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**A Journey Towards Wholeness:  
Sumak Kawsay and the Voices of the Ecuadorian Amazon**

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A JOURNEY TOWARDS WHOLENESS:  
*SUMAK KAWSAY* AND THE VOICES OF THE ECUADORIAN  
AMAZON

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**Introduction**

Since the Spanish conquest, Amazonian civilizations in Ecuador have suffered the violent imposition of exogenous models in the form of development and modernity speeches, how they should understand their endemic realities (Lorenzo García 1999, Wasserstrom and Bustamante 2015). Witnessing the rupture of their sacred relationship with nature, their Mother Nature.

Given the continuous asphyxiation of their dignities, these civilizations decided to wake up together with the peoples of the Sierra raising one of the strongest socio-political movements in Latin America in the 80s (Larrea 2004, de la Torre 2006, Clark and Marc 2007, Martin and Wilmer 2008, Jamenson 2011). Throughout the history of this activism, they managed to gradually accommodate their voices and aspirations as cultural-ecological alternative entities within the coexistence pact called the Ecuadorian State (Becker 2008, Reed 2011). The *Sumak Kawsay* was born under this resistance scenario, which has led to the establishment of alliances between the Indigenous Movement with environmentalists, intellectuals and academics (Altmann 2013). *Sumak Kawsay* for seeking truce, as a process of reconciliation between the Modern World and the Ancestral World of Indigenous peoples (Acosta 2013). The term draws on various proposals, trying to crystallize something different, alternative in order to find common ways to resolve conflicts, forgiveness and above all, restoring harmony between humans and nature (Durán López 2011).

*Sumak Kawsay* as a guiding principle for a future multicultural coexistence pact has been included in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 along with the recognition of collective rights for Indigenous peoples and Nature as a holder of rights (Ecuadorian

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<sup>1</sup> The positions of this article are an exclusive responsibility of the author, and do not necessarily represent the point of view on the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.

Constitution 2008). However the project of *Sumak Kawsay*, as any process of negotiation, has contradictions, multiple views and different interpretations. There is now a power struggle for the proclamation and interpretation of the term and consequently how needs to be implemented. Therefore, Indigenous peoples are now facing the dilemma on whether they should claim the term as their own or on the contrary, they must be express clearly that it is an invention and that also the Ecuadorian State is responsible for making its own projection of the significance of it, rather than decoding it in collaboration with them.

All this in a context in which memory, protest and resistance to the claim to be different are being criminalized in Ecuador as can be evidenced by the events of the last few years<sup>2</sup>. It also seems that the national development is understood under the same standards, involving the destruction of what is most sacred to Amazonian peoples: life<sup>3</sup>. Causing Amazonian peoples to be orphans, steered away from their roots, and forcing them to belong to a State where they are clearly marginalized. Condemning them to a lower social stratum in which they are poor, without access to basic services and economic resources. In addition, they are subjected to racial and savagery judgments.

Consequently, Amazonian peoples feel doubly orphans: without their Mother Earth without their adoptive father, the State. They feel trapped in a situation of marginalization, disadvantage and above all, despair and disagreement with themselves. In modern psychology this condition has been termed as solastalgia (Albretch 2011).

Therefore, addressing this solastalgic fierce urgency of Amazonian societies becomes necessary. This article aims to revive the dialogue that Ecuador should have about the consolidation of alternative dignities. To do this, the voices of the Ecuadorian

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/02/ecuador-murder-jose-tendetza-el-mirador-mine-project>  
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/ecuador>  
<http://amazonwatch.org/news/2015/0313-ecuadorian-indigenous-movement-unites-in-defense-of-territory>  
<http://www.elpais.cr/2015/10/13/organizaciones-denunciaran-en-cidh-casos-de-mujeres-y-pueblos-no-contactados/>

<sup>3</sup> The Ecuadorian government is intending to expand the oil frontier of the Ecuadorian Amazon to the South-Central region under the so-called “XI Ronda Petrolera” project. The oil blocks comprise an area of approximately 3.6 million hectares, affecting 76% of the total area of Indigenous territories in the provinces of Pastaza and Morona Santiago representing 100% territories of the Achuar, Andoa, Shiwiar and Sápara Nationalities and 97% of the territory of the Kichwa Nationality (Mazabanda, 2013). These oil blocks are often combined with mining concessions (Rafael Poveda, Ministry of Strategic Resources, October 2015).

