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We protect the forest beings, and the forest beings protect us: Cultural resistance in the Ecuadorian Amazonia

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Abstract

Sarayaku is an Amazonian Kichwa community on the shores of Rio Bobonaza, Ecuador. Ten years ago, Sarayaku hit international headlines because it managed to expel the Argentinean CGC oil company from its territory, and it won a court case against the state of Ecuador that had given oil concessions to a private company without consulting the community. Nevertheless, that was not enough because it did not guarantee Sarayaku's protection from *future* extractivist projects. In order to achieve that, Sarayaku *coined* the legal category of *kawsak sacha/the living jungle*, which views the jungle as inhabited by *visible* as well as *non-visible* beings that protect it and considers those beings to be bearers of legal rights. At the same time, by employing their cultural perspective on the jungle, the inhabitants of Sarayaku have forged an anti-colonial, anti-extractivist, and anti-capitalist resistance culture. How did that culture develop? How is it articulated? Moreover, how is *kawsak sacha* positioned in the discussion over the rights of Nature in Latin America? Based on three months of ethnographic research in the community of Sarayaku and more than twenty-five interviews with community members, this article addresses those important questions and argues that securing legal protection may not be a long-term resistance strategy, because laws can be overturned as easily as they were introduced and they are dependent on governmental commitment. On the other hand, the formation of a culture of resistance culture is more difficult to uproot and remains within the community's control to further consolidate it.

KEYWORDS: buen vivir, resistance culture, social movements, Ecuador, indigenous politics, extractivism

Introduction

Maria was sitting behind her table outside Puyo's Museo Etnoarqueològico. There were no customers that day, neither for the Amazonian artesanìa she had made (wooden hairpins with *papagallo* feathers, jewellery, wooden spears etc.) nor for her not-so-Amazonian ones: some necklaces and earrings that looked very *huichol* to me. She said she was buying those from some woman in Puyo who was importing them from somewhere she did not know. Since it was raining heavily, I sat next to her, and we started chatting. I was stranded in Puyo until my trip to Sarayaku would be arranged and which I mentioned to her: 'They are very strong in Sarayaku. They are organised,' she said, 'We [on the other hand] are doomed by the road.'

Maria was from Uniòn Base, a community nearby and, despite being Kichwa, she was jealous of Sarayaku because the road had not yet reached there. Her village had become accessible by road and that had spoiled the unity and the organisational capacity of her people. I found her "development-gone-wrong argument" challenging, yet I also noticed her admiration for the community I was about to enter.

It made sense.

Sarayaku had made quite a name for itself by resisting co-optation and repression when CGC entered Sarayaku territory without prior consultation, accompanied by the Ecuadorian army. The Assembly, the maximum decision-making authority of the village, decided to sue the Ecuadorian state and the oil company at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in San José Costa Rica. For some of the Sarayaku people, the journey to Costa Rica in order to give their testimonies was their first time outside the country. It took the court ten years to reach a decision; however, its verdict resulted in a victory for Sarayaku: the oil exploration had been done without prior consultation, which was unconstitutional. According to the ruling, the government would have to pay Sarayaku $90,000 for material and $1,200,000 for moral damages, and it was also obliged to remove the exploration dynamite from Sarayaku Forest's veins. Even though the government accepted responsibility and publicly apologised, the explosives remain in the ground. The case is known in the legal human rights circles as "the Sarayaku case" (Melo Cevallos, 2016).

Sarayaku, however, was soon to realise that the court's decision may have saved their territory from the extractive industry *this time*, yet it was not safeguarding the community's future peace and immunity from extractivism. For that reason, together with their impressive resistance culture, they have also developed a proposal which is trying to revolutionise nature's rights which they call *kawsak sacha/the living forest*, or *the living*

jungle (Sarayaku Government Council, 2018). That resistance culture, and the proposal of kawsak sacha, brought me to Sarayaku for research. How did that resistance culture that made Maria so jealous of Sarayaku develop? How is it articulated? Moreover, how is kawsak sacha positioned in the discussion over the rights of Nature in Latin America?

