Amazonian adolescents move, the more acutely aware they become of this extreme spatial marginality. From a geographical point of view, young Indigenous people need to succeed at the regional, but also at the national, and if possible, at the international level. As Blommaert would have it, Amazonian adolescents find themselves 'locked into one scale-level: the local', within a globalized world and ideology where upward social mobility increasingly requires geographical mobility (Blommaert 2010: 47).

During fieldwork I often encountered the popular expression '*nadie es profeta en su tierra*', or 'no one is a prophet in their own land', a saying freely adapted from the New Testament[7] and understood as an invitation to 'essentially leave Peru, go abroad and achieve great things in other countries … the US, Germany, Europe', as a professor once explained to me. The expression not only entails the idea of *scalar* success, but also the view that leaving one's country of origin to become a better professional is not only aspirational, but necessary to become truly successful and to contribute to one's country's development with first-class specialized knowledge and professional prestige.

Amazonian adolescents are often painfully reminded of inequality during their efforts to reach academic and professional success. Scales are, essentially, 'a matter of power' (Blommaert 2010: 5). They are ordered vertically, so that access to different scales is unevenly distributed. Amazonian adolescents would often ask me about educational or employment opportunities 'elsewhere', meaning outside of Peru. Alongside these requests, they often expressed feelings of being somehow 'trapped' ('*atrapados*') within much smaller scales compared to the ones they aspire to: being trapped within their indigenous communities, within an unpleasant neighbourhood in a big city like Pucallpa, and in some cases even within Peru as a country. Many Amazonian adolescents would spend endless hours scrolling through their social media looking for photos taken by influencers. They were drawn to photos taken in 'cool, expensive places abroad', showing people 'doing cool stuff and going to nice

restaurants and strolling', while, as Lisa, a Shipibo student, once said, 'we are *just here*'.

Sometimes my young research participants explicitly reflected on how, on a global scale, they studied not only within a third world country, but also in a marginal region (the *selva*), and, at a smaller level, in local universities which were certainly not the most prestigious ones in the country. In class, educators often mentioned how Peru was systematically at the world's bottom in terms of national literacy, reading comprehension, and mathematical skills. During official discourses, it was common to hear the expression '*no es la universidad que hace el estudiante, es el estudiante quien hace la universidad*', meaning 'the university does not make the student, it's the student who makes the university'. The expression was often repeated, almost like a mantra, to motivate students to *superarse*,[8] to give the best of themselves even if they were studying in universities that were not seen as first-class institutions, as was often the case for interculturality-oriented ones.

Professors also frequently commented on how Peruvian universities aspired to become 'prestigious, research-intensive institutions like Oxford or Harvard' one day, or at least being able to 'send their most competent students to these universities'. Any instances of Indigenous students who were able to 'scale up' to more prestigious educational institutions abroad later in life were celebrated and presented as virtuous examples to follow. Lisa and her *mestiza* classmate Rosa once asked me about different university systems and the duration of studies abroad.[9] Knowing already which continents they meant by 'abroad', I explained to them that in the United States, Bachelor's degrees generally took four years, while in Europe, just three. Lisa and Rosa became very worried, as they considered the difference in their own education. Rosa exclaimed: 'Three years! And these universities prepare their students *well*! Here we study for five years to get just a BA, which is not even that good, and then you have the thesis, which takes one, two, three more years'. On a different occasion, a group of alumni asked me about scholarships for Master's degrees abroad. We spent the afternoon researching these scholarships on my laptop. A common requirement to qualify for all the scholarships we found was that the applicant should *not* already hold a Master's degree. Since some of the alumni in the group already held Master's degrees, this news was disheartening. As one of these alumni pointed out:

> Oh gosh, […] does it mean I am ineligible then? I wish I had met you sooner, I really do. I paid for this stupid Master's here because I thought it would make me competitive to study abroad afterwards, in a good uni, not *here*! I was so proud to be called a *Magister* [person with a Master's degree]. What a fool! I paid a lot for this shitty title, and now what?!

Amazonian adolescents often came to rethink their achievements from a scalar point of view with anguish and regret. In fact, the same achievements which looked so impressive a moment ago within a local scale ('I was so proud to be called a *Magister*'), suddenly became a double-edged sword: a 'failure' from a more global perspective, which in fact may even *preclude* my interlocutors from fulfilling their ambitions to reach greater achievements on a larger scale. The locally impressive educational results that Indigenous adolescents were achieving with great dedication and after overcoming so many difficulties could easily turn into failings at a more global scale.

