SUMAK KAWSAY AS GENERATIVE OF A NEW INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN
THE AMAZONIAN REGION OF ECUADOR

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *sumak kawsay*, a Kichwa phrase roughly translatable into English as “good living,” served multiple functions during the latter half of the twentieth century in Ecuador. It served as a shorthand expression of an alternative mode of social organization premised on local community values and a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. As such, it was a marker of opposition to the national State’s emphasis on monetizing natural resources, in particular the petroleum reserves beneath Amazonia. At the insistence of representatives of the indigenous peoples, it was inscribed in numerous places in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, and even if not yet enforced by the national government, it expresses an aspiration in opposition to the State’s reliance upon the extractive industries. Its time may not have come, but its presence in the national and scholarly debate cannot be denied.

Originating in the Amazonian forests, sumak kawsay served as a means for indigenous peoples to revalue their culture as they developed a new relationship with the State. It functioned as a heuristic tool that the indigenous peoples of the Amazon used to create separation for themselves from traditional negative stereotypes and to reach new accommodations with the West on equal terms. This process is shown in the experience of the Ai Cofán with the petroleum industry, and in the practices of ecotourism. In both cases, the indigenous peoples, the whites, and *mestizos* negotiate the terms of their relationship as co-constituents.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, the relationship between the indigenous peoples of Ecuador and the national state of Ecuador underwent a fundamental transformation. The indigenous peoples of both the Andean highlands and the Amazonian lowlands organized themselves around issues arising from their specific historical and current experiences of the colonial State. Commencing in the 1980s, those disparate movements came together to form a pan-Ecuadorian indigenous movement that exercised great influence in the affairs of State.

Sumak kawsay is a Kichwa term that translates loosely into Spanish as “buen vivir” and into English as “good living.” Kichwa is the dialect of Quechua spoken by a majority of the indigenous peoples living in Ecuador; it is one of fourteen extant indigenous languages. Commencing in the 1970s, the idea of sumak kawsay has served as a unifying theme for the creation of indigenous identities over and against the traditional discourse of the State.

As an initial note, the terms “indigenous people” and the “West” are used as a matter of convenience. The indigenous peoples are all of the various peoples of the lowland forest of the headwaters of the Amazon River. They are heterogenous in their histories, languages, and cultures. The idea of a single indigeneity is doubly misleading given the nation of Ecuador is racially mixed to the extent there is no clear dividing line

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1 A note on nomenclature. I have elected not to refer to the indigenous peoples as Indians. “Indian” is a translation of the Spanish term “Indio,” which was a derogatory word for an indigenous person until it was adopted by indigenous social activists in the twentieth century. Even so, in the context of this paper, it still smacks of a colonialist viewpoint that essentializes indigenous peoples as a single amorphous group when the opposite is the case.
between the indigenous peoples, *mestizos*, and whites. The use of the term “indigenous people” is appropriate in the context of this essay as designating persons whose primary identification is with an indigenous group, who have traditionally resided in Amazonia, and who have a common history of genocide, exploitation, and loss of habitat at the hands of the group described as the “West.” The West is just as heterogenous as the indigenous peoples. Commencing in the sixteenth century, it was represented by religious missionaries, commercial traders, and soldiers. In the latter part of the twentieth century, it is represented by *mestizo* settlers appropriating territories traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples, State-sponsored projects to bring the indigenous peoples within the ambit of the national community, and multi-national corporations engaged in the extractive industries. Finally, it is represented today by a variety of non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) that oppose the oil and mining interests. These groups seek to rescue the indigenous peoples from Western capitalism at the same time they valorize the indigenous peoples as the bearers of an alternative epistemology characterized by the idea of sumak kawsay.

The indigenous peoples and the West continue an on-going process of co-constitution, meaning that each defines itself in relation to the other. The West has traditionally had a negative view of the indigenous peoples. That view has of late been inverted by ecologically minded elements of the West as a reflection back onto the indigenous peoples of sumak kawsay, the claim of a distinctly indigenous social model held to be preferable to Western capitalist ideology. The indigenous peoples have traditionally had negative interactions with the West and internalized a view of themselves as socially incompetent and maladaptive to the West. Sumak kawsay is the
heuristic wedge that has permitted the indigenous peoples to gain a new perspective on themselves in relation to the West, one that values their cultures on par with the West and has permitted them to negotiate their rapidly evolving relationship with the West on equal terms.

The State of Ecuador took a sustained interest in its Amazonian lowlands in the second half of the twentieth century following land reforms that promoted settlement by mestizo farmers as well as the discovery of immense petroleum reserves beneath it. The loss of territory, environmental contamination, and social dislocation that followed gave rise to an indigenous activism that had not previously existed among the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. A precursor for this activism is found in the history of indigenous resistance in the Andean highlands, which dates to the earliest days of the Spanish colonization. It was only in the mid-twentieth century, when the focus of that resistance turned from a class to an ethnic orientation, that the indigenous movement gained traction nationally. The resistance of the Amazonian indigenous peoples is of a more recent vintage, but it shares with the Andean indigenous peoples a focus on ethnic preservation. In the Andes and Amazonia, local and regional indigenous social movement organizations arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. It was the creation of CONAIE in 1986 that united these movements into a single force articulating indigenous claims nationally. The idea of sumak kawsay as a common non-Western principle of social organization was fundamental to unifying the heterogenous indigenous peoples of Ecuador into a force with national political relevance.

CONAIE lobbied successfully for inclusion of sumak kawsay in numerous places in the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008. In fact, however, the constitutional language was
crafted in such a fashion to permit the State to mold the idea of sumak kawsay as it saw fit. The important point is the very fact of its inclusion in the constitution as a permanent inscription of an idea, even if not yet ripe for implementation outside of a State-determined development paradigm, preserves it as a discursive step in the co-constitution of the indigenous peoples and the State.

The Aí Cofán, an indigenous people residing in the northeast sector of Ecuador, provide a key example of the force of sumak kawsay to maintain ethnic identity and to provide a base for negotiating with an aggressive, intrusive West. The ideal of opatssi, which closely corresponds to a generic iteration of sumak kawsay, is a traditional pillar of Aí Cofán society, an indigenous people resident in the northeast of Ecuador. It describes values that traditionally have been beyond contestation, such as mutuality, communitarianism, and pacifism. Its contextual application as the consensual basis of Aí Cofán sociability has traditionally been guaranteed by the rule of shamans, whose autocratic authority is both respected and feared. The necessity of such a community arbiter reveals the essential fragility of opatssi, and by extension, sumak kawsay.

One of the key consequences of the incursion of the petroleum industry over the past sixty years and the outsiders that came in its wake has been a transformation in the Aí Cofán’s relationship to the West. While the authority of the shaman has largely been displaced in favor of a non-shamanic patriarchy, and the Aí Cofán have increasingly adopted Western ways, their basic identity as a community of opatssi has remained intact and given them a grounding to maintain their culture and to integrate with the West on their own terms.
Finally, ecotourism provides an explicit example of indigenous peoples and Western tourists negotiating a middle ground in which ecotourists can experience what are billed as authentic indigenous practices, and the indigenous hosts present and thereby preserve their culture, even if only as a performance while obtaining the monetary resources they need to participate in the larger Ecuadorian society. The West has a romantic understanding of indigenous culture as a site of purity in which the indigenous peoples and nature are one and the same. They seek it out as a respite from their own society. They project sumak kawsay onto the indigenous peoples as the fundament of an imagined indigenous way of life. For their part, the indigenous peoples are knowing participants in a performance of their culture. They bring their own motivations to the encounter, again reflecting how sumak kawsay has given them an independence in determining their own future and signaling the possibility of an Ecuador in which the West and the indigenous peoples finally achieve social unity across cultural diversity.
CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A full history of the relationship between the indigenous peoples of Ecuador and the national State is beyond the scope of this paper. There is a long history of indigenous resistance to colonization and oppression of cultures under the rule of the Spanish and the Republic, mostly in the Andean highlands. For present purposes, it will suffice to begin with the formation of the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (the “FEI”) in 1944, which is credited as “the first successful attempt in Ecuador to establish a national federation for and by indigenous peoples” (Becker 2008: 78). Because the FEI focused primarily on class-based demands in the Andean highlands, it failed to build connections with coastal or lowland indigenous groups (Becker 2008: 95). The FEI fought to increase indigenous land rights, to improve the wages and working conditions of peasants, for agrarian reform, and the end of the huasipungo system (Pallares 2002; Becker 2008: 104). The FEI’s program shows the disjuncture between the agenda of the Andean highlands and that of the Amazonian lowlands which was not the subject of systematic Western colonization until the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1964 and 1973, land reforms were enacted under military rule. The reforms were intended to dissolve indigenous ethnic identities into a single national culture (Becker 2008: 142). General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara, the military dictator from 1972 to 1976, expressed this sentiment clearly: "There is no more Indian problem. We all become white when we accept the goals of the national culture" (Whitten 1976: 268;
Kimerling 2006: fn. 9). The general’s position clearly indicates the extraordinary devaluation of indigenous culture in the eyes of the State.

According to Pallares, land reform had a vastly different meaning in the Andes than in Amazonia: where the indigenous peoples of Amazonia sought to protect their ancestral lands from Western encroachment, their counterparts in the Andes sought to regain control of ancestral territories from which they had been dispossessed (Pallares 2002: 171). In either case, it engendered regional indigenous organizations in both the Andes and Amazonia. These new indigenous movements viewed "the racial domination of whites and mestizos over indigenous peoples as the main impediment to indigenous peoples' socioeconomic advancement" arguing "that indigenous people, not peasant identity, was foremost in the definition, specification, and defense of indigenous people's interests" (Pallares 2002: 21, 16). The formation of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (“CONFENIAE”) in the Oriente in 1980 and the Confederation of Quichua People of Ecuador (“Ecuarunari”) in the Andean highlands in 1972 functioned to unite a number of smaller indigenous movements into regional confederations. CONFENIAE organized the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (“CONAIE”) in 1986 to gather all of the regional indigenous organizations into a unified bloc, which then confronted the State in the name of all indigenous Ecuadorians. The overarching unity of the indigenous peoples was based upon an assertion of a common culture in opposition to the West. Sumak kawsay served as a short-hand statement of that difference. Sumak kawsay provided a common space in which the indigenous peoples of Amazonian lowlands and the Andean highlands could make common cause as indigenous peoples in opposition to the West (CONAIE 1994).
Under the leadership of CONAIE, the objectives of social activism expanded from concerns about development in Amazonia to ethnic claims, such as recognition of indigenous autonomy within a plurinational state, of Kichwa and other indigenous languages as official languages of the State, and of a right to control extractive activity on lands traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples. CONAIE led several levantamientos in the 1990s, focusing national and international attention on indigenous claims. Sumak kawsay thus became immersed in Ecuadorian clientelist politics as a general statement of a positive ethnic difference.
CHAPTER 3: SUMAK KAWSAY: THE WESTERN GAZE

The idea of sumak kawsay emerged from Amazonia in the early 1970s as a description of a utopic indigenous ethos grounded in communitarianism and a harmonic relationship to nature. It explicitly contrasted to the ideology of capitalist development and modernism generally. Davidoff analogizes to the case of the Bushmen of the Kalahari: the West elevated the Indians “from the level of vermin to be exterminated to the status of fauna to be preserved” (Davidoff 2013: 56). As Davidoff puts it,

[the] home of the lowland Kichwa has been historically constructed by outsiders as an imagined pristine rainforest populated by primitive Indians living in harmony with nature. Tourists and development actors alike imagine Kichwa as living in an isolated, precapitalist world, intruded on only by acrimonious and destructive relations with oil companies. . . . In this ecoprimitive discourse, fantasy rainforest Indians are threatened by resource extraction industries; rather than marginalized but competent human communities struggling to make decisions about their own destiny, they are portrayed as a nature-culture paradigm – an endangered species (Tsing 2003) needing “rescue” by NGOs and patronage by ecotourists (Davidoff 2013: 13).