This article is based on three months of political ethnographic fieldwork in Sarayaku that took place in 2019 and 2020. The research was authorised by Sarayaku Government Council. It was initially planned for six months, but it was interrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown that the Ecuadorian government imposed on May 16, 2020, and the biggest flood in the community's living memory that took place the following day. Such a combination of unfortunate events forced the author to leave the community after only three months of fieldwork.

El pueblo del medio dìa

Sarayaku is located on the shores of Rio Bobonaza, about seven hours away from Puyo, the nearest city. According to the latest internal census, Sarayaku is inhabited by 380 families, 1300 people in total (Cárdenas, 2020). However, it is not only the physical distance (63 kilometres) that makes access to and from the community difficult. In order to reach Sarayaku, one would need to drive one-and-a-half hours from Puyo to Puerto Canelos, through roads accessible only by 4×4 vehicles, and from there it would take another three to five hours by canoe to reach the community since there is no direct road connecting it to the outside world.

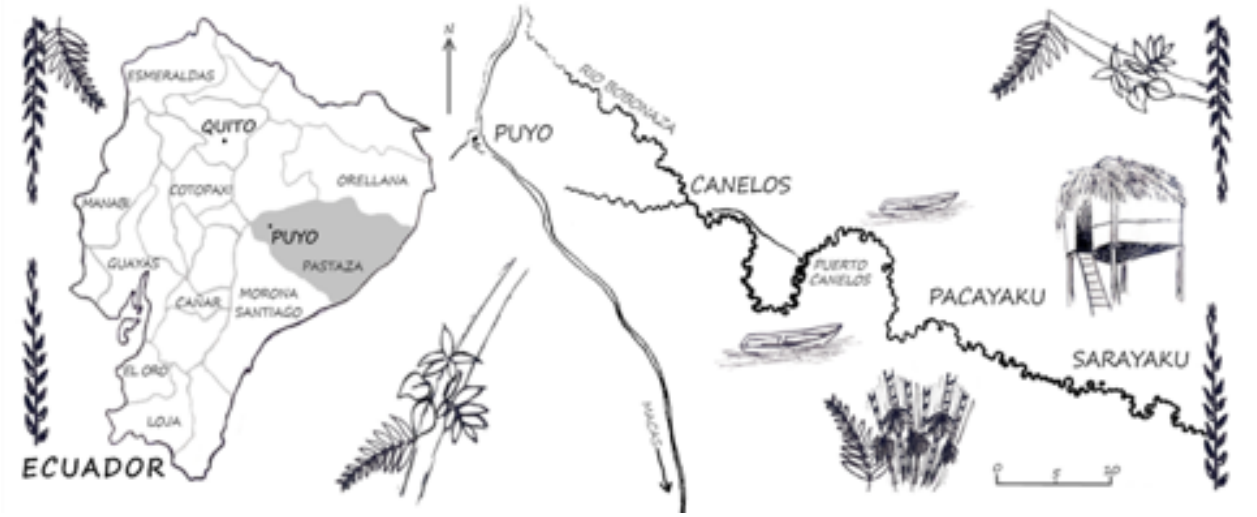

Figure 1: Map of Pastaza, including Sarayaku (created by Danai-Maria Kontou)

The journey through Rio Bobonaza also depends on the water level: if it has rained lately and the water level is high (*rìo crecido*), one can reach Sarayaku in between two-and-a-half and three hours; if it has not rained the journey can take up to four or five hours. The way back normally takes longer because one would have to travel against the current (*contracorriente*). The people who live in Sarayaku, are part of the *Canelos Kichwas* (Whitten 1976; Uzendoski & Whitten, 2014) call themselves *Sarayaku Runa* (Sarayaku people), and this is the term this text will be used to refer to them. They have constructed their cosmovision—the way they make sense of the world that is—around the idea of *sumak kawsay*/*Buen vivir*/living well (Kohn, 2016), which is an all-encompassing term that embodies the coexistence of human and non-human forms of life in community, which the Kichwas call *llacta* or *ayllu (Ram*írez-Cendrero et al., 2017).