It is now necessary to clarify that this emphasis on geographical mobility does not diminish the importance of *time* in the study of adolescents' aspirations. Time remains a vital sphere, particularly within the framework of interculturality, which

integrates the three temporal dimensions, as follows. Native Amazonian adolescents are encouraged – if not compelled – to reconnect with their ethnic *past*, reviving and preserving their ancestors' 'cultures' and knowledge. Simultaneously, they are tasked with integrating this cultural heritage into their *present* lives, ensuring its relevance and vitality. Finally, they must project this rich cultural legacy into the *future*, not only for their personal development but also for the continued cultural integrity and well-being of their entire native communities. The intercultural project expands these ambitions, perhaps endlessly. And the greater the scale, the greater not only the potential achievement but also the risk of failure.

The 'structuring structure' of scalar achievement: interculturality

Bifocality focuses our attention on how the achievement/failure dyad is 'not seen in the same way at all times and in all places' (Appadurai 2016: xxi), but focusing on the bifocal nature of achievement and failure alone does not tell us much about *why* this happens. Therefore, in what follows, the bifocality experienced by the Amazonian youth is productively unpacked by reflecting on how ambition has a *scalar* nature.

We have observed how Amazonian adolescents go through processes of scaling up their ambitions, from *local* to increasingly *global* domains. Along the way, degrees reveal themselves as not being short enough, universities not prestigious enough, and cities not big and cosmopolitan enough. But why does this happen? Within interculturality, achieving success for Amazonian adolescents means not only gaining the ability to mediate between different scales, as in the case of the leaders interviewed by Oakdale. Achieving intercultural success for young Amazonians also implies performing 'scale-jumping', meaning transitioning to new scales *themselves*, to embody and perform a specific kind of indigeneity: the highly educated, cosmopolitan, and globally competitive Indigenous 'intercultural professional'. Here, the scalar nature of ambition emerges as a result of an intercultural ideology: one that encourages Amazonian adolescents to become 'prophets' far from their homeland.

In order to analyse the new knowledge that achievers create about themselves and about others once a given achievement has taken place, Long and Moore have deployed the 'ethical imagination' framework (2013: 13), emphasizing how 'although ethical practices are proposed, suggested and imposed upon individuals by their social environs […] these are not, and cannot be, absolutely determining processes' (2013: 13). Following this, ethnographic studies had productively focused on people's agency in reflecting and reacting to achievement and failure, rather than on how environments and structural factors deeply shape them. However, even if interculturality is not 'absolutely determining' – it would be perhaps safe to affirm that no social process is – young Amazonians' ambitions and views of achievement and failure all unfold *within* the imagery of an intercultural project that is 'proposed, suggested, and imposed' upon them. Interculturality comes to represent a placeholder for Amazonian adolescents' understanding of success, how to achieve it, and at what scale.

Intergenerational ambitions

In focusing on intercultural education, particularly in light of its cultural significance in informing adolescence and youth, this article also acknowledges how educators, from university lecturers to schoolteachers, are certainly not the only influential figures shaping the visions of future success among Amazonian adolescents, especially those of Indigenous origin. Another key group is that of middle-aged and older

Indigenous leaders, who place considerable hopes in adolescents and assign them significant responsibilities for the future. A common belief that emerged during different conversations with these leaders was that the new generation of Indigenous people

> has it easier than us in our times. When we were young, there was *nothing*, no intercultural schooling, no indigenous associations. We created them. We fought for the scholarships. These days, young [Indigenous] people have it so much easier. They meet so many people from abroad who give them ideas, they travel. They have internet. They have many scholarships to study … they can become well-respected intercultural professionals, to salvage our culture. (Indigenous leader, interview)

Notably, not all current Indigenous leaders are 'professionals' themselves, at least in the most literal sense. When they were young, in the 1980s and 1990s, some of these leaders benefitted from Scandinavian countries' donations of scholarships to major Amazonian associations based in the region of Ucayali, but, unfortunately, only very few managed to complete their studies (Chirinos & Zegarra 2004; Espinosa 2017). During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to meet some of these former awardees, who today hold top positions within the most relevant indigenous associations.

