

Article

Llamas, Barter and Travel Rituals: An Ethnographic Study on the Esquela Tusuy Dance of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, Condesuyos, Peru

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Abstract: The “Esquela Tusuy” dance is a cultural manifestation deeply rooted in the Uchumiri Peasant Community (Condesuyos, Peru), reflecting the intersection between traditional cultural practices and community identity. This ethnographic study reveals how the dance, beyond being a mere artistic expression, is a complex system of meanings that articulates social relations, economic practices of barter, and Andean spirituality, through the veneration of Pachamama and Apu Coropuna. The dance is organized around rituals that include the preparation, journey, and return of the llama herders, being a living expression of collective memory and a mechanism of social cohesion. The adopted methodology was based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, allowing a detailed understanding of Uchumiri’s cultural dynamics. Despite contemporary challenges, “Esquela Tusuy” remains a central pillar for the affirmation of cultural identity and community resistance, underlining the importance of dance in the conservation of cultural heritage and in the articulation of local identities against national narratives.

Keywords: Esquela Tusuy; Uchumiri Peasant Community; barter; Andean identity; Andean rituals



Citation: Duche-Pérez, Aleixandre Brian, and Lolo Juan Mamani-Daza. 2024. Llamas, Barter and Travel Rituals: An Ethnographic Study on the Esquela Tusuy Dance of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, Condesuyos, Peru. *Religions* 15: 534. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050534>

Academic Editors: Stefan Bratosin and Mihaela-Alexandra Tudor

Received: 25 March 2024

Revised: 11 April 2024

Accepted: 12 April 2024

Published: 26 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Dance is a cultural manifestation that reflects the history, tradition, and values of a community, being not only expressions of joy and pleasure but also acts of resistance and affirmation of identities in the face of oppression and diaspora (McKenzie 2023). Furthermore, dance rituals act as bodily languages that communicate and negotiate social and personal tensions, offering a space for the expression of emotions and conflicts (Wilner 2022). In this vein, Sweet (2016) defines dance as a means of deep connection with the self, where the fusion of different dance forms becomes a path towards self-exploration and personal transformation, thus underlining the capacity of dance to cross cultural and personal boundaries and facilitate the creation of new bodily languages that express internal and external complexities.

The incorporation of reflective and ethnographic approaches in dance research proposes a methodology that emphasizes subjectivity and personal experience as valuable sources of knowledge (Sirotkina 2017; Wulff 2015). This allows for a deeper understanding of dance not merely as a series of movements but as a lived experience that encapsulates emotions, stories, and relationships.

Following these postulates, the relationship between anthropology and dance, explored through the anthropology of dance, underscores the understanding of dance not just as an artistic expression but as a window into the sociocultural, historical, and personal realities of communities and individuals. This intersectional discipline addresses how dance acts as a medium for communication, the expression of identity, ritual, and resistance within various cultural and social contexts.

Previous studies have shown how dance is viewed as a cultural practice that embodies and transmits the knowledge, values, and traditions of a community, serving as a means to explore the construction of social identities, gender, and power relations, which establishes dance as a cultural text that anthropologists can “read” to better understand human societies (Banks 2023; Reid 2022). In this context, the work of Katherine Dunham (1909–2006) becomes fundamental to this understanding, as through her ethnographic work in the Caribbean and her innovative teaching and performing method, she not only highlights the importance of dance as a form of cultural knowledge and as a bridge between different cultures, but her work also demonstrates how dance can be a site of cultural resistance and a way of preserving history and identity (Banks 2012; Chin 2010).

The study by Fleischer (2019) on blood pressure issues in a community in Ceilândia (Brazil) illustrates another dimension of dance anthropology, where corporeality and movement express and impact living conditions, health, and well-being, turning dance into a tool for understanding bodily and emotional experiences of individuals within their social and economic context. Similarly, the autoethnographic work of López Rodríguez (2019) on the fusion of flamenco and butoh shows how dance serves as a medium for exploration and personal expression, while reflecting on cultural intersections and fluid identities, focusing on self-exploration through dance to highlight the ability of movement to cross cultural and personal barriers, promoting a deeper understanding of oneself and the other. Additionally, the research by Thiagarajan and Mokhtar (2022) on the “Candy Girls”, a group of breast cancer survivors in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), who use dance as a means of rehabilitation and empowerment, underscores the power of dance to facilitate physical and emotional healing, and to build communities of support and resistance in the face of illness.

These works, intersecting, provide a comprehensive view of how the anthropology of dance can reveal the complexities of human experiences, situating dance at the heart of anthropological study. Through this lens, dance is revealed as a social and cultural phenomenon rich in meaning, capable of communicating and transforming human experience in its multiple dimensions.

A particular case can be observed in the “Esquela Tusuy” dance (or bell dance) of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, located in the district of Yanaquihua, Condesuyos Province (Arequipa, Peru), which, from a perspective that emerges from the intersection of dance anthropology and cultural studies, is recognized not only as an artistic expression but also as a means through which cultural identities and local histories are articulated, negotiated, and transmitted.¹

The “Esquela Tusuy” dance plays a crucial role in the safety and ritual practices of the peasants, serving both to alert about dangers during their travels and to honor the “Pachamama” and Apu “Coropuna” through protection and gratitude rituals associated with the well-being and safe return of the male llamas and travelers. Participants, who mimic the characteristics and behaviors of the male llamas through special clothing and masks, form a group of 9 to 11 individuals following choreographies led with discipline. The dance also includes elements of challenge, such as the dramatic depiction of the attempt to unload the llamas, and culminates in gratitude rituals where food and drinks are shared, reflecting the cultural complexity and richness of this tradition that goes beyond the simple act of dancing.