The Laws of Buen Vivir

Sumak kawsay, *sumak qamaña*, or *buen vivir/living well*, is a cosmovision that challenges Western, capitalist concepts of poverty and development-as-growth. It is a concept that has been developed in indigenous Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru (de la Cadena, 2015) and, in theory at least, has also been safeguarded by the Ecuadorian Constitution since 2008. However, the concept has been appropriated by the Ecuadorian government in order to promote its neo-extractivist idea of neo-developmentalism (Escobar, 2010; Webber, 2017). "Neo-extractivism" refers to a development model based on the extraction and export of natural resources, just like "classic" extractivism but (unlike classic extractivist models), with an advanced role played by the state which charges more royalties to the private companies that are contracted for the job. The state then (again unlike "classic" extractivism)- redistributes then those royalties in the form of social development policies for the common good (Petras, 2015; Gudynas, 2010; Blaser & de la Cadena, 2017). Svampa (2013) considers this process a continuation of the "commodity consensus" that appeared in Latin America in the past fifteen years or so. The idea is that raw materials such as soy, timber, hydrocarbons, minerals can be cheaply acquired in Latin American countries and then exported abroad, taking advantage of the high demand (and prices) especially in emerging economic giants like China. With the revenues generated from this process, the neo-extractivist state becomes a "compensating state" (Gudynas, 2013) that can then justify its environmental destruction with its social investments. Ecuador is one of the compensating states to which Gudynas[1] is referring. After that, it just increas-

[1] Both in the past but also more recently, it has been proposed that the state itself industrialise and export its own natural resources, without the participation of private investment. This process of actual nationalization of natural resources is called by Riofrancos 'radical resource nationalism' (2017, p. 284).

es the budget destined towards social spending which (the state argues) contributes to sumak kawsay, as the people of Sarayaku complain. For them, however, sumak kawsay is something else.

In fact, several people in Sarayaku are convinced that the concept of sumak kawsay was systematised in their lands by a Sarayaku anthropologist (according to his CV) and later *Alianza Pais* deputy, Carlos Viteri. For them, Viteri (who is not very popular in the community) is the personification of the distortion of the concept that the government adopted:

> [He] learns this while conducting research, and goes to the parliament to propose the concept, the word sumak kawsay that the government adopted. For the government, sumak kawsay meant bringing in extractivists, and those things, messy things for the communities. It meant being able to acquire cars and a house, whole buildings… that's what sumak kawsay meant for them. Fighting the [oil] company meant poverty [according to them], so he confused us with the word sumak kawsay. [For us] sumak kawsay is: 'Maintaining our territory intact from any kind of extractivist companies [that are] negative for the people.' (Interview with Hilda Santi, Sarayaku, January 15, 2019)

According to Sarayaku, in sumak kawsay taxonomy,[2] *buen vivir* means collective decision making, gender participation, conservation of natural resources, quality health services, and alimentary sovereignty. It means uncontaminated ecosystems, use of medicinal plants and conservation of local ancestral knowledge, solidarity, collective work (*minga*), shamanism, and of course (in Sarayaku specifically) *kawsak sacha*, with its visible and invisible *selves*. Of course, the concept of sumak kawsay also has its indicators of poverty: individualism, racism, human exploitation, economic dependency, alcoholism, and loss of biodiversity, among others. Contaminated rivers, forests, and lagoons are some examples. Loss of cultural identity (spiritual, architectural, medicinal, artistic, economic), and educational and cultural colonialism are also perceived as poverty indicators.

In the words of Yaku Viteri,[3] Sarayaku's *dirigente* (person in charge of) of external relations:

> Of course, if we think in capitalist, monetary terms, we are poor. We don't have money. But we do have our solidarity, our communal spirit, our forest, our

[2] Author's fieldwork notes.

[3] Yaku Viteri was responsible for Sarayaku's external relations until May 2020 when his mandate was over.