Most Indigenous adolescents I collaborated with for my research look at these middle-aged local leaders with esteem and admiration. Yet, they sometimes discussed with me how the high dropout rate of the older generation could be well understood as a 'failure', especially because of the long-lasting ramifications Amazonian youth perceive they had on their own educational opportunities, as the Scandinavian countries that had so enthusiastically supported Indigenous students decided to cut their funding to Amazonian indigenous associations because so many students left their studies (Chirinos & Zegarra 2004: 25-6; Espinosa 2017: 109). Moreover, young Amazonians sometimes criticize these leaders, pointing out how they have taught their children neither to speak indigenous languages nor to uphold traditional customs. They often feel that these leaders have somewhat 'failed' in their mission to preserve indigenous heritage, which is still at risk of being lost and forgotten. Nonetheless, most Amazonian adolescents think very highly of them. From time to time, some of my youngest research participants would come to me, excited and nervous, to ask me if I could introduce them to this or that leader I was lucky enough to know personally. After all, these leaders are involved in many of the pursuits Indigenous adolescents wish to follow: having been selected for scholarships by prestigious social actors, having completed university courses, serving as the primary Indigenous representatives whom Peruvian officials, foreign researchers, and development practitioners consult, frequently travelling abroad and maintaining numerous international collaborators and friends, participating in prestigious research projects, co-authoring or appearing in books, documentaries, and artistic productions, and engaging in broad social and political networks. Above all, they manage key funding and make crucial decisions on behalf of their ethnic groups.

As a bilingual Shipibo teacher observed once, unlike his generation, contemporary Indigenous youth 'can travel, they can study at the university […] So now it is the turn of young people: they are the ones who have to practise interculturality now'. Importantly, most Indigenous adolescents in Pucallpa who attend intercultural higher education institutions – even including those who are critical of older leaders – agree with older generations that preserving cultural life is not merely one of the core social responsibilities entrusted to youth: they are, in fact, optimally placed to fulfil it. Crucially, I have highlighted how this endorsement forms part of a

combined orientation towards local cultural reproduction and towards upward mobility at national and transnational scales. The scalarity of adolescents' ambitions clearly emerges here, as they seek to combine community continuity and socioeconomic progress across different scales. By linking these discourses to interculturality, I illustrated how interculturality functions as a moral framework of intergenerational cultural obligations, while at the same time legitimizing particular routes to ethnic achievement.

Spatiality, temporality, and uniformity

As shown, the intercultural ideology expands Indigenous Amazonian adolescents' ambitions both spatially and temporally. Interculturality is the primary vehicle for Indigenous Amazonian adolescents' views of success, emically seen as an effective tool for cultural maintenance and spatiotemporal scalar aspirations at the same time.

In Peruvian Amazonia, cities represent coveted loci of success and attainment, as outlined earlier in the article. Recent literature highlights how Amazonian cities represent ambivalent places of disconnection and uncertainties but also of social mobility through enskilment (Buitron Arias 2023; Erikson 2023; Fabiano 2023; Santos-Granero 2023; Virtanen 2023; Wright 2023). Amazonian adolescents who manage to study at university in the city are already quite successful, especially when they come from rural communities: in the eyes of themselves and others, they are already 'achievers'. As discussed, 'setting foot in the city' and 'setting foot at the university' have a significant symbolic value for Amazonian adolescents' social status. Still, once in the city, many young Amazonians inevitably feel there is still much for them to achieve. Once Amazonian Indigenous adolescents, whose lives I have shared during fieldwork, migrate to Pucallpa, they begin to aspire to move to larger, more cosmopolitan, technologically advanced, and more distant cities. Here, the significance of *space* is a relevant theoretical insight with important ramifications for the study of adolescence at large.

The seminal work that contributed to laying the groundwork for a sociocultural anthropology of adolescence, Margaret Mead's *Coming of age in Samoa*, explored adolescence in the 1920s Polynesian island, arguing that the turmoil commonly associated with this life stage in the West was not universal but rather culturally specific. According to Mead, this lack of 'storm and stress' in Samoan society was to be attributed, among other factors, to the uniformity of the Samoan context, vis-à-vis the heterogeneity of the 1920s United States:

> Our young people are faced by a series of different groups which believe different things and advocate different practices, and to each of which some trusted friend or relative may belong. So a girl's father may be a Presbyterian, an imperialist, a vegetarian, a teetotaller […] Her mother is of a quietistic frame of mind, very much interested in Indian philosophy, a pacifist, a strict non-participator in life […] (Mead 1928: 162-3).