This dance is presented as a vital element of the cultural identity of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, incorporating practices, symbols, and narratives essential for understanding their cultural heritage and community cohesion. However, the process of recognizing and valuing this dance as a national cultural heritage faces several challenges.

First, the documentation and preservation of traditional cultural practices, such as the “Esquela Tusuy” dance, are at risk of erosion due to globalization, modernization, and generational change, highlighting the need for sensitive and detailed ethnographic methodologies to capture the richness and complexity of these cultural practices.² Second, the formal recognition of this dance as cultural heritage involves navigating bureaucratic systems and national discourses that may not fully align with local perceptions and values,

underscoring the tension between cultural preservation and patrimonialization processes and the importance of a collaborative and participatory approach in anthropological research, where the community's voices are at the center of the documentation and recognition process. Finally, its study opens questions about how dance practices can serve as a means for affirming local identities in the context of broader national narratives.³

Therefore, this study seeks to address how the "Esquela Tusuy" dance can be recognized, documented, and preserved as a vital expression of the cultural heritage of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, and what this process means for both the local community and the Peruvian nation as a whole.

2. Results

2.1. *The Peasants of Uchumiri and the "Barter"*

The peasant community of Uchumiri, situated more than 4000 m above sea level, is an area where agriculture is nonexistent. However, its inhabitants have adapted through an economy based on the herding of South American camelids, including sheep. Llamas play a central role in the economy due to their historical-cultural value during the era of barter; today, their importance is primarily cultural, being part of the collective memory and community life in Uchumiri.

Families in this region dedicate themselves to the care of alpacas and llamas, using alpaca fiber to create textiles that date from the pre-Hispanic to the colonial era, which is an essential part of their tradition. The most valuable items include ropes, slings, and sacks made with more resistant fiber, sourced from both alpacas and, especially, llamas. Meat is another important product, generally transported live to be sacrificed at the point of exchange during bartering.⁴

In contrast to Andean agricultural peasants⁵ (Apaza-Ticona et al. 2023; Gascón and Mamani 2022; Zimmerer 1993, 2017), the situation of the Uchumiri shepherds is distinct, especially in August when they conduct their ritual payment or "Tinkache" to both the "Pachamama" and Apu "Coropuna," situated in front of their community. This ceremonial act is performed in honor of their llamas, which are fundamental for "barter" with nearby agricultural towns, such as Chuquibamba, Solimana, and Yanaquihua, among others. This form of direct trade serves as a complementary and independent mechanism between both communities. It is complementary because it facilitates the exchange of products necessary for the survival of both economies; on one hand, textiles and on the other, grains, tubers, and fruits. It is independent since it revolves around the mutual benefit of the agricultural and pastoral economies. It is relevant to note that, from a geopolitical perspective, this "barter" system has been a precursor to fairs that contribute to the creation of settlements.

Moreover, "barter" has played a vital role in the peasant economy, facilitating a natural commercial exchange between different ecological zones. The peasants of Uchumiri, lacking cereals, tubers, or fruits, have known since ancestral times to organize trips to neighboring towns to obtain a variety of products necessary for their survival, thus strengthening the coexistence between agricultural valley communities and pastoral heights.

The barter system has not only had a significant impact on social relations, fostering the union among families through the establishment of godparent bonds through marriage, notably among in-laws, but this phenomenon also reflects the shepherds' capacity to expand across various ecological zones, even reaching the coastal areas. Similarly, the importance of barter within the "Esquela Tusuy" tradition underscores its fundamental role in the pre-Hispanic economy, indicating the conquest of territories both ecological and geopolitical and the strengthening of family ties, thus demonstrating that barter is more than a simple economic practice; it is a vital element that has woven the very structure of Andean communities throughout history.

2.2. *The "Esquela Tusuy" Dance*

The "Esquela Tusuy" dance could equally be considered as the "dance of the bells," those bells that farmers attach to the so-called male llama "leader" or also known as "the

head of the herd." During their travels, the llamas signal their arrival at villages through the jingle of their bells; moreover, on journeys that span several days, the herders opt to overnight in places they know, where they take measures to protect their animals. However, in remote areas, foxes find ways to steal or attack the llamas, and the sound of the bells alerts the herders to the presence of these predators, motivating them to rise and fend them off to safeguard their flock.

"Esquela Tusuy", they said before. . . we learned from our ancestors. . . to tinker with the llamas; now we also continue with the tradition. . . First, it would have been our grandparents, we follow them, who taught us all their learnings and customs, so we follow those same steps, by applying the fat (grease) we reach our tutelary hills, our animals, for everyone (Community member).

This dance encapsulates four significant stages in the economic cycle of the Uchumiri peasant herders: the initial one is linked to the farewell rituals for the llamas at the beginning of the journey, the second celebrates the return of the llama herders who left for the "barter", the third consists of the ritual of the return of the llama herders and the offering of gratitude for the acquired products. Each of these moments is distinguished by distinctive attributes in the execution of the dancers. The second and third moments represent a combination of unloading the goods brought back and the expression of gratitude towards "Pachamama" and the Apu "Coropuna" through the ritual. The conclusion marks the reunion of the entire community through a celebration that includes a lavish feast for all.