> plants, our animals, our rivers and lakes … that's wealth! Therefore, we consider ourselves rich! (Interview with Yaku Viteri, Sarayaku, January 14, 2019)

Furthermore, as Túpak Viteri,[4] one of the Sarayaku's young leaders, who was active in the formation of these concepts, told me, living well is directly related to the concept of territory:

> There cannot exist sumak kawsay without kawsak sacha, and there cannot exist kawsak sacha without sumak kawsay either. Living well is necessarily related to the territory within which it is being exercised. (Interview with Túpac Viteri, Sarayaku, January 15, 2019)

Sarayaku Runa are not content with legal concepts such as *national park*, *biosphere*, and *biological corridor*, because those terms make the territory untouchable. As Dionicio Machòa told me, you cannot even cut a tree to start a fire in a national park, while the people of Sarayaku depend on their natural environment for their survival and they try to make responsible use of the resources available in it (Interview with Dionicio Machòa, Sarayaku, January 21, 2019).

Kawsak sacha is, therefore, an effort by Sarayaku people, to make their natural environment /which for them is not *just* nature) legally protected, producing an ontological shift in legal terms: they do not simply pursue the protection of "the rights of Pachamama", this abstract term that can easily be an empty concept, as we have seen in practice both in Bolivia and Ecuador, but rather the rights of both the visible and invisible beings that for Sarayaku people co-exist in the living forest.

Sumak kawsay (living well) in the kawsak sacha (living forest)

Echoing Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth-beings* (2015) and Toledo's *Ethnoecology* (2001), for Sarayaku runa, kawsak sacha is not only about nature. The term *nature* is not even sufficient to explain their relationship with the forest because, for them, nature is a *subject*, not an *object*. In the words of Tùpak Viteri:

> T:[…] the society has lost this connection with life, with the jungle, let's call it nature, even though that is not a term we use much, because it is a term that doesn't completely cover what it is … It is in the books, in the Constitution but it is an insufficient word, it doesn't cover a whole life system that lives in the jungle ¿no?, they just conceive it as nature.

[4] As of May 2020, Tùpak Viteri was elected President of Sarayaku *Tayjasaruta*.

L: Something without content?

T: Yes, without content, we don't use it much ourselves, we are now looking for more precise terms. (Interview with Túpac Viteri, Sarayaku, January 15, 2019)

For Hernàn Malaver, the difference is very much ontological; the jungle for the Western rationale is just flora and fauna, yet it is much more than just that for Sarayaku people. There is a whole spiritual dimension that is absent from the term nature:

> ... for the scientists, for the—so-called—big thinkers, for the biologists, the jungle makes no sense, they just view it as a resource … flora and fauna … right? But the people of Sarayaku have an intimate relationship, a connection, [with it] because inside every space there are protector-beings, right? We can argue they are invisible, but there is a connection between Sarayaku Runa and those beings. (Interview with Hernàn Malaver, Sarayaku, 22 January 2019)

In a way, Sarayaku people are talking about what de la Cadena (2015) calls *radical difference*, a concept that exceeds the acceptable limits of the state, the limits within which lies the *indio permitido* (Hale, 2017).

The difference between de la Cadena's (and Turpos') Andean experience in Ausangate, and mine in Sarayaku—and even Kohn's *thinking forests'* (Kohn, 2013) in the Upper Amazon's Àvila—is that for the Quechuas in de la Cadena's study the mountain does not *host* invisible beings like *kawsak sacha* does in my experience, but it rather just *is* (and it is not *just* a mountain, it *is* Ausangate). In Sarayaku, the *beings* exist *inside* the jungle, the lakes, and the hills; the jungle, the lakes, the hills themselves *are not* beings themselves.[5] The difference is ontological: for de la Cadena's Quechuas, it is not the *spirits* of the mountain that are sacred, but rather the mountain it*self*. For the Sarayaku Kichwas among whom I have conducted research, it is not the jungle itself that is sacred, but rather the *beings* inside it. The jungle is their home, but not a *being* in itself. The same seems to be the case for the pueblo Wampi in Peru, where the earth beings live *inside* the earth, but they *are not* the earth (Gobierno Territorial Autònomo Wampi, 2015). However, who are these kawsak sacha invisible beings, really?