The West absorbed sumak kawsay in the 1980s and indiscriminately broadcast it back on the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, depicting them as the reification of the ideals expressed in the concept. The advertising materials prepared by the Pachamama Alliance for consumption by Westerners contemplating an ecotour in Amazonia is a prime example of this generalized valuation of indigenous traditions as a counterweight to Western modernism (Pachamama Alliance 2019). The indigenous peoples, both Andean and Amazonian, were credited with a different concept of social organization, one in which people take precedence over corporate profit, ancestral knowledge is valued at least on par with Western medicine, and economic development, if it is countenanced at
all, is conducted in such a fashion so as not to disturb the community’s purportedly primeval relationship to their environment.

The indigenous peoples of Amazonia did not embrace the role the West cast for them. For them, sumak kawsay was and remains the heuristic wedge they use to separate themselves from the hegemonic and overwhelmingly negative image rooted in centuries of oppression by the West. An exact definition of its substance as a set of positions is thus less valuable than its value as a tool to reclaim cultural wholeness. Sumak kawsay is a key element in the process by which the indigenous peoples have conceived a new relationship with the West and transformed themselves from victims of oppression to actors actively seeking to interact with the West on equal terms.

Karl Zimmerer traces the western record of the term “kawsay” to a Quechua portmanteau word in early colonial Peru. ... The Jesuit missionary Diego Gonzalez Holguín (1552 – 1618) listed no fewer than twenty-three variations in the specific meaning of causay in his 1608 dictionary of Southern Peruvian Quechua, making it one of the most versatile of indigenous words. ... The meanings of causay ranged from basic connotations of existence and subsistence to appraisals of health and well-being.” (Zimmerer 2012: 600) ... “[C]ausay and other terms signifying “to live well” (especially vivir bien, allin kawsay, and sumak kawsay) ... have become enshrined as a conceptual centerpiece of ascendant indigenous movements and endogenous development in the Andean countries and have encouraged a pan-Latin American perspective (Zimmerer 2012: 601).

Sumak kawsay was first articulated by indigenous intellectuals like Luis Macas and Nina Pacari in the early 1970s as a conceptual alternative to market-oriented development. It presumed to describe a traditional way of life that hearkened back to pre-Columbian times; thus, it is phrased in Kichwa to emphasize its indigenous origins. Sumak kawsay became a rallying cry for a new developmental paradigm, one in which the voices of the subaltern peoples of Ecuador would have input, and one in which the
assumptions of “unilinear modernism” would be set aside (Acosta 2009: 6). The claim was that modernity was destructive of indigenous cultures in Amazonia, which were generically characterized as places where individuals live in harmony with themselves, within a peaceful community in harmony with nature, or sumak kawsay. Sumak kawsay has been the subject of considerable academic discourse ever since and several schools of thought have risen as to how it should be applied at the level of the nation, the community and the individual (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017).

In similar fashion, Western actors as varied as the Catholic Church, the World Bank, and NGOs like Amazon Watch and Friends of the Amazon seized upon it to exhort indigenous peoples to reclaim a purportedly pure indigenous culture from the clutches of hegemonic Western oppression. The Western view was based upon an essentialist characterization of indigeneity. It denied the indigenous peoples’ agency and reduced their histories to a tragic tale of victims in need of rescue (Cepek 2018: 193). Preserving the Amazon forests seems to have been conflated with placing the indigenous peoples back into a paradisiacal setting, yet it still remains that economic development in Amazonia is now being discussed with reference to an indigenous paradigm.

Sumak kawsay gained wide-spread political traction in the early 1990s. It was interpreted as a statement of the need to conduct economic development in the Amazonian lowlands in a culturally and environmentally sensitive fashion (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 30). The phrase was intentionally coined in Kichwa to capture what were presumed to be eternal values of the Amazonian peoples in opposition to the modern extractivists - the giant multinational mining and petroleum companies. As Victor Bretón Solo de Zaldívar puts it, sumak kawsay provides
an alternative way of understanding development presumably anchored in the ‘ancestral’ knowledge and indigenous cosmvisions that would guide the State and public authorities. . . .[Accordingly,] the ethnic movements carrying the Sumak Kawsay flag were thus clothed in an aura of epistemic radicalism that came to be described as post-development, post-neoliberal and decolonial” (Bretón Solo de Zaldivar 2013: 72).

For its Western promoters, sumak kawsay supports a general criticism of Western capitalism, in particular its neoliberal iteration. Sumak kawsay bypasses the Western duality where humans either dominate or conserve nature, because humans are believed to be an active part of nature rather than separate from it” (Eisenstadt and West 2017: 232). “Under sumak kawsay, rather than a linear progression of accumulation, development is understood as the attainment and reproduction of the equilibrium state of buen vivir, which refers to living in harmony with nature” (Kauffman and Martin 2014: 43).

The best summation of the academic discourse on sumak kawsay is found in an article by Luis Hidalgo-Capitán and Ana Patricia Cubillo-Guevara:

Good Living can be defined as a way of living in harmony with oneself (identity), with society (equity) and with nature (sustainability). This definition is commonly accepted by the majority of intellectuals and politicians who use the term and, in addition, convert Good Living into a concept of universal acceptance” (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 24–25, citing their previous work from 2015).

They cite three different ways of understanding sumak kawsay—

one ‘indigenist’ and ‘pachamamist’ (which prioritises identity as an objective), one which is ‘socialist’ and ‘statist’ (which prioritises equity) and another which is ‘ecologist’ and ‘post-developmentalist’ (which prioritises sustainability). Each of these versions corresponds to an ideological school of thought that attempts to use the concept of Good Living for political purposes in a context in which the Latin American Left is jockeying to establish hegemony in a post-neo-liberal era” (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 25–26).
The importance of these efforts lies less in the particular programs arising from each than in the fact that they each represent an effort to incorporate an indigenous worldview into the discourse of the Ecuadorian State. As such, the academic discourse of sumak kawsay reflects an important step in the continuing effort to incorporate the indigenous peoples into the State, not by transforming them into whites, but on terms suggested by the indigenous peoples. At the very least, it demonstrates a willingness to respect the indigenous peoples as contributors in the national project, not as mere recipients of a civilizing program.

While the academic discourse on sumak kawsay seeks to elevate the voices of indigenous groups, there is an unfortunate insularity to the scholarly work. The academics seem to be talking to each other about their own visions of the good life in application to Ecuador generally. It is prescriptive – how Ecuador should develop, what values it should promote, and to what extent those values should be ascribed to the indigenous peoples. Much of it focuses on how to preserve a timeless indigenous culture, rather like a museum exhibit, where “primitive and remote, authentic and unspoiled sites” are populated by “ecologically noble savage[s]” living in harmony with their natural environments (Wesche 1996: 159). There is little sense of the contingencies actually faced by the indigenous peoples, of the choices they make in accommodating and resisting change.

The academic discourse on sumak kawsay characterizes the West as homogenizing, developmentalist, progressive, alienating, and dedicated to the violent subjugation of nature. Living within the sumak kawsay paradigm is taken to mean viewing the natural world as less of an object to be exploited than as a subject in its own
right, possessing a logic that human society must respect and with which they must live in a cooperative fashion. The idea of sumak kawsay has a utopian quality that invites a frank appraisal of current social conditions in light of what those conditions should be. The earliest iteration of sumak kawsay expressed a belief that economic development in Amazonia should be guided by concepts of sustainable development and development with identity; i.e., economic development within the Western paradigm, but with respect for nature and indigenous cultures. “Both of these concepts were disseminated among the indigenous peoples of the ‘Abya Yala’ at the end of the 1980s by agents of international cooperation, including the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean” (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 30). The discourse soon morphed into proposals for anti-development as an element of decolonization (Altmann: 2014). Other commentators see it as a general vision of a post-capitalist, post-colonial, and post-patriarchal society (de Souza Santos: 2018), or as a universal model of social formation to be emulated by all peoples everywhere (Altmann 2014; Houtart 2011). Yet, as noted by Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, it is most unspecific in exactly what sorts of steps should be taken, by whom, to its achievement.

The development of the discourse of sumak kawsay was based on a Western understanding of the peoples of Amazonia (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 33). Sumak kawsay intersected with a broad environmental movement in the West, one that led many Western commentators to question the viability of Western capitalism (de Souza Santos 2018: 238; Houtart 2011). In all of its permutations, the Western view reflects the idea of sumak kawsay back onto the indigenous peoples uncritically; i.e., it
valorizes the indigenous peoples as bearers of a socio-cultural ideal that bears no necessary relationship to the socio-cultural realities of indigenous people generally or any particular subset of them.

Ted Fischer provides a valuable perspective on sumak kawsay in his work, *The Good Life*, notwithstanding it is only mentioned in passing. He invites us to step away from specific applications of sumak kawsay and look at the good life more generally. He finds that at its core, a good life requires adequate material resources, physical health and safety, and satisfactory family and social relations. Beyond these objective factors, a good life requires that an individual be able to articulate his/her aspirations for the future and have the physical means to pursue them without undue cultural or legal impediments. Such an individual possesses a sense of value and dignity grounded in a concept of fairness. Finally, the good life rests upon the individual’s commitment to a purpose that transcends the self (Fischer 2014: 5). The strength of his work is that it is not theory driven. He observes people and listens to how they describe themselves, their ambitions and the barriers they perceive to realizing them. It is especially apt to a discussion of sumak kawsay since the idea is constantly in flux and subject to negotiation as circumstances change.