Amazon have been heard aiming to collectively build, under standards of respect for cultural diversity and not only under the banner of Ecuadorian citizenship, the true *Sumak Kawsay*.

The following lines drawn on activities that the author has performed for the fieldwork stage of her master's thesis. These activities consisted on encounters with Indigenous organizations' leaders and the coexistence of the author with Amazonian societies in the provinces of Pastaza and Morona Santiago from August 2014 to January 2015.

### ***Sumak Kawsay: The defence of life***

The history of Amazonian peoples is one of destruction but also a history of mobilizing an innate desire to remain loyal to their roots. So that they could not only resist but also contest the arsenal of exogenous speeches that still today condemns them to a spiritual despair. These speeches represent for Amazonian peoples a scraper that displaces life and the only thing that it develops is survival.

However, as this knife becomes more sophisticated, the purposes and the intentions are also revealed in a more obvious way. These shape a life sentence of inequities and social and environmental injustices for Amazonian civilizations. For that reason, Amazonian peoples need to face the imperative of divesting and emptying anything that reflects them as inferior, weak and vulnerable. Like this, they can retrieve and invoke a natural inheritance of wealth and strength that allows them to re-conquer their destinies.

*Sumak Kawsay* is thus constructed to carry out a social and political project in order to face the challenge of living as an Amazonian in a globalized society. In other words, maintaining and safeguarding life forms that make sense for the people that have to live them. *Sumak Kawsay* today is having the courage to have a choice, to choose how Amazonian peoples want to live. It is regaining sovereignty over life through the exploration of hybrid possibilities for autonomy so that Amazonian peoples revive their uniqueness and aspire to pursuit wholeness.

Although there are many different ways of experiencing wholeness, the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* is possibly collecting an essence that is shared by all Amazonian civilizations. *Sumak Kawsay* through four mantras intends to revive and catapult the distinctiveness of Amazonian civilizations. These mantras come from the holistic relationships between people with the community, and communities with the Amazon forest. It is important to understand that for Amazonian civilizations the individual personality and the dichotomy human / nature are concepts that conflict with the Amazonian tradition. For Amazonian peoples there are no such dissociations. The Sun and Mother Earth are the creators of life. Life conceived as a vibration that spreads temporary, spatially and dimensionally. Temporary through cycles. Spatially from the subsoil where the roots of Mother Earth are settled, through the earth to express and expand adopting different forms, such as the human one, to finally reach the cosmos where the sun is. Dimensional in two realms: the spiritual and the material. Hence the Amazonian civilizations belong to this vibration as receivers but also transmitters. Shaping an existence, the Amazonian as a living entity.

Current aspirations of Amazonian civilizations to attain a formal recognition of their territories arise from this ancestral conception. Although there are some cases where Amazonian peoples have been granted with collective property rights over territories, many others are still waiting to regularize their situation. Moreover, the ancestral property recognized in Ecuador can only be exercised in the superficial part of the Amazon. Meanwhile the underground belongs exclusively to the State. Consequently, the Amazonian existence is subordinated to national development and poverty eradication policies, which still remain focused on extractive industries and domination over nature. These strategies directly undermine the living space, the underground, of the Mother Earth's blood and roots.

The Amazonian existence, the life that vibrates, builds a network of relationships that, as mentioned above, could be crystallized in four mantras for *Sumak Kawsay*. In the sense that these mantras represent a lexicon, which has psychological and spiritual power that reinforces a symbolic way of walking.