2.3. The Llama Ritual (Departure for Barter)

The worldview of the inhabitants of the Andes is not isolated from the events of the cosmos, integrating both living beings and inanimate objects of the earthly environment. Within this framework, alpacas and llamas, emblematic animals of the Andes, maintain a deep connection with pastoral families. This cosmology intertwines the circulation of water, seen as vital energy, with the earth, thus establishing a special link of the camelids with the aquatic element. It is considered that both the sun and water act as essential fertilizing agents for the life of the universe, where Wiraqochan represents not only these elements but also the vital energy that permeates both (the term "Wira" means fat in Quechua and blood in Aymara). In the Andean region, blood and fat are seen as essences of life, fundamental in both humans and animals, and the presence of fat in offerings to deities symbolizes the interdependence between man and camelids, underlining that neither the llama nor the alpaca could survive without humans, nor they without them. According to this tradition, camelids emerged from the "huku pacha" (the underworld) through ponds and springs, assigned to the families of the "Kay Pacha" (the terrestrial world) to care for and protect them, using only what is necessary from these beings. This way of life dictates the need to thank the deities for the gift of camelids through rituals, recognizing their vital coexistence.

These rituals are of great importance, as the animals are seen as family members, receiving care and affection as if they were children, even teaching the youngest to take responsibility for them from an early age. This union between pastoral families and South American camelids is founded on a kinship relationship within the Andean worldview, where it is considered that these animals have been granted by the deities.

Specifically in Uchumiri, the relationship with camelids, and particularly with llamas, takes on special relevance in August during the "Llama Tinkay" ritual, one of the oldest ceremonies in the Andean world, which sees the participation of families preparing for barter, the "Paq'os" (special figures in charge of leading the ritual), and the animals. After designating a specific day of this month, the herders look for the llamas in the nearby hills or wetlands, guiding the herd through the arid Andean climate, raising clouds of dust on their way, until they reach the main dwelling of one of the families, where the "Paq'os" await. This journey not only reflects the arduous task of the herders but also the profound spiritual and physical bond that unites the community, their deities, and the natural environment they inhabit (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Herding the llama troop to the homestead for the ritual.

Upon entering the homestead, the herders chant while playing the “tinya” (a small traditional drum), an instrument played by one of the women of the family. Dressed in garments that have been passed down from generation to generation, they represent a visible link with their ancestors. This entry marks the beginning of a significant moment in which the family, the herders, and their llamas come together, intertwining their lives in a ceremony (Figure 2). This is the “Llama Marking Ritual,” a crucial preparatory event for the herders and their llamas before embarking on the barter journey. This act not only reinforces the connection between them but also serves as a moment of blessing and protection for what is to come.



Figure 2. Women singing with their “tinya”.

Gathered in the courtyard that extends in front of the main dwelling, the community begins to assume their ceremonial roles. At this moment, the paqos, specialists in rituals, start their sacred work by offering tributes to the venerated deities: the “Pachamama” and the Apu “Coropuna”,⁶ also known as the “golden mountain” (Figure 3).

The Paq’o meticulously prepares his ceremonial space, beginning his prayers to the gods of his ancestors and asking for their blessing. Looking up towards the imposing Coropuna, they offer corn chicha, pouring the first glass toward the ground in the direction of the sunrise. The beginning of the ritual is marked by the opening of the usnu, understood as the portal to the deities; it is the way through which both the Apus and Pachamama are nourished. Incense is used as the initial element, while coca leaves, chicha, and aguardiente serve to dispel lethargy and prepare the community for connection with this ancient rite. The ritual table is also adorned with corn and fat from a llama or alpaca. On one side of the courtyard, the “iranta” is placed, the sacred space for communication with the divine,

where firewood and llama dung are placed to be burned, presenting the offerings for the common wellbeing.



Figure 3. The Paq'os pay homage to their deities.

With the completion of this initial rite, the herders and drovers proceed to choose the llamas that will be distinguished with colorful wool earrings. This selection process requires considerable effort, as the llamas do not allow themselves to be easily captured; therefore, it is carried out in collaboration between two or more people, who use ropes they have made themselves to hold the animals⁷ (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Selection of llamas for marking.

Once the llamas are captured, the marking process begins. The herders take out red garments, similar to flowers (Tik'as), and using a special thread, proceed to decorate the llamas' ears. The Paq'o, using incense, purifies the selected animals and applies a colorful mixture, similar to ochre, on their skin. Then, they are adorned with esquelas (bells), as part of the tradition to mark and protect our llamas, ensuring their wellbeing and a safe return from their journey. "This is how we are accustomed to marking and tinkering our llamas so that nothing happens to us and we return as we have left" (Community leader), indicating that they are ready to undertake the barter journey. In this ceremonial act, chicha is also offered to the animals, showing that, just like the human members of the community, they too participate in the rituals and are considered an integral part of the family (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Smudging and marking of the llamas' ears.

They leave the enclosure where the ritual of the now-marked llamas took place, carrying their new earrings and bells, moving to the next step which involves preparing the necessary load for the journey: “Just the same, let’s suppose they dance, we have a custom, so to say we dance all that dance just for that, for example, I have in August, we already know how we do the custom, as I tell you, female llama, then male, then we eat, we roast a roast, an arm, a leg, then we tinker the male llamas, after that’s finished, we always tinker, we tie the llama nicely with esquila, then after finishing that we do tica to the ears (earrings to the ears), after finishing, we dance that is the custom” (Community leader) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Departure of the llamas from the ritual and the herders with their esquelas.