In typical Canelos Kichwa fashion, of course, amongst the *seres protectores* (protector beings) or *amos* (masters) of the jungle, we find Amasanga (the male protector of the animals) and Nunghui (the female protector of pottery) (Whitten, 1987) as well as Sacharuna (the man of the jungle), Sachawarmi (the woman of the jungle) and Yakuruna (the protector of rivers, lakes, fish, and amphibian animals). We also find other beings

[5] The author would like to thank Felix Santi for clarifying this concept.

that exist in the trees, the hills, the rivers, and the lakes, who make their presence visible through their perceived actions.

For example, more than once I was told that when you approach a lake, and the lake does not know you, or does not trust the people who go with you, it may start raining, it may get windy all of a sudden, you may hear thunder, and similar. That means that you are disrespecting the *being* of the lake, and it is protesting. You have to ask for permission before you go to such places, you also have to ask for permission before cutting certain trees; other trees should never be touched, and some animals should not be killed (deer, for example) (Interviews with Hilda Santi, Narcisa Gualinga, Yaku Viteri, Tùpak Viteri, Rudy Ortiz). Therefore, according to the logic of Sarayaku Runa, oil exploration activities can cause the drying up of a lake, the destruction of large forest areas, and eventually the death of many of those invisible beings, which is precisely why they should be protected by law. In the words of Narcisa Gualinga:

> Everything has its master, therefore, here in the soil, the trees over there [there live invisible beings … there are certain trees that we respect—lakes and mountains that we respect, places where nobody goes, we respect that. You respect when you don't go around shouting, laughing, or peeing, and doing things like that, that is respect. They [the masters] don't like these things, or cutting any kind of tree, or swimming in the lakes, because [the masters] are there. When this master doesn't exist, then it dries up, and we suppose that if they throw dynamite to the lake, he/she dies and the lake dries up. (Interview with Narcisa Gualinga, Sarayaku, January 23, 2019)

Sarayaku's resistance culture

Apart from the effort to legally safeguard their territory, Sarayaku Runa (intentionally or not) have also developed a certain kind of resistance culture, which has an anti-colonial, anti-extractivist, and eventually anti-capitalist character.

There is a strong anti-colonial dimension in Sarayaku's resistance culture. It was certainly strengthened during the community's anti-extractivist struggle but was rather formed earlier, ever since the formation of community organisation *Centro Alama Sarayaku* (CAS) (Siren, 2004, p. 134). CAS would later evolve into today's Consejo de Gobierno *Tayjasaruta* (*Tayak Yuyayta Jatachik Sarayaku Runakuna Tandanakuy*), and its struggle for the territorial recognition of Sarayaku culminated in the 240-km-march to Quito in 1992 (Siren, 2004), when Sarayaku eventually granted ownership of its 135,000-hectare territory. This

anti-colonial sentiment is expressed in various cultural and political forms. One cannot fail to notice it even in the case of the names Sarayaku Runa give to their children. Inca names such as Huayna and Tùpak are present in Sarayaku's cultural life, names from Amazonian mythology such as Yaku and Amazona. Tùpak Viteri narrated to me that when he went to the relevant registry office in Puyo to register the names of his children, Amazona and Tunguey, he was not allowed to do so at first:

> They insisted that those were not Christian names and they did not want to register them. So I told them I would stay in the registry office all day until they would finally register the Amazonian names I had selected for my kids. I also threatened to call the journalists, and, in the end, they gave in.

I was also impressed to observe that every time I was mentioning Gonzalo Pizaro's and Francisco de Orellana's "discovery" of Rio Amazonas, people were very hostile towards the idea. I was surprised because this was in stark contrast to Quito's national legends that are *written on stone* even on the Plaza Grande, Quito's central square, on the wall of the cathedral itself where one can find the following inscription:

> The discovery of Rio Amazonas is Quito's glory … Babylon could be very well glorified for its walls, Nineve for its grandeur, Athens for its letters, Constantinopolis for its imperium. Yet Quito beats them all for being the key of Christianity and conqueror of the world, because it is to this city that the discovery of the Great Amazon River belongs.