## **First mantra: Health**

For Amazonian civilizations there is a natural tendency towards equilibrium. Equilibrium understood as a state of balance, an adequate and stable proportion, in the spiritual realm. When one is sick in the physical realm it is an indication that an imbalance has occurred in the spiritual realm. Here it lays a clear ontological difference with modernity that understands health from the disease's perspective, health as the absence of disease. Health for Amazonian peoples is a premise at a cognitive level to stay tuned with the vibration of life. Health is a spiritual boost to seek harmony with the vibration of life.

This instinct is reflected in the demands of Amazonian peoples to reassert control over the exercise of healing so that is not understood from the Western logic. The modern health system conceives healing as a service, which is practiced in a hospital and not in the forest. In addition, this system brings new names for diseases and exogenous remedies affecting the healing process not only because it addresses only the physical symptomatology but also it is impossible for ancient medical healers to cure because they cannot recognize accurately the diseases by their unknown Western names.

## **Second mantra: Love**

Among the Amazonian societies there is a tradition of love as an act of reverence for the life that vibrates. From this perspective, Amazonian peoples regard themselves as sons of Mother Earth. Thus, building an intimate and special relationship with the forest from which it derives a role of custody that they today proclaim and practice. It also stems from this conception the recognition that we are all sons of Mother Earth and therefore, this facts declares us as equal beings. Perhaps for this reason, the Amazonian activism is precisely focus on eliminating inequities and injustices, as inequality is unnatural in the Amazonian tradition.

The consecration of love builds a sacred geography, as a lens for looking at the world. Belonging to a sacred world means assuming that welfare does not exist if not the vibration of life is not safeguarded. It is therefore not possible to speak about welfare if one is not in harmony with Mother Earth, with its different expressions and its dynamics. The Indigenous movement has translated these traditional values in demands for the recognition of the plurinationality and multiculturalism, and the recognition of Nature as a holder of rights. These demands are a request for respect of the diversity of human and non-human dignities, which is very present in their ancestral ethics.

This mantra induces us to reflect on two Western notions: poverty and environmental destruction. Amazonian civilizations do not have a concept of poverty as it is conceived from the Western perspective, as unmet basic needs. For them poverty, although that word does not exist in their languages, it is more associated with failures related to the possession, cumulative and destructive practices that threaten Mother Earth, and the loss of knowledge about the forest. Moreover, poverty is related to the lack of attitude towards prevention and long-term perspective. On the other hand, poverty could be interpreted, from the Amazonian existence's perspective, as a feeling of abandonment or orphan status which is related to the lack of security and warmth, loss of community life, a feeling of not belonging to the vibration of life.

The acts of plunder nature and the condition of poverty are shameful for Amazonian peoples. Thus, challenging the prejudices or perhaps the projections that the Western world does over the Amazonian civilizations to classify them as poor under exogenous socio-economic standards, and by trying to induce a conservation ethic through the declaration of protected areas or programs like Socio Bosque, which not only intends to compensate financially for practicing this ethic but also to eradicate an inexistent poverty. In addition, it is an ethic to preserve only the aesthetic, hence that motivates the creation of spaces where nature has to be left alone. Moreover, nature is also a provider of services and its role is valued according to an economic logic. Therefore, if the exploitation of resources like oil and minerals provided by nature are more profitable than conservation, primarily for the development of tourism and access to international funding, this conservation ethic is displaced by the ethic of destruction. Conversely, this represents an oxymoron for Amazonian civilizations.



### **Third mantra: Working**

Working for Amazonian peoples is to canalize the vibration of life to meet the physiological, spiritual and cultural needs. They canalize it through various activities such as hunting and fishing, crops, building houses, crafts, etc. These are activities that make people feeling that have the ability to sculpt their own lives. Working also stresses the responsibility of Amazonian peoples of spreading the vibration of life. Thus perpetuating a relationship of correspondence between the life that vibrates and humans.