If not the whole Amazonian urban society, at least the educational intercultural milieu within which Amazonian adolescents come of age, is rather homogeneous: following Mead's line of reasoning, currently there is not a striking variety in terms of, say, religious beliefs, eating habits, political views, values, and in particular in terms of 'uniform and satisfying ambitions' (Mead 1928: 129). More specifically, I have shown that the ambitions of becoming a professional, getting acquainted with the city, and experiencing life abroad are shared by the vast majority of Amazonian adolescents

as well as their role models. To use Mead's expression, interculturality ascribes rather *uniform ambitions* to Amazonian adolescents: embracing one's indigenous roots while becoming an urban and global professional. Perhaps, even a 'prophet' in a foreign land.

Furthermore, Amazonian adolescents appear to experience relatively few significant intergenerational conflicts, and certainly nothing like the pronounced generational tensions often observed in other cultural contexts. Amazonian adolescents hold current Indigenous leaders in high regard, including those who have not yet fully achieved the sought-after status of 'professional'. Older Indigenous leaders, for their part, place significant hopes and responsibilities on these adolescents: expectations that remain almost unquestioned by the youth. This suggests a relatively harmonious relationship between the younger and older indigenous generations in contemporary urban Peruvian Amazonia, characterized by a certain uniformity and continuity of core values and expectations.

Even so, urban Indigenous Amazonians' experiences of adolescence are by no means as carefree and unburdened as those described by Mead. The kind of relative uniformity of ambitions and of intergenerational values mentioned above does not prevent Amazonian adolescents from going through significant 'storm and stress' while attempting to achieve success. The widespread anxiety of 'getting stuck' within their regions of origin, alongside an acute awareness of their marginal place within society, all contributed to a stressful adolescence and youth. Much of this distress is linked to Indigenous adolescents' ethnic standing, given that the expansion of their ambitions happens within an assertively intercultural context in which they are compelled to navigate between – and shape and define themselves in relation to – often contrastive dimensions of indigeneity, within a wider Peruvian society that is still non-Indigenous, if not anti-Indigenous. A world in which indigeneity is interpreted by key social actors as the least desirable heritage for future success – almost like a predictor of failure.

This ideology of success amplifies the ambitions of Amazonian adolescents, expanding both spatially and temporally. This ideology, while relatively uniform across generations, is continuously broadening in scope. I therefore suggest that the challenges faced by these adolescents are related primarily to their future aspirations, rather than a physiological 'stormy' phase. They are not necessarily undergoing an 'unavoidable period of adjustment' (Boas 1928: 12), nor do they experience inevitable 'difficulties and conflicts', nor a 'period in which idealism flowered and rebellion against authority waxed strong', as the North American adolescents Mead referred to do (Mead 1928: 2, 23). Instead, most of my young research interlocutors actively embrace the intercultural ideology.

Conclusions

Amazonian adolescents today are not 'merely' expected to transition into adulthood, an undertaking that is already inherently challenging. Rather, they are compelled to become successful *intercultural* professionals – a specific and demanding kind of adult that navigates and reconciles different worlds – attaining spatiotemporal achievements that not even the past generations have reached. Indigenous adolescents bear a significant responsibility: they are entrusted with preventing cultural extinction and are regarded as the future of their ethnic groups. It is a template of adulthood that aims to ensure the historical continuity and cultural future of Amazonia while simultaneously projecting it on unprecedentedly vast scales.

This carries two significant implications for anthropological approaches to adolescence, in Amazonian settings as well as more globally. First, while existing literature on adolescence has focused primarily on temporal aspects, starting with efforts to chronologically define this elusive life stage, I have argued that a well-rounded analysis of adolescence – in Amazonia and beyond – benefits from the consideration of both time and space. I have addressed the aspirations Amazonian adolescents hold for their future and the geographical changes required to realize them, highlighting the importance of accounting for both temporal and spatial dimensions when considering adolescent ambitions.