In the context of both the experience of the Aí Cofán interacting with the petroleum industry over a period of fifty years, as well as the development of ecotourism over the past thirty years, this model can be tested. In both cases, indigenous peoples, armed with a self-worth vis-à-vis the West, have engaged in a cross-cultural process of give-and-take that would have previously been unthinkable.
CHAPTER 4: SUMAK KAWSAY: THE INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

From the perspective of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, sumak kawsay had a much more marked effect than in the Andean highlands. In contrast to the indigenous peoples of the Andean highlands, indigenous peoples of the lowlands traditionally were perceived as irredeemable: "While highland Indians were effectively seen as a type of 'model Indian', as transformable future citizens, lowland Indians, meanwhile, were seen as more problematic: as savage, backward and fundamentally uncivilized" (Foote 2006: 271). Sumak kawsay served to release the suffocating grip of the classic Western perception: it created the possibility of a transformation of the relationship between the indigenous peoples and the West. It points to a positive indigenous identity in which ethnic otherness is not read as inferiority. Instead of retreating into an idealized past, the indigenous peoples re-valued their cultures within the nation as a whole in order to engage modernity on something like equal terms.

The experience of the peoples of the Amazonian lowlands also differed significantly from the Andean highlands in that they never experienced anything like the attempts in the Andean highlands to control and assimilate their populations, such as the encomienda or the huasipungo systems. Similarly, lowland activists weren't influenced by leftist organizations and never identified as peasants (Mijeski and Beck 2011: 14). According to Sawyer, because the West by and large did not dispossess the lowlands indigenous peoples of their lands, those communities maintained strong indigenous identities (Sawyer 2004: 60). Those indigenous identities had two antithetical aspects, one positive: the indigenous peoples certainly maintained intact their pre-Columbian
cultural traditions; and one negative: they knew themselves to be wholly deficient in the
eyes of the West. Sumak kawsay signaled an ethno-cultural reversal: it served to
establish a critical separation between indigenous cultures and the hegemonic values of
the West. It is a means of establishing an ethnic self-image in contrast to the West. It has
provided indigenous peoples a vantage point rooted in the wholeness of their own
cultures from which to negotiate new relationships to the West. It is less of a doctrine
than an attitude.

The indigenous peoples of Amazonia have traditionally been portrayed as isolated
and primitive, untouched by the West until the latter part of the twentieth century. It is
ture that most of Amazonia is lowland jungle and many of the peoples there are not
thoroughly integrated into the State.² The West imagines such “tribes” as characteristic
of the Oriente as a whole, yet the tropes of the “Amazon’s marginality, its abandonment
by distant governments, the isolation of its indigenous people” are simplistic and
inaccurate (Sawyer 2004: 40; Wasserstrom and Bustamante 2015: 2). In fact, the
indigenous peoples of Amazonia have been in continual contact with the State or its
proxies - landowners, government officials, rubber collectors, and missionaries since
early in the eighteenth century (Wasserstrom and Bustamante 2015: 4). The rubber boom
of the 1880s introduced many indigenous families to the social practices prevalent in the
highlands, such as debt peonage, forced labor and concertaje (Wasserstrom and
Bustamante 2015: 6-7). The violence visited upon the indigenous peoples by the Western
rubber trade has been described by Whitten as a “holocaust” (Whitten 1976: 213). While

² Those areas of Ecuadorian Amazonia that have been subjected to petroleum extraction and/or
homesteading are easily identified on a map by the presence of a network of improved roads. The very
large preponderance of the lowlands, however, remains accessible only by water or air. This is true of
approximately 40,000 square miles of territory, or about one-third of the land area of Ecuador.
it is true that the Incas, the Spanish and until recently the State of Ecuador viewed these regions as impenetrable, the lowland peoples conducted regular trade with their neighbors to the west since pre-Columbian times and were organized in complex village structures (Whitten 1976). Neither the traditional image of the indigenous peoples as wild savages nor the recent characterization of them as noble, untouched savages is anything but a romantic fantasy.

In the early twentieth century, various lowland peoples began to organize themselves to defend the territorial integrity of their lands from homesteaders. The first such group was the Shuar Federation, centered on the eastern slope of the Andes in the south of Ecuador. Other groups followed, representing other regions and localities. The original impetus was to protect territorial integrity and modes of production from encroachment, principally by mestizo settlers (Rudel, Bates, and Machinguiaishi 2002: 146).

Commencing in the 1960s, the State committed itself to an aggressive campaign of internal colonization of the Oriente. This entailed literacy and educational programs, but also the promotion of settlement of farmsteads by non-indigenous peoples on the eastern slopes pursuant to a State campaign to “civilize” the indigenous peoples living there. The settlers brought new diseases. They disrupted the indigenous peoples’ tradition of swidden agriculture and hunting and gathering. The indigenous peoples increasingly found their way into wage labor for capitalist enterprises on the lands they had formerly considered their own. Yet this was not uniformly the response. As settlers began to encroach, the Shuar people of southern Ecuador initially retreated, but eventually, under the guidance of the Salesian Order, reorganized themselves from
isolated farmsteads into villages, which then laid claim to the surrounding areas. They defended that title by copying the settler pattern of clearing forest for pasturage and raising cattle. These activities, plus a renowned bellicosity to trespassers, resulted in the government recognizing Shuar title to over forty percent of Morona Santiago Province by the mid-1980s (Rudel, Bates, and Machinguiashi 2002: 148). This represents a localized interaction with modernity quite separate from the articulation of sumak kawsay. Significantly, the Shuar response was particularistic: it was centered on the protection of ancestral territory, inspired by the Catholic Church and relied upon the ferocity of the Shuar themselves. It was not based upon a claim of a common ethnicity across all indigenous peoples. That general movement for indigenous rights would have to wait for the insertion of sumak kawsay into the indigenous discourse.

As already noted, the State’s ambition was *blanqueamiento* and then *mestizaje*. The former sought to convert indigenous peoples throughout Ecuador into de facto white people; the second was predicated on the idea that the races in Ecuador have been so thoroughly mixed that the State should promote the idea that all Ecuadorians are of mixed blood, or *mestizo*. This is just another way of saying that the State proposed to redefine the good life of its indigenous peoples by obliterating the bases for their traditional cultures. The Shuar example aside, sumak kawsay may be seen as the expression of a basic indigenous objection to such dismissive Western logic.

It was petroleum, however, that galvanized Amazonian and Western activists and introduced sumak kawsay as a broad criticism of modern capitalist development (Sawyer 2004). The catalyst was the environmental disaster referred to colloquially as “Lago 3 The Shuar were renowned for their traditional, and unnerving, practice of displaying the shrunken heads of vanquished enemies in their villages.
Agrio.” The environmental contamination of this area, located in Sucumbios Province along the Colombian border and often referred to the Amazonian Chernobyl, was caused by the release of millions of barrels of toxic waste directly into the waterways used by downriver indigenous peoples for fishing, drinking, and bathing over a period of forty years (Sawyer 2004; Kimerling 2006; Lyons 2004; Chevron Corporation v. Donziger 2016). To the Western environmentalists, it presented a stark contrast between indigenous naturalism, encapsulated in sumak kawsay, and multinational corporate interests, between those who would live in peace within nature and those who would destroy it for profit (Kimerling 1993). CONFENIAE and Acción Ecológico (an Ecuadorian NGO) organized collective resistance to the petroleum companies; in the case of the Aí Cofán, they literally taught them the concept of “protest” (Cepek 2018: 169). They surely had to do so with other groups who, like the Aí Cofán, had never experienced the permanent destruction of their health and their homelands by Western invaders.

CONAIE led levantamientos in 1990 and 1994 that demonstrated the political unity of the indigenous peoples and their ability to topple the national government. These were the first pan-indigenous actions against the State in Ecuador’s history. CONAIE forced a dialogue with the government over indigenous rights in respect of bilingual education, recognition of Kichwa as an official language, settlement of land claims, and CONAIE’s principal objective - recognition of Ecuador as a plurinational state (CONAIE 1994). With few exceptions, the long-term and material consequences of CONAIE-led uprisings were modest. As Sawyer pointed out – in 2004 - in regard to the 1994 negotiations over land use and land tenures, "at critical junctures - articles
pertaining to communal holdings, expropriation, water rights - CONAIE only succeeded in softening the wording. . . . The overall thrust of the law - securing private property and facilitating further land acquisition in order to produce for export - had not substantially changed" (Sawyer 2004: 208). The immediate results of these efforts should not be read to discredit indigenous activism, but rather as a key moment where indigenous peoples forced the State to acknowledge and respond to their perspective. The idea that the indigenous peoples are bound together by a common vision of a society operating under radically different premises from the West served to create under CONAIE a consciousness of indigenous culture not only distinct from the West but superior to it.
CHAPTER 5: SUMAK KAWSAY AS STATE DOCTRINE

Rafael Correa was elected President in 2007 on a platform promising sweeping social reforms for the benefit of the poor. CONAIE supported Correa’s candidacy and he was elected with an absolute majority of the votes cast, which was unprecedented. In fulfillment of a campaign promise, the Correa administration caused the passage of the Constitution of 2008. This document makes numerous references to precepts that CONAIE had negotiated for inclusion, among them:

- recognition that Ecuador is a multinational State (Article 1);
- recognition of Kichwa and Shuar as official languages for purposes of “cultural exchange” (Article 2);
- the right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability and the good way of living (sumak kawsay) and in harmony with nature (Article 14);
- the right to prior consultation before the State permits extractive activities on indigenous people lands (Article 57, Subpart 6); provided, however, in the event the affected communities vote against such activities, the State may override them (Article 398);
- authorization for indigenous peoples to create their own courts and legal systems (Article 57, Subpart 10);
- establishment of so-called Rights of Nature, which may be asserted by any person to vindicate damage done to Pacha Mama (Article 71); and
- creation of a single planning area across all of Amazonia with land use development and planning that ensures the conservation and protection of its ecosystems and the principle of sumak kawsay (the good way of living) (Article 250) (Constitution of Ecuador 2008).

The actual constitutional language is set forth in Appendix A. A careful reading of these provisions reveals that they are largely unenforceable against the State. For example, Ecuador may be multinational, but the central government owns all subsurface rights and
can therefore grant mining and drilling concessions as it sees fit, subject to prior consultation with affected local populations, whose objections it may disregard in pursuit of what it deems a paramount national interest. Its courts supersede any indigenous court; it is not clear whether indigenous courts even may exercise jurisdiction over non-indigenous persons. What is more, the constitution nowhere defines sumak kawsay. The drafters decided to include the idea, but to allow the national discourse to determine the contours of its meaning (Acosta 2009).

The new constitution nonetheless was generally heralded as a great achievement with the potential to transform economic relations (Avendaño 2009). Unfortunately, as noted, the new constitution was not self-executing; neither was there a tradition of treating constitutional mandates as specifically binding. Thus, the effectiveness of the constitution depended first and last on the government’s willingness to enforce it (Becker 2013). It is a fact that the 2008 iteration was the 21st Ecuadorian constitution in 176 years. It is not viewed as sacrosanct. It is more of a statement of goals and aspirations for the type of society the government should promote.