On the other hand, working is a source of personal discipline as it teaches the values of patience and perseverance since it is performed respecting the natural cycles and by imitating the behaviour of non-human beings. Hence work develops the ability of mimicry, the inclusion to the vibration of life. This is reflected in the spirit of struggle and proactive resistance of Amazonian peoples. In the sense that it transcends the protest to build counter-responses and by creating alliances to dynamically adapt to the different challenges that come from the Western world. For instance, the Amazonian peoples of Sarayaku began a peaceful and legal struggle against the Ecuadorian State to the Interamerican Court of Human Rights fifteen years ago, the different mobilizations of Amazonian women against oil and mining activities, the proposal of cultural and environmental standards for oil exploration such as the EOS 100 certification from the COICA and CONFENIAE or the production of audio-visual materials to show the situations that are taking place in their ancestral territories.

Working also reveals the traditional economy of Amazonian civilizations, although the word economy is exogenous for them. One purpose of working is to strengthen values such as solidarity and reciprocity. For solidarity generosity is required. In order words, one must first show that is willing to give and share his/her skills and what is capable of doing with those skills. This principle emphasizes the preference of Amazonian civilizations for collectivism by disregarding behaviours driven by individualism. Finally, once one has proven solidarity one is lawful to receive and is rewarded with a reciprocal act.

The despotism of modernity introduces the market logic for practicing economy. Consequently, money becomes the unit of exchange displacing the Amazonian tradition whose unit of exchange is working and its associated community values. From this market logic derives another western classification for Amazonian peoples: unemployment. The work carried out daily by Amazonian civilizations is therefore not recognized. Rather it is overlooked each time statistics show that Amazonian peoples are not part of the labour market because they do not hold a salaried job. This of course highlights the perceived inferiority of the Amazon civilizations when they compare themselves within the Western world.

Money, understood as cash cannot be invested in the forest. First of, by relying on the mantras, money does not guarantee *Sumak Kawsay*. Secondly, money can only be used to purchase goods and services that come from the Western world. Inducing that the more money is available the greater reliance on external resources. Thirdly, the logic of accumulating, prevent and plan around money is clearly an exogenous and unknown practice for Amazonian peoples, whose sharing behaviour is almost an unconscious natural tendency.

Moreover, the imagined development agenda for the Amazon civilizations is centred on money. It is also a development agenda very assisted by the State, trying to replace the maternity of the forest by reinforcing the notion of external dependence. As a consequence the State is becoming an adoptive father for the Amazonian civilizations.

The inclusion of Amazonian peoples into the market is in the name of the development for the whole country. However, it clearly remains a process that excludes in a holistic way the voices of the Amazon. Amazonian societies are trapped in a spiral of dependence and helplessness.

## **Fourth mantra: Wisdom**

Probably the pillar that is supporting the three mantras above is wisdom. The key linkage between the vibration of life and the Amazonian societies is the knowledge under which their worldviews are constructed. It is a compilation of observations, which are found within a collective memory through which people try to make sense of and explain how the world behaves. This system of knowledge is inter-subjective in the sense that it tries to find explanations through consensus. Amazonian societies apply this knowledge-legacy to guide their daily actions in the forest. It is a knowledge that is transmitted orally and experientially which gives it a very dynamic character.

Traditional knowledge and ancestral forms of learning Amazonian societies are being silenced by the standardization of a single, centralized education system. This system does not address the fact that the perception of time is different for Amazonian peoples and the fact that Amazonian societies develop their daily life from different perspectives and needs (such as spiritual needs, beliefs and taboos). Further education is taught mostly in Spanish and not in traditional languages, which are of equal importance as recognized by the Ecuadorian Constitution. As a consequence, this is leading to the potential loss of vocabulary and fluency in traditional languages and the consequent erosion of the bases and the meanings of the Amazonian wisdom. In addition, it is creating power dynamics within communities between those who do have access to the education system and those who have not had such opportunity. These first ones are exercising superiority over these latter ones. Reinforcing the displacement and the rejection of Amazonian peoples' ancestral wisdom.

The Western perception of illiteracy is also projected as a categorization of Amazonian societies. This represents another form of silence and denial of the existence of vibrant ancestral wisdom. Ancestral wisdom represents a learning system that seems to be the key to achieve *Sumak Kawsay*.