Second, and more broadly, I contend that exploring young people's aspirations, alongside the hopes of older generations for their futures, is central to comprehensive cross-cultural and cross-temporal academic understandings of adolescence. While it is true that the experiences of puberty and coming of age may vary significantly across different times and places, at the very least, the view that the younger generation will carry forward cultural, economic, and social legacies – the idea that young people represent *the future* – is likely to be globally shared. Clearly, the targeted expectations and pressures placed on adolescents vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and economic contexts, yet this core commonality allows for meaningful comparisons to be drawn between contemporary aspirations for adolescents and those that have motivated humans since the dawn of our species (Baxter 2021: xi).

In other words, although the nature of adolescence may vary so greatly across time and space that even reaching scholarly consensus on a clear-cut concept of this life stage proves analytically challenging, it would be equally difficult to find a society that does not place great hopes in its younger generation, instilling them with specific sets of aspirations for their future. As things stand, the ambitions, hopes, and dreams that so often characterize adolescence and youth around the world, the ways in which these aspirations develop over time and within space, and especially how they are shaped by the expectations and desires that older generations place on young people, represent promising lines of inquiry with broad cross-cultural relevance that require thorough research to deepen our understanding of this life stage across a multiplicity of different historical periods and cultural milieux.

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NOTES

[1] I had the privilege of accompanying Amazonian students through much of their undergraduate studies. When I began my research, I was only slightly older than them, and a doctoral researcher navigating the transition from student to scholar: two important points of connection. Despite our many differences, our similar age, along with shared life-stage liminality and ethnic resonance, shaped my overall positionality in the field as one of empathy and closeness.

[2] Specifically, Wampis (a Jivaroan Amazonian group spanning southern Ecuador and northern Peru).

[3] The impact of anthropological research on the social capital of Indigenous people is not negligible and warrants further reflection. As noted in my earlier note on positionality, our comparable age and shared life-stage liminality positioned me close to research participants. This was further amplified by ethnic resonance, as my own Sicilian background – with its distinctive identity, marginalized history and contested bilingualism – unexpectedly echoed the ethnic struggles of Amazonian adolescents.

[4] The meaning of the emic term *conformarse* does not map onto the English sense of 'to conform' as following norms or rules.

[5] The Shipibo(-Conibo) are a Peruvian Amazonian Pano ethnic group.

[6] As Long and Moore have also highlighted, a focus on the bifocality of achievement demands 'sustained attention to the ways in which the appropriateness of various forms of achievement varies according to such categories as […] race' (Long & Moore 2013; see also Luhrmann 2008).

[7] Mark 6:4.

[8] The 'moral imperative' of *superar(se)* is broadly present across Peruvian youth, from Andean regions (Leinaweaver 2008: 60) to migrant communities (Leinaweaver 2010).

[9] As previously discussed in relation to positionality, while my interlocutors and I saw each other as relatively close age-wise, we diverged significantly in *spatial* terms. Young Amazonians generally perceived me as someone who was 'succeeding' on a global scale, being highly educated, well travelled, and coming from the 'First World' (as they called it). They frequently asked me about my international studies and experiences, and how they might access these opportunities themselves through exchange programs or scholarships.

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Attentes interculturelles et ambitions globales: les dimensions spatiales et temporelles de l'adolescence chez les autochtones d'Amazonie

Résumé

Le présent article explore les expériences d'adolescents autochtones amazoniens vivant et étudiant dans une métropole péruvienne, et amenés à gérer des interactions complexes entre appartenance ethnique, attentes « interculturelles » des générations plus âgées et ambitions pour l'avenir, dans une société qui s'urbanise et se mondialise rapidement. L'article illustre comment, dans un tel contexte, l'adolescence est modelée non seulement par sa dimension temporelle, traditionnellement privilégiée par la recherche académique, mais aussi par des facteurs spatiaux. Il contribue aux récents travaux anthropologiques consacrés aux aspirations en examinant comment les adolescents autochtones des villes sont encouragés par la génération de leurs parents à passer d'une échelle locale à une échelle de plus en plus globale, géographiquement mais aussi temporellement, dans la poursuite de leurs buts éducatifs et professionnels. Cette approche livre des indices précieux pour l'étude anthropologique de l'adolescence, en Amazonie et ailleurs, et met en lumière la façon dont, malgré la nature culturellement contingente de l'adolescence, aujourd'hui bien établie, chaque société ou presque investit dans sa jeunesse de grands espoirs qui influencent profondément les ambitions de la jeune génération pour son avenir.

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