

# “Its spirit is strong:” Shawi Spirits, Healers & Diarrhea in the Amazon

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## Background

Diarrheal disease is a worldwide concern. In the Balsapuerto region of the Peruvian Amazon, the Shawi are a prominent Amazonian Indigenous group who still use traditional medical practices and have maintained strong spiritual belief systems.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous perceptions of illness may not always reflect known biomedical causes of disease, making some health interventions ineffective.

## Objectives

We aimed to understand how Indigenous perceptions of health might impact the effectiveness of diarrheal disease interventions.

The objectives were to:

- Characterize cosmological and spiritually perceived causes of diarrhea
- Explore how the Shawi traditional health system manages diarrhea
- Compare Shawi and biomedical understanding of risk factors for diarrhea

## Methods

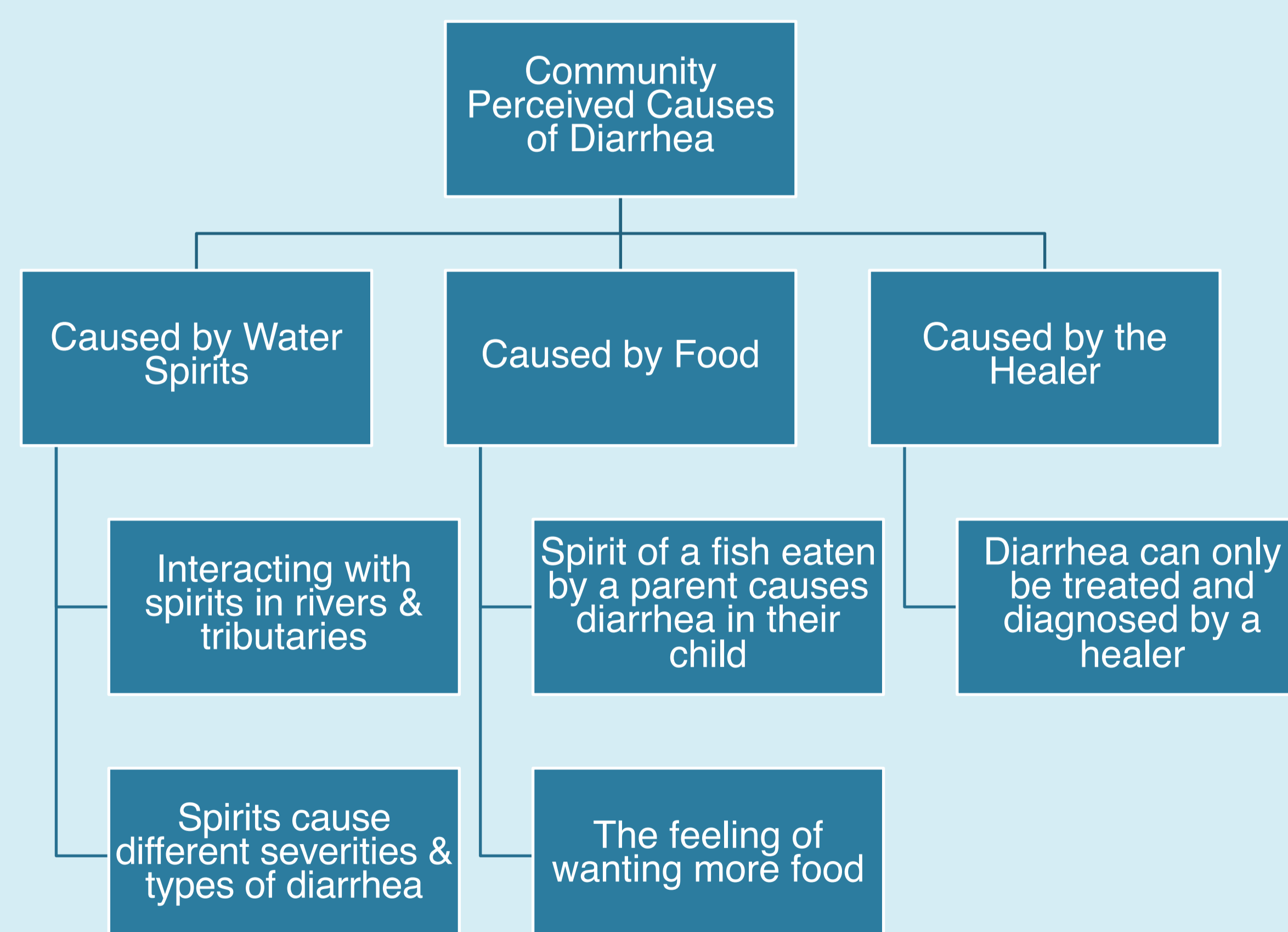
- Semi-structured interviews (n=22) were conducted in two Shawi communities in the Balsapuerto District of Peru.
- Phenomenology and comparative thematic analysis guided data collection and analysis. The analytical approach included:
  - Using Atlas.TI software to code and analyze interview transcripts for recurrent convergent and divergent themes.
  - Triangulating themes with findings from academic journals and ethnographies to ensure validity.

## Results

*“The water as well you must treat with respect, because within the water there are spirits.”*

*“Its [the serpent’s] spirit is strong. It can cause diarrhea in children and hemorrhage in women. When you see it in the path, the following day the diarrhea or hemorrhage can begin.”*

### Perceived causes of diarrhea



## References

(1) Hofmeijer et al. (2013). Community vulnerability to the health effects of climate change among Indigenous populations in the Peruvian Amazon: A case study from Panaillo and Nuevo Progreso. *Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change*, 18(7), 957-978. (2) Nawaz, H., Rahman, M.A., Graham, D., Katz, D.L., & Jekel, J.F. (2001). Health risk behaviors and health perceptions in the Peruvian Amazon. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 65(3), 252-256.

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## Discussion

- Spiritually perceived causes of diarrhea reflect:
  - Shawi subsistence lifestyle.
  - Belief in spirits of the living environment (plants, animals, rivers).
  - Failure to respect the water, and the spirits that reside there.
- Shawi believe traditional healers can cause diarrhea, but are essential to diagnosis and treatment of diarrhea.
- Diarrhea caused by feelings of hunger could be related to food security.

## Next Steps

- Continued research on Indigenous illness perceptions related to:
  - Spiritual beliefs and illnesses caused by traditional healers.
  - How Indigenous perceptions may relate to biomedical risk factors.
- Need for health interventions which combine Indigenous and biomedical medicinal knowledge.

## Conclusion

- Many Shawi perceptions of illness do not reflect bio-medical causes of diarrhea (hygiene, sanitation, parasites).
- Perceptions correlate with Shawi cosmology, spiritual beliefs, and the Shawi traditional health system.
- Current interventions for diarrheal disease do not recognize community perceptions, rendering them ineffective.<sup>2</sup>
- Understanding and appreciating Indigenous health perceptions is key to improving the design of health interventions.<sup>2</sup>



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