2.4. *The Arrival of the Male Llama Herders—Drover*

This segment of the dance is the core of the performance, in which the community members adopt the figure of the llamas, taking on the role of these animals that left for barter. Thus, they present themselves laden, emulating the llamas, and even replicate the movements and expressions of the camelids. They strive to mimic the manners of their faithful travel companions who experienced multiple adventures since they left their home, throughout the exchange, and upon their arrival at the point where the barter took place over extended days. They even represent the tasks shared with the llamas, such as transporting harvests to the farmer’s collection space. Finally, they dramatize the return, coming back to their community or base with the goods acquired in the exchange (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Scene of the llama herders' arrival at their Uchumiri community.

The scene captures the palpable exhaustion of the beasts under the weight of their loads, filled with fruits, potatoes, corn, ceramics, and a variety of other essential goods, while the bundles they carry are a creation of the farmers themselves, made from queñua sticks, a distinctive element of the region whose naturally curved shape is ideal for their function.

The men in disguise carry loads of fruit in their backpacks. The backpacks are padded with straw to protect the products, such as potatoes or fruits, considering that the journey lasts several days, which forces them to take breaks to rest along the way, making it necessary to relieve the beasts of their load repeatedly so they can feed or hydrate.

There are those who transport sacks full of corn, potatoes, or beans, among others, which are also carefully secured on the back of the llamas. It is important to note that each llama carries a weight that varies between 20 and 30 kg. These foods are essential for the annual subsistence, hence the extreme care in their handling to avoid damage.

Other llamas come loaded with firewood or dry yareta, products that have been collected during the return journey. None of the animals can return without a load, as this would negatively impact the economy of the peasant home, hence the pressing need to collect all the necessary supplies to survive throughout the year.

2.5. *The Esquela Tusuy Dance (Central Part)*

First, we must remember that this dance represents the peasants and their male llamas returning from their journey to the community. The “Esquela Tusuy” dance allows us to observe two events that are carried out together. It becomes a game of catching the loaded llamas, some with sacks full of fruits, such as apples, mangoes, figs, or prickly pears, products not found in their community; others carry firewood for their kitchens to prepare their meals, whether on the journey or for their homes; other llamas bring potatoes in their sacks, small pots, whatever is useful and serves the community. On the other hand, the community family waits with a thanksgiving ritual for the return of the drover peasants. We will describe both acts independently, aiming to address the attire, steps, choreography, games, and musicians.

The attire is very traditional to the area; we could say that the dancers dress in their everyday clothes, as is the custom in their community: the men wear ojotas (made from used tires), although in the past, they wore small shoes or sandals made of llama leather, fastened with strips of the same material (it can still be observed that some peasants and their wives use them, especially on festive days or because it is the occasion of the festival that honors the travelers and the llamas). They wear trousers made of bayeta or coarse woolen cloth in gray or white (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The “Esquela Tusuy” dancer showing his costume and dance implements.

On the upper part, they wear a white jacket made of bayeta. Both the trousers and the jacket are very warm. The Uchumiri area is extremely cold, with icy winds, so their clothing must be in accordance with the climate and environment. The jacket is fastened with a chumpi or colored belt. On the head, they wear a chullo or woolen cap, over which a hat is placed, and this is accompanied by a llama mask, colorful earrings, and ribbons. It is worth mentioning that this is the outfit they use for traveling, their everyday attire.

“It’s not quite the same as before, we didn’t have these fabrics before, nothing, nothing, it was only bayeta, maquito, with sleeves, unqu (vest)” (Community member).

“Here is a gentleman named Manuel Ramos, he would weave and sew the looms for everyone, the rest of us would buy things like the shirt, the jacket, on top there’s gerga and inside the shirt, and then the makito, after that there’s the chest piece, then there’s the wadador made from llama skin, it’s similar to the (k’ara watana)... yes, just like that. You tie it up to this part to protect yourself and to prevent the pants from wearing out..., the wardador is made of goat leather, and the chest piece is of little llama... and the bell is never missing... we also make the mesa to reach... we ask for everyone, we tinka with the chicha” (Dancer).

Over the body, they wear a rope that crosses from one side to the other, used to secure the load on their back. They also carry the Peruvian flag, a symbol of national identity. The load can consist of sacks of food, bags of potatoes, corn, or even dry firewood or yareta that they gather along the way.

The leader of the troop holds in his hands a sling, a sign of his leadership, with which he maintains order among the other members, especially when they misbehave or stray from formation. The other dancers carry in their hands the “esquelas” or bells, tied together with ropes and placed on the llamas. These bells sound as they move or dance.

Another prominent member is the commissioner, the authority of the town, a person who commands respect and also is responsible for maintaining it, imposing penalties. His term lasts for one year and he represents the community in all its activities. In the “Esquela Tusuy” dance, he performs his accompanying function. He is dressed like the other peasants, differentiated by carrying a stick adorned with colored ribbons and his lliclla tied to his back. Another participant in the dance, when the unloading of products

begins, is the chief's wife. She is dressed according to the customs of her community (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The current and former commissioner with his wife.