Bretón Solo de Zaldívar summarizes the status of sumak kawsay within the Ecuadorian legal regime in this way:

Anyway, being an invented tradition, Sumak Kawsay incarnates at a certain moment - that of its inclusion in the constitutional texts - an enormous transforming potential, insofar as it wanted to present itself as an alternative to neoliberalism and developmentalist ethnocides. The other problem, and not a minor one, comes from the permanent and flagrant contradiction to which the real politik has subjected such programmatic declarations; of the weight that the neoextractivist reconfiguration gives to the ways of imagining other ways of managing living in diversity. All this can turn Sumak Kawsay, if it has not already done so, into another of these essential images, as a mirror, in front of which to contemplate the elongated shadow of a conventional development coated with postmodern and alternative dyes where its supposed carriers are nothing
Bretón Solo de Zaldívar is overly pessimistic in his view that “realpolitik” has rendered sumak kawsay an empty performance. The fact is that language demanded by the indigenous peoples, acting by and through CONAIE, is now included in the nation’s constating document. How it is rendered operational, i.e., in accordance which of the three models outlined by Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, is not as important as the fact that it represents another step in the ongoing negotiation between the indigenous peoples and the West concerning the values of the national state.

Governments come and go in Ecuador, as do constitutions, but the national discourse will hereafter take cognizance of indigenous views. This is the first critical step in moving toward a new common ground in national policy. Luis Macas, president of CONAIE in 2008 and the person who argued most persuasively in the Constituent Assembly for the inclusion of sumak kawsay in the new constitution, refers to it as a community space of reciprocity, coexistence with nature, social responsibility and consensus. Alberto Acosta, former president of the Constituent Assembly, writes that the adoption of sumak kawsay in the political thought of Ecuador means "a demonstration that the door to the construction of a democratic society can be opened, it welcomes the proposals of the indigenous peoples and nationalities, as well as of broad segments of the population, and, simultaneously, it is projected with strength in the debates of transformation that take place in the world "(Acosta 2009: 7).

The State controls the course of development by either manipulating the consultative process or overriding indigenous peoples’ objections (Basic Materials & Resources Monitor 2018). For example, CONAIE vehemently opposed the Coca Coda
Sinclair dam project, yet it went forward (New York Times, December 24, 2018)\(^4\). Oil concessions have been granted as have open-pit mining permits despite CONAIE’s objections and local votes in opposition (CONAIE 2019b).

The prevailing statist view of sumak kawsay is exemplified by the Yasuni ITT project, pursuant to which the State in 2013 offered to set aside plans to grant drilling concessions inside the Yasuni National Park, provided the “West” contributed $330,000,000, representing what the State estimated would be about 1/3 of the revenues it would otherwise have realized. CONAIE protested this project strenuously, but it only failed because the State and the international donor community could not agree on how the funds would be handled (New York Times, June 11, 2014). Drilling commenced in 2016. As the Times noted in 2014, “[t]wo-thirds of Ecuador’s Amazon is currently zoned for oil concessions, but there has yet to be an example of responsible drilling there” (New York Times, June 11, 2014).

In the hands of the State, sumak kawsay is synonymous with buen vivir, which is narrowly defined as a product of development, which in effect means that it is subordinated to the immediate financial requirements of the State (Davidoff 2013). The government of Lenin Moreno has explicitly turned away from the “citizens’ revolution” of Rafael Correa to adopt an accommodationist policy with respect to multinational corporations in the extractive industries (Bloomberg Businessweek, June 10, 2019). It

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\(^4\) The Coda Cola Sinclair dam was constructed in defiance of decades of counsel that the underlying ground was geologically unstable. It began to crack before it was ever put into operation. Due to loss of snow melt, it only generates at one-third of its capacity for a few hours of the day (El Comercio (Quito, Ecuador)). Ecuador has pledged eighty percent of its oil revenues to repay the construction loans extended by China. From time to time, the price of petroleum has been less than the cost to bring it to market; accordingly, Ecuador’s repayment obligation will likely require twice as much time than was contemplated, from ten to twenty years. How this reflects upon the economic incentives underlying Ecuadorian governmental decision-making is a matter for a different essay.
would be easy to write off sumak kawsay as a failed doctrine irrelevant to the conduct of
the State’s business, but it has created a space for the articulation of a coherent
indigenous protest of the current statist development paradigm. The persistence with
which CONAIE protests on behalf of indigenous peoples keeps the possibility of a
middle ground open and guarantees that it is considered.
CHAPTER 6: THE AÍ COFÁN NEGOTIATE THE WEST

If the practical effects of the insertion of an indigenous concept of well-being into the discourse of the State are not immediately apparent, the same cannot be said of its effect upon the indigenous peoples. Here a new idea of indigenous cultural worth and competence vis-à-vis the West transformed the indigenous peoples. The best example of this phenomenon is the case of the Aí Cofán, who in the past sixty years have been able to protect their culture against devastating contamination and in so doing to assert themselves as full social actors in defense of their lands and in setting their course within Ecuadorian society.

Like other indigenous peoples of the Oriente, the Aí Cofán have had a conflicted relationship with the colonizing forces of the West. Their response to rapid and cataclysmic change wrought by immersive contact with the West - in the form of the petroleum industry and homesteaders – demonstrates well the ability of indigenous peoples to maintain their cultures in the face of such an onslaught and to determine for themselves how they will adjust and move forward. There is nary a mention of sumak kawsay in the tale of the Aí Cofán, no doubt because they do not speak Kichwa or any derivative of it. Instead there is the performance of the people staking out their space and accommodating the West on their own terms. To understand the nature of this work, it is necessary first to describe the traditional cultural milieu of the Aí Cofán in some detail.

The Aí Cofán people have lived on the eastern slope of the Andes Mountains and the lowland forest along both sides of the present border between Ecuador and Colombia.
for millennia.\(^5\) Prior to invasion by the Spanish, they occupied “millions” of hectares of land (Cepek 2018: 30). They numbered 30,000 or so, and lived in isolated riparian communities, supporting themselves by hunting and gathering in the forest and fishing in the rivers. They also engaged in subsistence gardening but essentially lived on the natural bounty of their environment. Pre-colonization, Aí Cofán groups moved about freely, building simple homes and cultivating gardens for a few months before moving on (Cepek 2018: 31). The common Western image of foraging peoples constantly on the move in a desperate search for food is thus inaccurate. Cepek refers to Marshall Sahlins for the observation that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle provides ample leisure time and is not focused on acquisition of material surplus simply because the materials necessary to a comfortable life are always at hand (Cepek 2018: 31, citing Sahlins 2000).

Commencing in the early seventeenth century, the Aí Cofán periodically encountered the West in the form of soldiers, Christian missionaries, rubber tappers, gold seekers and wanderers (Cepek 2018: 24), collectively referred to as *cocama* in A’ingae, the traditional Aí Cofán language. This narrative is a tale of devastating epidemics, violent expropriation of land, environmental degradation, murder, rape, kidnapping and exploitative labor practices. Following a measles epidemic in 1923, the Aí Cofán population had dwindled to its lowest recognized number - 323 individuals. Their territorial boundaries had shrunk until they were left with only a few villages on the south bank of the Aguarico River. At the insistence of CONAIE, in 1994 the State finally awarded them surface rights to 9,571 hectares, a square territory measuring a little bit more than six miles on a side (Cepek 2018: 25). Their population has recovered to about

\(^5\) My discussion of the Aí Cofán rests upon the work of Michael Cepek, in particular his 2018 book, *Life in Oil*. 28
1,400 persons, living in scattered small settlements along the Aguarico River. The Aí Cofán are principally located in the village of Dureno along the south bank of the Aguarico River. There are no longer any large Aí Cofán settlements. As Cepek notes, the Aí Cofán have a deep-seated distrust and fear of *cocama*, whom they regard as thieves and murderers (Cepek 2018: 87).

The relationship between the Aí Cofán and the West is complicated by the fact that from the earliest colonial times, itinerant Western merchants have traded with the Aí Cofán for commodities such as machetes, axes, metal pots, plates, sewing needles, fishhooks, thread, cloth, matches, and salt. In exchange, the Aí Cofán offered whatever they had on hand, be it gold, pelts, tobacco, hammocks, canoes, and/or rubber. The Aí Cofán did not purposely gather goods for the purpose of exchange – they mainly gathered goods at their leisure and traded them with the *cocama* as and when they crossed paths. Sometimes, the Aí Cofán traveled and worked alongside *cocama* traders who oversaw their collection of forest and riverine goods (Cepek 2018: 94). Thus, from earliest contact, the Aí Cofán and the West have engaged in a dialogic relationship – perhaps a mutual pantomime would be a better description. The Aí Cofán have found the West to be violent and dishonest but also the bearers of goods that quickly became baseline necessities of Aí Cofán life. For their part, the West has viewed the Aí Cofán as docile and simple exotics, yet well-adapted to their surroundings and therefore useful.

Aí Cofán society has traditionally rested on the concept of *opatssi*. *Opatssi* translates into English as a general reference to the individual living at peace within a community within nature. As described by a member of the Aí Cofán people,

*Opatssi* means living without being timid or nervous. It means that you’ll be happy. You sit, you rest, you sleep, you’re full. You go to your garden, and you
come back, satiated, and you bathe in the river. It’s like the opa con’sin. That’s what we’re like here. If you’re afraid, you’ll have many troubling thoughts. But if you’re opatssi, well, like that monkey, it goes high, high up in the trees, and it looks all around. And it sees you on the ground, and it comes very close. It doesn’t know. It doesn’t know how to be afraid. It doesn’t know to be nervous or timid. It will come to you and stare at you. That’s what opa con’sin is like (Cepek 2008: 314).

Opatssi represents a blissful life in which there is “an organic fit between structure and practice – or more appropriately, of a condition in which one does not have to discipline one’s behavior to make it accord with conditions or rules that are anything but fully internalized” (Cepek 2008: 342). It is a shared state of being that bespeaks the possibility of finding utopia in the here and now as one tends one’s garden, harvests animals and plants from the forest, and bathes and drinks from the river in the company of like-minded people.

Opatssi also represents a position of extraordinary vulnerability to the outside world. Per Cepek,

[w]hereas [the Aí Cofán] feel comfortable, secure, and capable in community contexts, most Aí Cofán people define themselves negatively in relation to the knowledge, skills, and equipment that would allow them to be effective actors in other spaces. From their perspective, to be Aí Cofán is to lack material resources; it is to be illiterate and innumerate; it is to be monolingual; it is to be timid in the presence of non-Aí Cofán people; and, most importantly, it is to be more or less incapable of dealing effectively with the great challenges that threaten their continued survival as an indigenous Amazonian people (Cepek 2014: 100).