## **The Amazonian justice: a catalyst of the mantras**

The exercise of justice for Amazonian societies is one of the most important rituals in which the symbols and beliefs are brought into practice. Through the exercise of justice the *Sumak Kawsay*'s mantras are catalysed. Amazonian justice is contextually adapted and is held by the traditions of each village, each community. The same people in the community, its leaders and elders in the forest apply Amazonian justice. The events are solved collectively and the imposition of a punishment is not sought if not an exercise of remembering the reasons why people should belong to the vibration of life. It is an exercise of remembering inclusion. It is also a justice that not only happens in the social dimension but also in the spiritual dimension. The maximum sanction of Amazonian justice is the expulsion from the community.

Contradictorily, justice practiced at the national level is based on a formal written tradition, in which the judges have specific training and places them in a distant position away from the social reality and especially the forest's reality. Currently there are many cases of Amazonian peoples who have had to resort to Western justice due to the disrespect against their ancestral forms of justice and coexistence. These acts systematically disregard the Ecuadorian Constitution, which recognizes and respects for both forms of justice.

## ***Sumak Kawsay: the result of a struggle to ensure the dignity of the dignities***

Encounters with modernity have forced Amazonian peoples to enter into non-peaceful negotiation processes to safeguard their alternative existence. In other words, they have been forced to adopt an eternal state of alert against the systematic suppression and dismantling of the vibration of life.

Since the Spanish conquest, Amazonian societies have been forced to gradually institutionalize their choices of life and their cultural expressions in order to achieve autonomy and freedom. A claim of the right of being, a call for dignity, to defend themselves for ensuring that they transcend as entities for the vibration of life.

Amazonian societies have resorted to politics, through the consolidation of the Indigenous movement to translate a common language certain aspects of cultures and their ancestral ways of life but at the same time to make visible the historical wound of conquest and domination. From this political organization, they are carrying out eco-social struggles that began by being very focused local actions to defend their territories against the advance of oil, mining, agriculture, etc to become alternative proposals to build a new paradigm away from neoliberal capitalism and globalization.

This historical contestation is because there is a negative affinity between the ancient Amazonian ethics and the spirit or essence of the Western modernity. Meaning that from the beginning there was a great and deep cultural resistance. Amazonian leaders from then until now, they must be both modern and traditional to legitimize their eco-social struggles. Moreover, in many cases, they have been forced to build external networks to gain national and international support.

## **A proposal...**

The awakening of *Sumak Kawsay* could only be understood from this Amazonian peoples' urge to transcend. *Sumak Kawsay* as a transition shift from Indigenous institutions for struggle to Indigenous institutions for freedom and autonomy. Thus, shaping a new Amazonian existence that on one hand have the spiritual and cultural sense that enables them to be attached to their roots but on the other hand, it ensures them an equitable and fair participation inside the modern Ecuadorian State.

That is how I think we can try to understand *Sumak Kawsay* as an attempt for reconciliation and aspiration: a project of reconnecting with their Amazonian ancestral integrity, with all that makes them be who they are and neglecting anything that makes them be somebody else's imagination. *Sumak Kawsay* is for Amazonian peoples the capacity of being able to answer who are they, and that question can be answered from different realities. Thus we cannot speak about a single *Sumak Kawsay* if not, about a diversity of dignities. Consequently, the protection and respect for the Amazonian existence and other identities that exist in Ecuador should be mandatory in the pact of coexistence for building a "Plurinational State". It also should be scaled-down into policies, plans and programs through the real inclusion of the voices of the Amazon. Otherwise the co-construction of real proposals so that future generations can achieve a better life as sons of Mother Earth will represent just a utopia.

Finally, as a personal note, I would like to reveal that Amazonian peoples give great importance to words. Words represent the links between the spirit and the body. The words that you use are those that later you will feel the responsibility to walk them, to translate them into actions. Therefore, the act of naming, to find the exact word is one of the most sacred rituals in the Amazonian world. So, I feel responsible to suggest a new translation of *Sumak Kawsay* and talk about the pursuit of wholeness: a way of walking that affirms, in every step, the vibration of life.

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