The traditional shoes or sandals, made of llama leather, colorful skirts, a white blouse, a vest or bodice over the blouse, and the traditional lliclla crossed on the back and tied at the front, are characteristic and very striking. The hats, made of compressed wool and adorned with a variety of colorful ribbons, highlight the elegance and personality of the community woman, who are embellished with flowers to further beautify their presence. She, with the help of other women, participates only in the rituals and in the unloading of the merchandise resulting from the barter.

The steps and choreography performed by the dancers are in rhythm with the “tinya” and “quenas” that accompany the parade. The dancers move with a martial step to the sound of the esquelas or bells. They enter the estate (or the place where they have to deliver the load) in a line, one or two at a time (as the case may be), advancing, making gestures, and emitting a sound like “hop, hop. . . hop” according to the progress of the dancers. To the sound of “hop, hop. . . hop”, they lift their legs up to about waist height to advance by jumping or taking a martial step. To the beat of the steps, they make the esquelas they carry in their hands sound, creating a commotion, as if to scare away the evil spirits or animals that want to harm the troop of merchant shepherds, marking their presence wherever they are (Figure 10).

The one who directs the steps and the choreography is the male llama or the leader, also known as the chief of the llama troop. He goes in front of the troop of dancers (remember that they all represent the troop of llamas); this character extends his sling and, based on his advance, the dancers in line follow the sling (the sling serves to control and the llamas know that if they do not follow the sling, they can receive a hit). The organization within the estate or the place of delivery of the products resulting from the barter includes a variety of choreographies, jumps, dances, and the ringing of their esquelas; based on the cultural transmission of the peasants of Uchumiri, they perform bodily and sequential movements, moving to the right or left (Figure 11).



Figure 10. The troop leader leading the other members of the dance.



Figure 11. The chief directing the dance with his sling.

In their dance choreography, they perform lines, curves, and dance in parallel, always jumping and ringing their *esquelas* to the rhythm of the sound of their voices applied in each movement. The other dancers advance obeying the movement of the chief through his sling (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Natural choreography of the peasants of Uchumiri.

One of the central acts of the “Esquela Tusuy” choreography is the moment when the chief directs the unloading of the products each of the llamas carries. These come loaded with exchanged products; the dancers show on their backs how the llamas are loaded, with sacks, bags, or simply with firewood or yareta as fuel for their homes. The chief, along with his wife, begins to direct the first llama for unloading. However, the llamas are rebellious, it is not easy to lower their load, they are elusive, and this same characteristic is simulated by the dancers, who imitate the attitudes observed in their communities when the peasants returned from performing the barter.

The chief, with his sling, and the wife, with ropes, head to the first indicated llama to unload it; meanwhile, the others continue dancing to the rhythm of the esquelas. The male dancing llama escapes and begins to run around the other dancers; the wife and chief look for a way to catch it, chasing it with their ropes until they capture it. The chief throws himself at the legs of the male dancing llama to prevent it from escaping, and the wife ties it up; after great effort, the male llama gives in, and they manage to strip it of its load. The couple collects the load to hand it over to the Paq’os (a detail that will be described in the fourth aspect, corresponding to the return ritual) (Figure 13).



Figure 13. The chief directing along with his wife to catch the first male llama.

It is important to mention that, as they proceed with the unloading, other male llamas try to free themselves from the excess load. They even mount the women. They charge at the chief and the women, trying to knock them down. This complicates the unloading, creating a tumult among the dancers, struggles, and even forced acrobatics to flee or capture the male llamas. This part of the dance continues until all the male llamas have been unloaded, which takes a considerable amount of time (Figure 14).

A main act within the dance is called “la Taba”. It is a dance game in which the llamas juggle around a round ceramic brought as part of the barter (a small clay bowl), along with the troop leader. The llamas stand over the bowl, heels together, and in a jump, they try to lift the bowl as high as possible, with the task of the chief being to catch it. Through jumps or diving towards where the bowl falls, the chief captures the clay bowl.

This game is carried out amidst the other male llamas participating in the dance, who ring their bells on their knees and emit their characteristic sounds “hop, hop... hop”.

All the dancers participating in this festivity are peasants of various ages. Generally, they do not prepare to participate; they do not act but express their reality, demonstrated since ancient times. They dance naturally, highlighting their identity and preserving the collective memory passed down from generation to generation. Although there are no written records, it is likely that this tradition dates back to pre-Hispanic times, given that barter is a fundamental part of the ancestral peasant economy (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Captured male llama and struggle with other male llamas.



Figure 15. The male llama jumps and tosses the clay bowl.

The musicians, who are also part of the dancers, consist of *quenás* and *tinyas*. The *quenás* are played by men, who dance to the rhythm of their music, turning and contorting their bodies, advancing along with the dancers of the “*Esquila Tusuy*”. The women, for their part, play the *tinyas*, emitting sounds that mark the step of the dancers. Within the dance, the women sing, uttering phrases in praise of “the llamas that are in the corral, that’s the custom, so jajooooo”.