Like the monkey so unaware of danger that it exposes itself to predators, a people living in opatssi is at a disadvantage in dealing with violence from outside. As the history of the Aí Cofán demonstrates, their response to colonization has been to accept from the West those products that make their lives easier, but otherwise to retreat into whatever sanctuary remained to them. The West has not so much bulldozed the Aí Cofán people
as periodically permeated them, stealing, raping, and killing as it deemed expedient to its purposes. As Cepek described the situation in 2008, “[a]fter hundreds of years of coercion, capture, and epidemics, the Cofán had developed two main responses to incursions: flee from the cocama or wait for them to leave” (Cepek 2018: 170).

The second pillar of traditional Aí Cofán society is shamanism. Cosmological concerns have been and still remain critical to Aí Cofán people’s lives (Cepek 2018: 67). Their world is densely populated by human spirits and demons. Accordingly, shamanism has traditionally been the central organizing principle of Aí Cofán culture (Cepek 2018: 58). Shamans serve as intermediaries in the spirit realm, entrusted with the care and protection of their community against other shamans and evil spirits. They are also the defenders of their people against the cocama. They are the arbiters of all matters that might disturb opatssi within the community. They arbitrate disputes, kill enemies, repel assailants, and attract wild game for their people (Cepek 2018: 252). Their responsibilities are plenary. In their protective function, shamans are viewed as jaguars, the reification of prowess, aggression and strength. They are experts at mediating external forces, and are defined by an eagerness to identify, confront, and overcome enemies. Even today, as the role of the shaman has been reduced in importance, they are seen as quasi-supernatural beings, both respected and feared, at once central and at the periphery of the Aí Cofán sociocosmological world (Cepek 2014: 102).

In Dureno, the village studied by Cepek, the last great shaman was Yori’ye. He directed his people to settle in Dureno in 1944 and he is credited with providing a good living to his people there until he died in 1966. Fifty years after his death, the residents of Dureno still marvel that he had the temerity to pinch a Catholic priest after the priest
had pinched him. Such violence, especially against a *cocama*, was inconceivable for non-shamans (Cepek 2018: 100-101).

With the aid of a hallucinogenic beverage called *yaje*, shamans can transform themselves into wild beasts, like a jaguar or anaconda, to engage neighboring villages’ shamans in battle, kill or disable other people, and do battle with evil spirits in the forest. Adopting the form of a jaguar, they will devour individuals from a neighboring people (Cepek 2018: 59). Occurrences that Western logic would view as the product of random chance are attributed to shamanic intervention. For example, when a controversial oil well stopped producing, it was attributed to the shaman (Cepek 2018: 186). A shaman has the power to cause harm, even death, to persons who offend him. When a canoe carrying oil workers who had committed a theft from Yori’ye overturned in the Aguarico River and drowned most of them, it was universally acknowledged that Yori’ye in the form of an anaconda had capsized their boat (Cepek 2018: 110).

Like the Aí Cofán generally, shamans are in a dialogic relationship with the West, one in which the West respects and fears them: “Ecuadorians of all backgrounds – indigenous or not – fear the malevolence of indigenous shamans, whom they sometimes call *brujos* (witches in Spanish)” (Cepek 2018: 184). For their part, shamans have accepted Western interventions in matters traditionally considered their exclusive province. The best example is the case of medical care. Presented with symptoms, the Aí Cofán will first treat the disease with medicinal plants. If that does not work, it is presumed the disease is caused by evil spirits and the shaman is consulted. Finally, if the shaman does not effect a cure, the Aí Cofán will have recourse to Western medicine, most commonly in the case of recently introduced diseases associated with the presence
of the West (Cepek 2018: 97). The Aí Cofán take a pragmatic view in these matters. Yori’ye welcomed missionaries in the 1950s because they brought pharmaceutical treatments for tuberculosis and whooping cough, diseases that had proven resistant to plant medicines and shamanic intervention (Cepek 2018: 66). Traditional healing has not been supplanted by Western science; rather, they are seen as different approaches to a common project, even to the point of translation into a money transaction (Cepek 2018: 227-228).

Because they are so closely associated with malevolent beings and forces, villagers view their shamans as dangerous, terrifying, quasi-human creatures (Cepek 2018: 75). The shaman thus occupies a liminal position in Aí Cofán society. He attracts game to the village, he protects people from sickness and death, he confronts the forces that would disturb his people’s opatssi, but he is also an agent of violence and death. After they die, shamans become cocoya, demons who turn upon their former people and inflict suffering, even to the point of death. Thus, upon the death of a shaman, a community will relocate to save itself from his wrath (Cepek 2018: 64). The forests are full of cocoya and without the protection of the shaman, they can wreak havoc.

The Aí Cofán identify with the forest in the sense that it has always provided for them. They have no ethic of conservation of its resources simply because they have always experienced them as infinite. As their acceptance of Western materials demonstrates, neither do they make a fetish of relying solely upon its bounty. The forest is an abundant resource, but it is also home to cocoya. The idea of a benign natural divinity is alien to Aí Cofán thinking.
Opatssi is at the heart of what it means to be Aí Cofán. An Aí Cofán is defined functionally: he/she speaks A’ingae (a linguistic isolate), lives among the Aí Cofán and observes opatssi. “Aí Cofán-ness” is not determined by bloodlines. Intermarriage with other groups of indigenous peoples is common such that there are no pure Aí Cofán (Cepek 2018: 66; Cepek 2014: 92). Those who perform Aí Cofán-ness are considered Aí Cofán so long as they perform it. For example, Randy Borman, son of white missionaries, who has lived his entire life in Dureno, married an Aí Cofán woman and is credited with living in accordance with opatssi values, is accepted as authentic Aí Cofán, albeit with a special ability to interact effectively with cocama (Cepek 2014: 98).

Mapping Aí Cofán opatssi onto standard definitions of sumak kawsay presents difficulties. There is no reason to assume that Aí Cofán opatssi bears any relationship to the good life as it may be defined in other indigenous cultures. In fact, Andean spirituality centers on the idea of the Pachamama, a divinity that translates into English as “Mother Earth,” an entity completely alien to Aí Cofán spirituality. Further, after five hundred years of cultural domination, the idea of sumak kawsay had long lost its relevance among the indigenous peoples of the Andes. Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara observe that the melding of Andean and Amazonian concepts created a common ethos of living in harmony beneath the benevolent rule of a general divinity. In essence, the Andean and the Amazonian peoples forged a sumak kawsay generally acceptable to each which then served as the foundation of a common political project (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017: 33).

Opatssi is inseparable from shamanism – they are two sides of the same coin. The shaman provides the protective shell and internal rule without which opatssi cannot
long persist against outside interference. Even more, opatssi presumes the authority of a shaman to maintain peace among members of the community as conflicts arise. Opatssi is inherently fragile, yet it has endured as a community ideal for over three hundred years of assault by the West through the strategy of turning inward and waiting for the aggressor to move on. The greatest test of opatssi would be the fundamental transformation of their relationship to the cocama and to their lands brought about by the arrival of the petroleum industry and the settlers who accompanied it in the second half of the twentieth century. This disturbance soon showed itself to be a matter of permanent change.

Almost all of the Amazonian forests of eastern Ecuador sit atop petroleum reserves. Royal Dutch Shell conducted seismic exploration in the 1940s but did not find commercially viable deposits. It established its base of operations downriver from Durenó and flew its workers in and out on an amphibious airplane, the first flying machine ever encountered by the Aí Cofán (Cepek 2018: 102). Royal Dutch Shell abandoned its efforts within a few years but employed a number of Aí Cofán men as guides and manual laborers for cash wages. It also gave the Aí Cofán their first experience of rubber boots and canned foods. We can see here that the image of the Aí Cofán as a primitive, or savage, people is easy to form, but inaccurate. Royal Dutch Shell brought new technology that impressed the Aí Cofán, but they were not totally unsophisticated or ignorant of the ways of the West. As Sahlins cautions, we must not mistake material simplicity for impoverishment (Sahlins 2000: 96-97). The record of contacts shows the Aí Cofán to be a complete and functioning culture parallel to the West but with few points of commonality. Unfortunately, the Aí Cofán had no understanding
of why Royal Dutch Shell was digging so many holes and they certainly had no prior experience of the large-scale drilling operations to come or the effect they would have upon their lands and persons (Cepek 2018: 102).

Texaco arrived in the vicinity of Dureno in 1966 and extracted oil from 1973 to 1992. Unlike Royal Dutch Shell, Texaco operated from a base of operations in Aí Cofán territory, from which it sent exploratory parties into the forest. They cut paths ten feet wide through the jungle to create a rectangular pattern of squares measuring 285 yards on a side. Often the Aí Cofán would not know of such activity until they heard the seismic explosions. Texaco built an airport which brought great volumes of equipment to the field. For the great majority of the Aí Cofán, this was their first exposure to the internal combustion engine, in the form of automobiles and trucks driving through their land on newly constructed roads or outboard motors operating on the Aguarico River. Looking back, the Aí Cofán remember the arrival of gasoline-powered machinery as the commencement of the age of noise (Cepek 2018: 132). Of course, nobody consulted with the Aí Cofán prior to Texaco entering onto their land.

Texaco was recklessly negligent to the point of intentional malfeasance in every phase of its operations, from the storage and transport of petroleum to the disposal of the toxic by-products. It is well-documented that Texaco discharged huge volumes of carcinogenic chemical waste directly into the waters used by the Aí Cofán for drinking, fishing, and bathing (Sawyer 2004; Kimerling 2006; Cepek 2018). Pipeline spills and leeching of waste materials spilled over thirty million gallons of crude oil directly into the Aguarico River basin, three and one-half times the total spill from the Exxon Valdez and establishing a record for contamination that would stand until the Deep Water Horizon
blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The Aí Cofán immediately began to experience deleterious health effects associated with contamination of food sources, air, and water. Today, they exhibit disproportionate rates of cancer and birth defects that are clearly traceable to oil.

Encouraged by the State, settlers used the lattice of roads carved out of the forest to gain access to Aí Cofán lands which they claimed for farmsteads. Over the next forty years, over one million acres of land surrounding Dureno on all sides was deforested. Texaco founded the town of Nuevo Loja, which in the 2010 census had a population of 57,727 and serves as the capitol city and commercial hub for the Province of Sucumbios. The Aí Cofán are now outnumbered by *cocama* in their immediate surroundings by a factor of 42 to 1. The arrival of Texaco and the settlers thus entailed nothing less than the permanent transformation of the Aí Cofán’s lands.

But why would the Aí Cofán passively allow such dramatic, sudden and destructive change on their lands and to themselves? The answer is two-fold. First, the Aí Cofán are a peaceable group, prepared to endure intruders rather to fight against them. Second, they lacked experience with toxic contamination. In the words of one of Cepek’s informants,

> when Texaco came and made their wells, we didn’t think they had come to damage our land. We did see the oil. It was all over the river. But we didn’t think to try to stop it. We didn’t know how. It didn’t occur to us. We also didn’t know that, later on, we would all get sick because of it. We even walked all over the contamination, on the roads (Cepek 2018: 113).

The Aí Cofán initially considered the oil explorers as just another in the long line of invaders who would only stay temporarily and who would not affect permanent changes to the land. The idea of roads running all the way to Quito was fantastical. The idea that
settlers would carve farms out of the forest remote from the rivers was clearly impossible
given the presence of *cocoya* (Cepek 2018: 115).

The next question must be why, given their history of longsuffering endurance
against *cocama* depredations, the Aí Cofán organized themselves to challenge the oil
companies in the 1980s and 1990s. Several factors combined to make this happen. First,
Yori’ye had instructed them not to leave Dureno and their fear of *cocoya* violence should
not be discounted (Cepek 2018: 64). No shaman of Yori’ye’s stature had come forward
in the twenty years since his death and his commands were still respected, especially
since his *cocoya* could bring death and ruin upon Dureno were they to disobey him.

Second, the Aí Cofán became a member of CONAIE in 1986, whose constating
document asserted indigenous rights that the Aí Cofán had never dared to claim for
themselves (CONAIE 1986). Several Aí Cofán men are reported to have become
involved in indigenous activism by the mid-1980s (Cepek 2018: 181 – 185)). A wave of
indigenous activism swept across Ecuador, coming to a crescendo in mass
demonstrations in the early 1990s seeking among other things, recognition by the State of
indigenous cultures and languages and culminating in a demand for re-organization of
Ecuador as a plurinational state (CONAIE 1994). CONAIE clearly emboldened the Aí
Cofán by emphasizing a common indigenous ethnicity that bound all indigenous peoples
into a whole. When the Aí Cofán sought to close oil wells, other indigenous peoples
literally stood by their side (Cepek 2018: 183).

Third, Western environmental activists took up the cause of the indigenous
peoples of the Amazon, styling them as victims of capitalist greed in need of the
intervention of a countervailing Western force to preserve their pristine jungle habitat (or
whatever was left of it). These groups, organized into well-meaning NGOs, promoted a return to an imagined traditional way of life. The Aí Cofán became interesting to the West, as groups like the Pachamama Alliance (a group of North Americans and the Achuar people) and Acción Ecológico (the principal Ecuadorean environmental NGO) invested them with a mystical value as bearers of an ancient non-Western mode of living (Pachamama Alliance 2019; Cepek 2018: 85). These groups’ chief value to the Aí Cofán was to valorize the idea of sumak kawsay, which resonated with opatssi and thereby created a space for the Aí Cofán to criticize the West.6

Fourth, they were participating in cocama ways through their interactions in Nuevo Loja, as well as by seizing employment opportunities they found in the oil fields (Cepek 2018: 197-198). There is a compelling and practical case to be made for converting cash wages into an outboard motor for one’s canoe, educational opportunities for one’s children and access to free healthcare. Participating in cocama society will tend to raise expectations of exercising cocama rights and to be accorded cocama respect. Cepek relates the story of the local beauty pageant which was always won by a cocama girl. In 2012, the Aí Cofán went to great lengths to present an attractive candidate. When the cocama girl was announced as the winner, an Aí Cofán elder in attendance stormed the stage, shouted down the cocama and announced there would be no more

6 Western interest in what was transpiring in and around Lago Agrio dates to the publication in 1992 of Amazon Crude, an exposé by Judith Kimerling. Her work describes in detail the scope of the contamination (Kimerling 2006). It portrays the Aí Cofán as helpless victims. In 1993, a group of American attorneys filed a class action against Texaco seeking a fund for environmental remediation and personal injury to the exposed persons. That lawsuit followed a tortuous route through the courts of Ecuador and the United States but resulted in a $9,500,000,000 judgment against Chevron in Ecuador, handed down in 2013, but only collectible against Chevron’s assets in Ecuador, of which there were none. The judgment has been declared unenforceable in the United States and in several other countries where the plaintiffs have sought to levy. It is worthless as a potential source of financial recovery (Chevron Corporation v. Donziger 2016).
trade between their communities (Cepek 2018: 206 - 207). This level of confrontation is a product of both familiarity and a sense of cultural equality. It was also unthinkable before the Aí Cofán became confident in their ability to negotiate the world of Nuevo Loja.

What had happened was the Aí Cofán had overcome their awe of the departed Yori’ye (and the lesser shamans who followed him) to define a new path into the future as one of many indigenous peoples free to enter into cocama society in pursuit of those things they found of value there. This represented a transformation in the manner in which they perceived themselves vis-à-vis the West. In essence, the traditional dynamic in which shamans were counterpoised against evil forest spirits gave way to one in which evil is located in the physical world of oil contamination and deforestation. The Aí Cofán have taken upon themselves responsibility for matters formerly entrusted to shamans.

One of their leaders described the situation succinctly as follows:

In the old times, we had a great shaman, a great leader. He knew how to call game. He knew how to cure people and keep them healthy. He knew how to do everything. Now, we can have that again. We need to strategize well and work with the government. We need to negotiate well and create a solid structure here. If we do a good job planning what to do with our land and lives, our leaders here in Dureno can have the same kind of power Yori’ye had (Cepek 2018: 208).

It was not an easy process. It is a matter of observable fact that the ways of the cocama have infiltrated Aí Cofán culture, especially among the youth. At home, Aí Cofán children still speak A’ingae, but they are educated in Spanish-speaking schools. They listen to both Latin American pop and traditional music. They tend to wear Western clothes when they go to town, but dress traditionally in Dureno (Cepek 2018: 120-123). The ways of traditional healers now accommodate Western medicine, a
development welcomed by a people among whom traditionally 10% of fatalities were caused by snake bites. As Cepek notes, “the days when shamanism provided life’s basic structure are likely gone for good” (Cepek 2018: 242), yet the Aí Cofán have accommodated the West and asserted themselves in the Western economy, at the same time maintaining their ethnic identity. Opatsii is fundamental to this accomplishment.

The Aí Cofán also exhibit a proprietary willingness to monetize the natural resources found within their territory. The State pays the Aí Cofán $54,000 per year to protect standing forest; an excavation company pays them $35,000 per year for the right to dredge rocks from the bed of the Aguarico River; a Chinese company paid them $500,000 for the right to conduct seismic testing on their land, distributed in cash and outboard motors (Cepek 2018: 41).

After expelling the petroleum companies from their lands in 1998, the Aí Cofán authorized the resumption of oil production on their land in 2013 (Cepek 2018: 186 – 188). Their reasoning shows how they have recast their relationship to the West:

1. Petroamazonas and BGP made numerous commitments in regard to employment opportunities for the Aí Cofán, and the handling of waste.

2. The elderly Aí Cofán deserved to receive benefits of drilling since they had been the ones to struggle against the oil companies in the past and had borne the brunt of the contamination.

3. BGP employees and equipment were to be kept on the far side of the Aguarico River, so that daily access to the well site would depend on their continuing observance of their agreements.
4. The development of directional drilling meant that the oil companies could gain access to oil beneath Aí Cofán lands from neighboring lands, albeit at an increased cost; in other words, the agreement with the oil companies created production efficiencies for them while ensuring the Aí Cofán would benefit from their oil (Cepek 2018: 215–217).

To sympathetic Western observers, the Aí Cofán have been trampled and poisoned by the great capital engines of the cocama. The environmental disaster of Lago Agrio coincided with and to a certain extent caused a dramatic increase in interest in the Amazonian region in general and in Ecuador, yet as Cepak explains, “The West demands too much of the contemporary native peoples, the Aí Cofán included. It hopes to make them into symbols of its worst crimes while portraying them as wise beacons who offer a superior and authentic way of life, even today” (Cepek 2018: 12). The West seeks to atone for the crime of environmental contamination by imagining that it can preserve remnants of a pristine pre-Columbian past. The Aí Cofán are by turns to be pitied as egregious collateral damage in the train of capitalism’s march or valorized in a grotesque romanticizing of their fortitude and the ancient values of the forest. In all their feathered headdresses, mystic shamanic practices and native hunter-gatherer production, the West sees them as the reification of pre-, anti-, and post-capitalism. Their victimhood constitutes a great blessing conferred upon that enlightened small portion of the West able to perceive it.

The reality among the Aí Cofán bears little resemblance to this self-serving Western construction of their plight. There is no doubt but that the pollution of their lands and drinking water were not welcome, neither were the deleterious health effects
visited upon them. There is also no doubt but that the Aí Cofán have had to accommodate new social realities not of their making, even to the point of adjusting to life not dominated by shamanism. Yet Aí Cofán elders now state that they wish a more thorough integration with the West. They envision Aí Cofán persons occupying the roles they now see reserved to Westerners, such as professionals, retailers, even drilling operators (Cepek 2018: 211-212). Members of the Aí Cofán people are now employed as park guards, research assistants, and tour guides (Cepek 2014: 91). In addition, the Aí Cofán have obtained legal title to surface rights over one million acres of Andean and Amazonian forest, most of which overlaps with protected natural areas. All of this may distress certain NGOs who want the Aí Cofán to remain “authentically” frozen in time (Cepek 2018: 47). It does not, however, reflect a betrayal of ancient values. Rather, it shows a people exercising agency to find their way in changing times, to redefine their good life as they identify new aspirations and evaluate their options in new circumstances.

Is opatssi still relevant? The Aí Cofán have begun to abandon the social practices that once expressed opatssi. Public assemblies have occasionally devolved into fisticuffs (Cepek 2010: 213 - 215). The animosity once directed at the cocama is now directed into the community. As they have grown less reliant on the forest for their sustenance, both due to their preference for store-bought foods and the scarcity of game, the custom of sharing food with one’s neighbors has ceased. The idea of shared labor has also gone by the wayside. The practice of gardening has fallen away – the Aí Cofán buy their vegetables in the market at Nuevo Loja (Cepek 2018: 240). The West and the Aí Cofán have stumbled into a new relationship. The West treats the Aí Cofán as competent,
capable of handling their own affairs, and deserving of respect at the negotiating table. Their *opatssi* culture is explicitly valued by the West as an expression of the ideals of *sumak kawsay* set forth in the Constitution of 2008 and as the reification of an imagined past in which those values were central to everyday life. They have done the inconceivable by replacing the shaman with human leaders, by remaining in place as the forest environment around them was transformed by drilling operations and agriculture. They have maintained a cultural identity in the midst of sweeping change.