The lyrics of the songs performed by the ladies of the community are adapted to the moment; for example, on the day of our presence, the performance was based on the inauguration of their cultural center, an event attended by local authorities, and they sang:

Nuqa kunan kashani
 Now I am
 Bandera peruana k’aywiykusqq
 With the Peruvian flag on my chest
 Manan nuqa desfilanichu
 I am not parading
 Nuqan como peruano lihítimo kani
 I am a legitimate Peruvian
 Muchas gracias, señores autoridades
 Thank you very much, gentlemen authorities
 Muchas gracias, señores autoridades.
 Thank you very much, gentlemen authorities

Kunan punchay qusqaykusum
 Today we gather together
 Comunidadpaq aniv ersariompi
 For the anniversary of our community
 Manan nuqa riqsirqanichu
 I have not known
 Manan nuqa qunqarkanichu
 I have not forgotten
 Bandera peruana k'aywirikuyta
 To wear the Peruvian flag on my chest
 Yiqrallayman churaykamuy
 Put it on my chest (arm)
 Yiqrallayman churaykamuy
 Put it on my chest (chest)
 Haphiyuruspa munasaq
 Holding, I will want
 Patroncituta munakusaq
 The little patron, I will love.

The songs are directed to their Apus (Coropuna), so that their ancestral gods may fulfill their requests, especially for the people who are going to barter: “may they bring rich mangos, may they enjoy good health.” They also refer to their animals, especially to the male llama or “Tankay”, to whom they sing in the circle of those present. To the sound of the esquelas and with the shout “Uchj, uchj, uchj,... open up, damn it!” they signal to the llamas to get ready to be adorned with the esquelas and thus mark them. In this way, they perform the tribute to their Apus, as part of their cosmology and/or ancestral magical-religious beliefs, singing and praising so that their petitions are heard and, especially, attended to.

The instruments have a pre-Hispanic origin and are one of the most important in the Andean world. It is worth mentioning that the quena is one of the oldest pre-Inca wind instruments that the community members of Uchumiri continue to use in their ceremonies and rituals, as is the case of the “Esquela Tusuy” dance, and it is present both in the dance and in the ritual of the payment to the earth “Pachamama” and to the Apu “Coropuna” as a synonym of celebration and respect. The tinya, companion of the quena, is a percussion instrument made with materials from the area, such as llama or sheep leather, tightened with strips of leather from the same animals. This instrument, as ancient as the quena and of pre-Inca origin, possesses a spiritual and medicinal connotation within the Andean worldview.

“Just the quena then and the drum and the tinya is from the llama... chant (ay lilla huaylilla imallampi kashanqui, antapuna qoriyuq, colqueyoc) hallelujah hallelujah how are you that walk in the puna with copper, gold, and silver, that is tinya” (Dancer).

2.6. Return Ritual of the Llama Herders and Gratitude for the Products They Bring

In an important part of the homestead, the two Paq'os are found extending the payment table or ritual table. It is August, the month in which the “Holy Earth Pachamama” must be rewarded; this fact is widely recognized in the Andean world. The peasants of Uchumiri are fully aware of such responsibility. Therefore, in the “Esquela Tusuy” dance, they are present both in the farewell ritual of the llamas and the peasants going to barter and in their return, thus thanking the return of “my relatives who have come back healthy” and the products they have brought to be consumed by the family during the year. In front of the Apu “Coropuna”, the return ritual of the llama herders begins (Figure 16).



Figure 16. The Paq'os pray, give thanks, and ask for blessings from Pachamama and Apu Coropuna.

We can observe that, along with the dance of unloading the male llamas, the chief delivers the products obtained through barter to the Paq'os. Tired from unloading, the chief approaches the ritual table and, on his knees, delivers the products; simultaneously, the mother of the house offers coca to the visitors and authorities participating in the activity. The Paq'o approaches and offers chicha or a drink to the chief as a sign of gratitude and smokes a cigarette with all those present at the ritual table. Thus, the Paq'o receives the load and, with each load received, offers chicha or some alcoholic beverage. All the visitors share the food and drink from the ritual table (Figure 17).



Figure 17. The chief delivers the load to the ritual table.

Once all the load has been delivered, the community family begins to offer food to the participants. Dancers, musicians, and the relatives of the homestead owners gather to enjoy what the family has prepared: roasted alpaca meat, boiled potatoes, and toasted corn. The feast turns into a family event as a sign of gratitude to the "Holy Earth Pachamama" and Apu "Coropuna" for the food they have received and, especially, for the health and return of the travelers who performed the barter (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Cutting the roasted meat for the return feast of the travelers who performed the barter.

3. Materials and Methods

The methodology employed in this research on the “Esquela Tusuy” dance⁸ of the Uchumiri Peasant Community is based on an intensive ethnographic approach, reflecting a deep immersion in the cultural and social context under study. During a two-year active research period (2022–2023), over three hundred hours of participant observation were conducted at events, practices, and celebrations related to the “Esquela Tusuy” dance. This approach allowed for a deep and nuanced understanding of the cultural and social dynamics surrounding this artistic expression.

Fieldwork was complemented with sixty semi-structured interviews with a variety of key actors within the community, including dancers, musicians, community leaders, and community members actively involved in the organization and realization of the dance. The interviews, conducted in Quechua and Spanish, were essential for delving into the meanings, stories, and individual and collective perceptions about the “Esquela Tusuy,” as well as for understanding its role in affirming community identity and intergenerational cultural transmission.

Data collection was primarily carried out in the Condesuyos province, with specific visits to the Uchumiri Peasant Community, and extended to other locations on special occasions related to the dance. This translocal approach enabled the mapping of interaction networks and cultural flows connecting Uchumiri with other communities and regional contexts. Additionally, complementary material such as video recordings, historical photographs, and archival documents were analyzed to construct a broader and more detailed contextual framework of the “Esquela Tusuy” practice.