What is the prognosis for the Aí Cofán? Applied to the Aí Cofán, Fischer’s objective factors are in flux. One can argue the Aí Cofán had adequate material resources prior to the arrival of the oil industry and that they have now regained that level after the transformation of their society from a subsistence to a wage earning economy, which is only to say the material resources they view as baseline now include Western consumer goods, like groceries, mechanical equipment, medicine and technology. Physical health and safety have also stabilized after the catastrophe of oil contamination, yet the poisoning of the ground water beneath Dureno is irredeemable and will cause deleterious health effects into the foreseeable future. As the Aí Cofán become ever more integrated into the West one might expect them to abandon Dureno, if not for economic opportunities in the larger Ecuadorian society then due to the presence of carcinogens in their groundwater. This result would be consistent with the aspirations articulated by the Aí Cofán elders, who look toward a future in which members of the Aí Cofán people take over *cocama* roles in the community. Cepek reports that “the Aí Cofán see no reason why they should remain impoverished. They identify many ways that increasing their access to material resources, including money, will help them to maintain rather than
cause them to lose their cultural distinctiveness” (Cepek 2018: 221). Even as the Ai Cofán declare their values as *opattsi*, and as the West projects sumak kawsay upon them, their performance reflects an ongoing process of evaluating the West and taking from it those features the Ai Cofán deem attractive. With the encouragement of CONAIE, the Ai Cofán have forged new identities that have nothing to do with regaining a lost utopia of forest dwelling, but instead have created a platform for a cultural revaluing and an engagement with modernity.
CHAPTER 7: SUMAK KAWSAY AND ECOTOURISM

Megan Epler Wood defines ecotourism as “purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens” (Epler Wood 1991: 201). As defined, ecotourism requires a complex balancing of interests between the Western guests and the indigenous host communities. First, who determines the “cultural and natural history of the environment?” Second, who defines the “integrity of natural resources?” Third, what does it mean to make “conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens?”

The idea of sumak kawsay, or the good life, however it is phrased in various indigenous languages, has served to ground the indigenous peoples so they can understand their relationship to the tourism industry, to define what they want from it, and what they are willing to offer it.

Per Stronza and Hunt, “the post-WWII era has seen tourism implemented primarily as a tool for modernizing traditional or underdeveloped societies as they march toward a First World ideal of mass-consumerism” (Stronza and Hunt 2012: 19). Prior to the late 1980s, tourism typically involved the construction of high-rise hotels and resorts in tropical climes on the seashore. The industry was dominated by large resort operators and very little of the financial benefits filtered down to the locals, save wages earned in menial labor. Manta, Ecuador is typical: high-rise hotels line the beach, and one block inland the locals who work menial jobs in in those hotels live in poverty. This type of
development has the feel of a foreign production in which the local population appears as extras. On the other hand, Nash suggested in 1981 that while a local society may unavoidably be affected by tourism "it also may play a significant role in determining the kind of tourists it receives and the form of tourism they practice" (Nash 1981: 462). Similarly, Erve Chambers has pointed out that "too often we regard the local communities and regions that receive tourists as being the passive recipients of a tourist dynamic", adding that our attempts to understand tourism solely on the basis of the motives and behaviors of tourists, "is certain to leave us with only a partial appreciation for what tourism has come to represent in our time" (Chambers 1999: 22, cited in Stronza 2001: 267). Clearly, Western tourists and their indigenous hosts are in a dialogic relationship in which each party has certain expectations that must be reconciled. For example, the tourist wants to see certain “tribal” dances and rituals, so the host community obliges even if the performance is out of context. The host community wants to ensure that one segment of the community is not disproportionately enriched by the tourist trade, so it makes sure the tourists have access to artisanal goods made in the community (Stronza 2001: 263). The indigenous hosts understand they are entering a market exchange with the West that will enable them to acquire those Western commodities they desire.

The advent of ecotourism marked a dramatic paradigm shift in the Western view of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. In the early 1990s, Western interest in the remote Ecuadorian lowlands arose in conjunction with the modern conservation movement (Wesche 1996: 159, citing Ceballos-Lascurain 1996: 24). This terrain features neither beaches nor Western amenities. As sympathetic elements of the West absorbed
the idea of sumak kawsay, the idea took hold that the best response to the threat to nature posed by the petroleum industry was to promote a different model of development, one that created economic opportunities for the indigenous peoples while preserving their cultures and natural habitats. Hence ecotourism as part and parcel of the response to the oil industry (Davidoff 2013: 67). If access to the jungle and the indigenous cultures to be found there could be monetized, then the State would have an economic incentive to preserve the lands from the petroleum companies.

Just as the West projected sumak kawsay back on the Aí Cofán and took up their cause in the interest of preserving an imagined native wisdom and way of life, the conservationists projected a romantic vision of indigeneity onto the most remote of Amazonian peoples as part and parcel of preserving their habitat. In essence, the ambivalence between viewing Amazonian indigenous peoples as vermin for extermination versus fauna to be preserved has been decisively resolved in favor of the latter. There is no better presentation of this position than the materials published by the Pachamama Alliance (Pachamama Alliance 2019).

The emergence of community-based ecotourism in Ecuador is historically rooted in the larger indigenous movement, which gained significant momentum throughout the 1990s as groups pressed for self-determination (Hutchins 2010: 19; Wesche 1996). In an ironic twist, the West demanded a performance that corroborated their assumptions regarding how indigenous societies were organized and the values that motivated them. The West demanded authenticity and their indigenous peoples obliged, even to the extent that they fabricated backstories for artisanal products and local customs in a conscious effort to imbue every moment of the tourists’ experience with “meaning and cultural
significance” (Stronza 2001: 273). Thus, as in the case of the Aí Cofán, the indigenous peoples of remote Amazonia consciously engage with the West on negotiated terms and exercise a high degree of control over the presentation of their culture (Stronza 2001: 273). Per Cohen, “[t]ourism can become an empowering vehicle of self-representation, and locals may purposely choose to reinvent themselves through time, modifying how they are seen and perceived by different groups of outsiders” (Cohen 1988, cited in Stronza 2001: 264).

The experience of the Achuar people demonstrates the process of co-constitution between the Western ecotourists and their indigenous hosts. Like the Aí Cofán, the Achuar are considered the original inhabitants of their lands, located at the juncture of Morona Santiago and Pastaza Provinces on the border of Peru. It is some of the most remote forest terrain in Ecuador, a full one hundred miles from the nearest road. The Achuar were not contacted by the West until the 1960s, but by the 1990s they had become aware of the contamination of indigenous homelands lands to the north. They were also aware of the grant of oil concessions immediately adjacent to their lands and the imminent threat it posed to their land and rivers.

In the Western telling of the tale, in 1995 the Achuar invited a group of Americans to visit to show them their lands and to voice their concerns about industrial encroachment. Soon thereafter, the Pachamama Alliance was formed, ostensibly as a partnership between the Achuar and ecologically minded Westerners. The Alliance’s website proclaims its “vision of a world that works for everyone: an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, socially just human presence on this planet—a New Dream for humanity” (Pachamama Alliance 2019: Mission and Vision Statement).
Immediately, we see that the West absorbed the idea of sumak kawsay and reflected back a much broader program upon the Achuar – holding the oil companies at bay is part of a program to reconfigure all of humanity.

Out of this vision came the Kapawi Eco Lodge, located in Pastaza Province along the border between Ecuador and Peru. It is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) from the nearest road. According to its website:

Kapawi Ecolodge is the ultimate home for travelers seeking the highest-quality experience of another culture, while reveling in a beautiful, tropical environment.

For over 15 years, Kapawi has served as a physical and spiritual retreat for adventurous travelers, soul seekers, and eco-enthusiasts. It gracefully blends indigenous culture and modern comforts to welcome all guests with peerless hospitality and creates an environment for intercultural exchange.

Among myriad tropical plants, birds, and other life, you can experience yourself as you are meant to be: relaxed, engaged, and viscerally free. You can find a bliss you can take home with you.

The Kapawi Ecolodge is completely owned and operated by the Achuar people. Considered one of the most intact indigenous cultures on Earth, Kapawi Ecolodge was born in 1993 as a revolutionary way to sustain their communities and preserve their ancestral lands and culture in the face of threats from petroleum development (Pachamama Alliance 2019: About Kapawi Ecolodge).

The site emphasizes that the facility is owned by the Achuar people who have extended an invitation to the West to come experience their culture. The featured activities include canoe trips on a river and interpretive hikes through the forest, but the centerpiece is a visit to an actual Achuar village where you, the tourist, will “connect with one of the most intact indigenous cultures in the world. Have your face traditionally painted, share a meal with local families, and learn about ancient ways of living interdependently with our planet home” (Pachamama Alliance 2019). The tourist expectation is a complex of
education, entertainment, illumination, expiation and restoration, deriving in equal measure from immersion in the jungle environment and interactions with the natives.

The Pachamama Alliance solicits visitors to its website to go on a “Pachamama Journey” to an unspecified number of Achuar villages with similarly broad claims:

A Pachamama Journey offers the rare privilege to have a profound immersion with intact indigenous people. You will be invited into their ancestral culture, providing direct experience to learn from an uninterrupted lineage of wisdom amongst the vibrant forest. This remote environment becomes curiously familiar as it awakens an ancient memory, stored in our very DNA, of a natural and harmonious way of living and being.

You will be welcomed at indigenous-owned lodges and villages that offer the unique opportunity to engage in intimate conversations and activities such as interpretive rainforest hikes, river trips in canoes and kayaks, cultural practices and traditions, and shamanic ceremonies (Pachamama Alliance 2019: Pachamama Journeys, an Immersion with Our indigenous Partners).

For the indigenous peoples, ecotourism demands a performance of “traditional” cultural forms for an audience of Western observers, essentially an invented authenticity. The indigenous peoples, because they have come to an understanding of their relationship to the West, understand the paradox inherent in the transaction. The audience believes it is helping to preserve ancient ways under siege by Western corporate interests; the actors understand that their performance is just another negotiated encounter with modernity that has shaped them and now offers opportunities for engaging the market on favorable terms as a means to self-determination:

They do not regard ecotourism as a way to preserve an unbroken tradition; they are very aware of the multiple ruptures and syncretic forms within the history of their culture. If anything, the Kichwa connect ecotourism with the nuanced existential concept of pachacutic, which means “the transformation out of an unhealthy present to a healthy future reminiscent of, but certainly not identical with, a one-time healthy past (Davidoff 2013: 21, citing Whitten 2003: 71).

The same exchange is evident in the tourist trade among the Aí Cofán. As sympathetic elements of the West arrived in Dureno, they sought and consumed a
presentation of local culture that corroborated their vision of sumak kawsay. Tourists tend to seek out the elderly and attempt to communicate with them, notwithstanding many of them speak only A’ingae. The Aí Cofán cooperate in this project. When the government constructed a series of new homes in Dureno in what is best described as an act of reparation, the Aí Cofán insisted that they be modeled on traditional homes, but include a number of common modern amenities, like running water, indoor plumbing, electricity, and internet and television connections (Cepek 2018: 199). They sell locally produced handicrafts out of several of these homes reserved for display to tourists. Cepek does not report any objection by the tourists to these evidences of modern living. Both parties to the transaction apparently understand that they are engaged in a cross-cultural performance.

Cepek notes that more adventurous among the tourists are willing to experiment with the ingestion of yaje (Cepek 2018: 84-85). A recent article in the New York Times reports the increased number of elderly Westerners traveling to Amazonia to consume “yage” for the purpose of exorcising their past and finding purpose for their remaining years (New York Times, October 19, 2019). One would assume this would include consumption of yaje by visitors to Dureno. Clearly, cultural appropriation is a two-way street. The West has begun to travel to the Amazon not merely to experience “native” culture, as by getting their faces painted, but to transform themselves through hallucinogenic experiences. Perhaps the use of yaje will be the heuristic tool the West uses to free itself from late-stage capitalist thinking to a worldview more consistent with the idea of sumak kawsay. The relationship is transforming itself in our time from a
hubristic West sharing modernity to a circumspect West looking for a new understanding of itself.

The applicability of sumak kawsay as a mutually constituting cross-cultural phenomenon in readily apparent in these exchanges. The West constructs an indigenous reality and the indigenous people cooperate. The net result is the West sees what it believes to be a genuine alternate social model and the indigenous people preserve an idealized version of their culture while earning needed income. The indigenous people dance about, paint the ecotourists’ faces, and offer shamanic readings and the West looks past evidences of modernism in the village, like canoes equipped with outboard motors. At the same time, the West experiences indigenous culture as vibrant and as offering unique benefits to the West at least commensurate to those the indigenous peoples accept from it.

The “healthy future” described by Davidoff comes at the cost of commodifying traditional indigenous culture, what Wesche characterizes as the sale of “traditional environmental knowledge and the image of a symbiotic relationship with nature, an increasingly rare commodity experiencing growing demand, in which indigenous peoples enjoy a virtual monopoly” (Davidoff 2013: 189, citing Wesche 1996: 158). The indigenous peoples walk a fine line: at what point does the cultural presentation become nothing more than tourist kitsch and the underlying traditions become remote or even a matter of cynical derision? Davidoff introduces us to a young villager whose family grows fruits and vegetables for its own consumption and uses its earnings to buy clothes and medicine. His father taught him essential skills, like how to build a bungalow, to fish, to hunt, to work, to identify medicinal plants and their uses. He goes to school in
Kichwa and in Spanish. The family produces handicrafts for sale to the tourists. His community would like to create a foundation, to be able to improve the tourist bungalows, to increase the tourist business at higher profit margins. “Then we would be able to have a better life” (Davidoff 2013: 118). That better life is couched in terms of making more money within a development model and the ecotourists are the means to that end.  

Perhaps, however, Davidoff describes only one side of the equation – as the Amazonian peoples accommodate Western modernity and tailor their presentation to its expectations, post-modern Westerners actively seek out the values and practices of the Amazonian peoples that are of value to them, including the ingestion of yaje. We may be witnessing the epistemological melding of Western and indigenous mindsets, ultimately represented in a social model based on sumak kawsay.

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7 The prognosis for ecotourism is troubling. The business is predicated upon the supposed authenticity of the presentation, yet the indigenous community utilizes the proceeds received to move themselves ever farther from that position. As they do so, entertaining the generous assumption that demand for this version of “authentic” indigeneity among Western elites able to afford it remains strong, enterprises like Kapawi Eco Lodge may find themselves in competition with Western resort operators more in tune with the fickle tastes of their Western clientele and with vastly superior financial resources. Even more troubling is the fact that the State still controls all subsurface rights and petroleum and mineral extraction generate many multiples of the revenue the State might expect from ecotourism. At full occupancy, Kapawi Eco Lodge grosses $3,000,000 per year. It incurs a net operating loss every year, largely due the cost of maintaining an airfield and airplanes. It has not repaid any part of the USAID and German Development Bank construction loans (Morningstar 2015). If the ecotourism business eventually thrives, the West will compete with it. If it doesn’t, the State very well may sell oil concessions around and under it to the highest bidder.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Sumak kawsay has had a profound influence among indigenous peoples throughout Ecuador. The idea of a positive indigenous self-identify is reflected at numerous sites in Ecuadorian society. It served to unify the peoples of the Andean highlands and Amazonian lowlands around a vision of a society with a non-Western rationale, thus empowering CONAIE to assert indigenous values in contrast to the West and as an alternative to modernism. The results are inscribed in the Constitution of 2008, where they serve as a permanent exhortation to the nation to find a better form of social organization. It has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly discussion, through which its implications and possible routes to implementation will be formulated. It is a bell that cannot be unrung.

A concept functionally equivalent to sumak kawsay – opattsi in A’ingae - is the traditional social contract of the Aí Cofán people. That ideal has remained constant through fifty years of turbulent interactions with the petroleum industry and the cocama who have come in its wake. As change has swept over the Aí Cofán, they have adapted in ways that evidence their independence – they have embraced the material advantages of the West and are active participants in its economy, yet they have not rejected their own cultural norms or language. They have found ways to hold the West at a distance in such matters. They are a success story and a model of an indigenous people negotiating their relationship with the West, not because of any particular position they have taken or result achieved, but because they have exercised their agency as people bearing a culture of equal worth to the West. They are inferior to nobody and they are nobody’s fool.
The ecotourism business offers an explicit example of cross-cultural co-constitution. The West, represented by elites seeking a personal experience of the primeval and the pure, and the indigenous peoples who understand that the West perceives them as the reification of that desire, each come to their transaction with knowledge that they are playing roles. The West studiously ignores evidence of modernism in the village setting. For their part, the indigenous peoples present their culture as immutable even as the financial resources it provides empowers them to evolve away from it.

In sum, the idea of sumak kawsay permeates Ecuadorian life in a variety of guises. It is an insistent voice promoting an alternative social model predicated on what both the West and the indigenous peoples consider ancestral indigenous values. It is the source of the underlying cultural strength that has given the indigenous peoples a fresh and positive self-valuation in their dealings with the West. It offers the promise of a continued narrowing of the cultural distance between the indigenous peoples and the West, perhaps to the point where Ecuador’s various peoples finally merge into a single culturally diverse people.
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APPENDIX A: CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

a. Article 1: Ecuador is a “unitary, intercultural, multinational . . . State . . .
governed using a decentralized approach. [However, n]onrenewable
natural resources of the State’s territory belong to its inalienable and
absolute assets.”

b. Article 2: “Kichwa and Shuar are official languages for intercultural ties.
The other ancestral languages are in official use by indigenous peoples in
the areas where they live and in accordance with the terms set forth by
law.”

c. Article 14:

The right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically
balanced environment that guarantees sustainability and the good
way of living (sumak kawsay), is recognized.

Environmental conservation, the protection of ecosystems,
biodiversity and the integrity of the country’s genetic assets, the
prevention of environmental damage, and the recovery of degraded
natural spaces are declared matters of public interest.

d. Subpart 6 of Section 57: indigenous peoples are guaranteed

free prior informed consultation, within a reasonable period of
time, on the plans and programs for prospecting, producing and
marketing nonrenewable resources located on their lands and
which could have an environmental or cultural impact on them; to
participate in the profits earned from these projects and to receive
compensation for social, cultural and environmental damages
caused to them. The consultation that must be conducted by the
competent authorities shall be mandatory and in due time. If
consent of the consulted community is not obtained, steps provided
for by the Constitution and the law shall be taken.
e. On the other hand, Article 398:

All state decision or authorization that could affect the environment shall be consulted with the community, which shall be informed fully and on a timely basis. The consulting subject shall be the State. The law shall regulate prior consultation, public participation, time-limits, the subject consulted and the appraisal and objection criteria used with regard to the activity that is being submitted to consultation.

The State shall take into consideration the opinion of the community on the basis of the criteria provided for by law and international human rights instruments.

If the above-mentioned consultation process leads to majority opposition by the respective community, the decision whether to implement or not the project shall be adopted by a resolution that is duly substantiated by the corresponding higher administrative body in accordance with the law.

f. Subpart 10 of Article 57: each indigenous people as the right “[t]o create, develop, apply and practice their own legal system or common law, subject to the Constitution.”

g. Article 26: education is an “indispensable condition for the good way of living.” Subpart 14 of Article 57 and subpart 9 of Article 347 provides for bilingual education.

h. Article 71:

Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.

All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature. To enforce and interpret these rights, the principles set forth in the Constitution shall be observed, as appropriate.
The State shall give incentives to natural persons and legal entities and to communities to protect nature and to promote respect for all the elements comprising an ecosystem.

Subpart 6 of Article 83: the correlative duty of each citizen is “[t]o respect the rights of nature, preserve a healthy environment and use natural resources rationally, sustainably and durably.”

i. Subpart 1 of Article 85: “[p]ublic policies and the provision of public goods and services shall be aimed at enforcing the good way of living and all rights and shall be drawn up on the basis of the principle of solidarity.”

j. Article 171:

The authorities of the indigenous communities, peoples, and nations shall perform jurisdictional duties, on the basis of their ancestral traditions and their own system of law, within their own territories, with a guarantee for the participation of, and decision-making by, women. The authorities shall apply their own standards and procedures for the settlement of internal disputes, as long as they are not contrary to the Constitution and human rights enshrined in international instruments.

k. Article 250:

The territory of the Amazon provinces is part of an ecosystem that is necessary for the planet’s environmental balance of the planet. This territory shall constitute a special territorial district, for which there will be integrated planning embodied in a law including social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects, with land use development and planning that ensures the conservation and protection of its ecosystems and the principle of sumak kawsay (the good way of living).

l. Article 275:

The development structure is the organized, sustainable and dynamic group of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems which underpin the achievement of the good way of living (sumak kawsay).
The State shall plan the development of the country to assure the exercise of rights, the achievement of the objectives of the development structure and the principles enshrined in the Constitution. Planning shall aspire to social and territorial equity, promote cooperation, and be participatory, decentralized, deconcentrated and transparent.

The good way of living shall require persons, communities, peoples and nationalities to effectively exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities within the framework of interculturalism, respect for their diversity, and harmonious coexistence with nature.

m. Articles 277 and 278:

The general duties of the State in order to achieve the good way of living shall be: 1. [t]o guarantee the rights of people, communities and nature[,] and 2. [t]o direct, plan and regulate the development process.” . . . “To achieve the good way of living, it is the duty of people and communities, and their various forms of organization: 1. To participate in all stages and spaces of public management and national and local development planning, and in the execution and control of the fulfillment of development plans at all levels.