The ethnographic relationship was built on mutual respect, trust, and long-term commitment, facilitating access to significant spaces and moments of community life. The researchers’ stance, marked by an ethical commitment to faithful and respectful representation, was continually negotiated through dialogue and the informed consent of the participants. This reflective and critical approach to ethnographic methodology underscores the importance of considering power dynamics, intersubjectivity, and ethics in anthropological research.

The methodology applied in this study on the “Esquela Tusuy” combines ethnographic techniques with an approach sensitive to the context and cultural particularities of the Uchumiri Peasant Community. This methodological framework allowed for a deep and rich exploration of the dance as a living cultural practice, revealing its multiple layers of meaning and its central role in the communal life of Uchumiri.

4. Discussion

The “Esquela Tusuy” dance reveals multiple layers of meaning and function within the peasant community of Uchumiri, located in a high-altitude region where agriculture

is unviable, and the economy is based on the herding of camelids, especially llamas and alpacas. This dance, intrinsically linked to barter and ritual practices of gratitude and protection, stands as a central element of cultural identity, community cohesion, and interaction with the spiritual and natural environment.

The dance reflects and reinforces the barter-based economy of the community, an economic system that favors the exchange of products essential for the survival of Andean communities. Through this practice, social bonds and godparent relationships are established and maintained, highlighting the importance of barter not just as an economic transaction but as the fabric of the Andean social structure.

Moreover, the “Esquela Tusuy” acts as a bridge between the spiritual and the earthly, honoring both Pachamama and Apu Coropuna. The marking and gratitude rituals incorporated into the dance underline the Andean worldview, where humans, animals, and deities share an interconnected and mutually dependent existence: By mimicking the behavior and characteristics of llamas, participants reaffirm their cultural identity and strengthen community ties. The “Esquela Tusuy” is much more than an artistic manifestation; it is an act of cultural affirmation, a means of spiritual connection, and a pillar of the barter economy in the Uchumiri community. Through this dance, social relationships are articulated, traditions are honored, and contemporary challenges are faced, ensuring the transmission of a rich cultural heritage to future generations.

The “Esquela Tusuy” dance is inscribed within a complex cultural and spiritual context, serving not only as an expression of joy and community cohesion but also as an act of resistance and affirmation of identity. This phenomenon aligns with McKenzie’s (2023) observations on dance as a cultural manifestation that reflects history, tradition, and values, also acting as acts of resistance and affirmation of identities. However, while McKenzie focuses on resistance against oppression and diaspora, the “Esquela Tusuy” emphasizes resistance against the economic and environmental adversities of its Andean context.

Wilner (2022) and Sweet (2016) highlight dance as a bodily language that negotiates social and personal tensions and as a means of deep connection with the self, respectively. The “Esquela Tusuy” reflects these perspectives by acting as a bodily language that communicates the relationship between human beings, animals, and the natural and spiritual environment, reinforcing the Andean worldview of an interconnected existence; but it could also be seen as a lived experience that encapsulates emotions, stories, and relationships, although this analysis does not directly address the subjectivity of the individuals involved in the dance, focusing more on its community and spiritual function (Sirotkina 2017; Wulff 2015).

Furthermore, the “Esquela Tusuy” serves as an expression of cultural identity and community cohesion, as similarly suggested in the studies by Banks (2023) and Reid (2022), considering dance as a rich cultural text in meanings, which would resonate with the function of the “Esquela Tusuy” as a carrier of the collective memory and traditions of Uchumiri.

Although Fleischer (2019) and López Rodríguez (2019) emphasize dance as a tool to understand bodily and emotional experiences or as a means of exploration and personal expression, noting its relevance in individual contexts and well-being, there is a notable divergence with how the “Esquela Tusuy” integrates within the community, focusing more on cultural affirmation and collective spiritual connection. In contrast, the research by Thiagarajan and Mokthar (2022) on dance for rehabilitation and empowerment finds a parallel with “Esquela Tusuy” in its function as an act of preservation and affirmation of collective health and well-being, albeit with a perspective that privileges the community over the individual.

5. Conclusions

It is concluded that the dance of the “Esquela Tusuy” is revealed as a cultural practice that encapsulates the complexities of human experience, resonating with and diverging from existing academic perspectives. This dance is unveiled as a social and cultural

phenomenon that communicates, transforms, and affirms human experience in its multiple dimensions, positioning itself as an act of resistance, affirmation of identity, and spiritual connection within the Uchumiri community.

Given the previous considerations, the need for an interdisciplinary approach and participative methodologies in future research for the cultural analysis of dances is suggested. An interdisciplinary approach that combines anthropology, ethnomusicology, history, and psychology will allow capturing the complexity of the dance as a cultural phenomenon, covering its social, cultural, historical, and emotional dimensions. Furthermore, the use of participative methodologies that directly involve community members in the research will promote a deeper and more respectful understanding of dance practices, positioning participants as co-creators of knowledge.

Finally, the documentation and preservation of traditional dances are presented as imperatives for future research, along with the conduct of comparative analyses and longitudinal studies that can reveal the dynamics of dance in relation to cultural identity, resistance, and spirituality over time. The incorporation of subjectivity and the exploration of cultural resistance and empowerment, inspired by previous work and recommendations from authors such as [Sirotkina \(2017\)](#), [Wulff \(2015\)](#), and Katherine Dunham, could significantly enrich the field of dance anthropology, contributing not only to academic knowledge but also to the preservation and celebration of cultural diversity through its dance traditions.

Author Contributions: In this ethnographic study on the “Esquela Tusuy” dance of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, all contributions were made jointly by the researchers. They collaborated on each aspect of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, and project administration. Every facet of the research was conducted with equal partnership and shared effort, reflecting the collaborative nature of the work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The authors declare that this research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the research was based on non-intrusive public observations and voluntary interviews with participants informed about the purpose of the study, without direct intervention or manipulation of behaviors.

Informed Consent Statement: For the conduct of this study on the “Esquela Tusuy” dance of the Uchumiri Peasant Community, informed consent was obtained from all individuals involved in the study. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted, respecting at all times the willingness and privacy of the participants. In cases where participants were directly identified, written informed consent was obtained for the publication of this research, ensuring their full understanding and agreement with the terms of participation and information disclosure.

Data Availability Statement: In accordance with the data availability policies of MDPI journals, this study promotes transparency and open access to research data. The data supporting the findings of this research on the Esquela Tusuy dance of the Uchumiri peasant community in Condesuyos, Peru, include audio and video recordings, interview transcripts, and detailed ethnographic observations. Due to ethical and privacy restrictions associated with the protection of the studied community, these data cannot be fully shared publicly. However, to request access to these data, please contact the corresponding author’s email.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ This approach aligns with [Reid’s \(2022\)](#) studies on Caribbean dances and [Fleischer’s \(2019\)](#) exploration of the relationship between corporeality and social conditions, as well as with [López Rodríguez’s \(2019\)](#) autoethnography, which highlights dance as a space for exploring fluid identities and crossing cultural barriers.
- ² Similar to those adopted by [Fleischer \(2019\)](#) in his study on bodily experiences in specific contexts.
- ³ This aligns with [López Rodríguez’s \(2019\)](#) focus on exploring dance as a site of cultural intersection and fluid identity.

- ⁴ “Barter” is a practice of exchanging goods or services without using money as a means of transaction and is notable for its socio-economic and cultural importance in various Andean communities. These barter practices not only involve the exchange of tangible products such as animals, food, or crafts but also the exchange of values, social relationships, and cultural concepts among participants (Ferraro 2011; Argumedo and Pimbert 2010).
- ⁵ “Peasant farmers” are individuals who live and work in rural areas, dedicating themselves to small-scale agriculture. This form of agriculture is characterized by the use of traditional practices and techniques, passed down from generation to generation, and is strongly tied to local customs and culture. Peasant farmers typically cultivate a variety of crops mainly for self-consumption and, in some cases, for local exchange or sale in nearby markets. This type of agriculture is essential for the subsistence of peasant families and plays a crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable management of natural resources, and preservation of local culture and traditions.
- ⁶ Apu Coropuna, a snowy peak that rises majestically to 6425 m above sea level, is deeply revered, not only in present times but also by the ancient Quechua Incas, who considered it a sacred place for conducting religious rituals and offerings. This act of veneration connects the community with its spiritual roots and the millennia-old tradition that continues to this day.
- ⁷ Two testimonies allow for a deeper understanding. First Testimony: “For example, in the morning, in the afternoon, for dawn, we go out to the field where the females are brought to the mothers in the corral, we say as a custom wirata churasun, kay mamay quikunapaq (we are going to put grease for the mother females) in the corral. Thus, we put bait, then we also take a little drink there, chicha, everything, thus we tinker. After tinkering, we make a sign, cut small pieces of wood like this, then we drive them to the hill, then we return home. We are in the corral again with the males also, so to start, we put those ribbons, bait, reach the rings, we put the bait with grains of corn, with all colors of corn, we tinker our chicha, and as I say again, we start roasting the meat, we roast leg, arm, like this to make sama, which we all who are here, on a family visit, have to eat. Then it ends, we eat everything, that’s how it is, then we cut the meat, put a table, just then they return. Then we tie the males to tinker, a pair here, a pair there, with a rope like this, we put a bell on each male, two bells, on this side two bells as well, ready like that, we tinker, tinker our chicha, with a little pisco, well this old man goes to rest with my animals and my dogs. Now we are going to put their flowers, their ribbons, ribbon for this one, for this one, grab it by its ear, there we make special little flowers for their ears, everyone gets a headband, turn and it’s finished, yajooooo, everything is joy, tinkering and singing, the ladies” (Dancer). Second testimony: “The first tinkacho is for initiating ch’isi (dusk), which means to allow the mountain spirit to emerge, for our mother earth. There is a place, for our mountain spirit you bring fat (ullpu) and all the ingredients for the offering, after having a good meal, there you perform the tinkacho and then return. This is all night that you’re staying overnight... From there, the next day you go out to the glory, early you see the stars, and then you return again. That’s all” (Dancer).
- ⁸ Academic literature on “Esquela Tusuy” has not been identified, and research on the historical and cultural growth of the peasant community of Uchumire, as well as several towns in the area, are scarce and characterized by bureaucratic or political-administrative documentation. However, it is plausible to consider that this dance has pre-Incan roots, given the use of certain instruments, rituals focused on their male llamas, and the natural trade practices of the Uchumiri shepherds.

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