It was, therefore, in contrast to such national myths to hear that the Sarayaku Runa, who are also Ecuadorian nationals, consider Francisco de Orellana and Gonzalo Pizaro murderers of their ancestors, and they recognise no *discovery* of a place that already existed and was already inhabited (therefore already discovered) before de Orellana's and Pizaro's famous expedition (Levy, 2011). During a meeting of the Autonomous Council on the anniversary of the Battle of Pichincha[6] (an event of national pride for Ecuador), Hilda Santi argued that their children at Sarayaku schools at least should not be celebrating the day. I asked her about it later, and this was her response:

> A while ago I was arguing in Kichwa, that we have to establish our own national holidays, instead of talking about the battle of Pichincha, or I don't know what [else]; things that came to kill our people, our grandfathers. We are going to insert our own national holidays. (Interview with Hilda Santi, Sarayaku, January 15, 2019)

[6] It took place on May 24, 1822 and marked the liberation of Quito from the Spaniards.

Both the discovery of Rio Amazonas and the Battle of Pichincha have been immortalised through Ecuadorian nationalism's cultural products (such as the epigraph on the wall of the cathedral mentioned earlier, poems, etc,) and, following Anderson (2016), such products are generally intended to inspire love to the motherland, and very rarely hatred. In this case, however, the national narrative is turned upside down, it is strongly challenged, and the motherland's heroes are turned into villains for Sarayaku people, both indigenous and mestizo (*Tùpak* is mestizo, *Hilda* is indigenous). It is also very interesting to note that while we have witnessed cases in which past heroes that had previously been incorporated into a state nationalist narrative are recuperated by social movements on the basis of social class,[7] it is rather rare to see national heroes being removed from their altar of national glory partly on the same basis (in Sarayaku, the challenge is on the basis of both class and ethnic identity).In both examples mentioned here (the selection of the community's children's names and the challenge of national myths), Sarayaku Runa related themselves to an Inca past that is largely imagined. It is highly probable that the Incas were as brutal to their ancestors as the Spaniards were and no less of conquerors, of course. However, the case is not rare. Salomon makes the same observation regarding Cañari people in Ecuador and their self-perceived Inca-ism, which is employed as a cultural resistance strategy against colonisation as well (Salomon, 2008), even though it is not exactly historically accurate.

Another aspect of cultural resistance, employing local (or perceived as such) cultural experiences to counter colonialism has to do with the traditional architecture of Sarayaku. Sarayaku Runa live in beautiful, traditional, oval, thatched-roofed huts, each roof comprised of around 20,000 *wayuri*, *ukshan*, or *lisan* leaves (Siren, 2004, p. 159). These huts, especially their thatched roofs, have a longevity of about 20 years, according to the locals. Some years ago, the government offered to build alternative laminate roofs instead at a very low cost for the Sarayaku Runa, which would also last much longer; most of the locals declined the offer. It was done both for aesthetic reasons but also for reasons of resistance to cultural domination that comes *de allà* (from over there). They did not stop there, though. Once, during the *minga del pueblo* (the collective work that takes place roughly once every 45 days), I helped Tùpak carry a very big trunk to his house. It took around 45 of us to carry it. I was wondering what he was planning to do with it. 'We shouldn't just reproduce things the way we found them; we have to innovate using the same old materials but new techniques,' he told me. A year later, I was happy to see that he had kept his word: his new umbrella-type thatched roof was ready, yet he was not

[7] See Jansen (2007) on the case of Zapata in Mexico.

happy with the result, and he was planning to improve the model, advancing Amazonian architecture. This is not just innovative thinking but yet another example of cultural resistance in Sarayaku, because Tùpak not only insisted on building his roof according to the local aesthetics and architecture instead of replacing it with a longer-lasting (but Western) laminate one; he also wished to take it a step further in order to make it more attractive, thus encouraging others to reproduce it as well.

Sarayaku Runa have always been conscious of the destructive effects of oil in the Amazon and have developed a strong anti-extractivist culture. Several of their elders had occasionally gone to Lago Agrio to work for Shell and other oil companies, and they had seen with their own eyes what this kind of "economic development" means. Bernal Santi, ex-President of Tayjasaruta for example, had worked for two of those oil companies in Lago Agrio and narrates:

> [I had seen] what they are doing to the land, the timber extraction, fires, how they extracted the oil … how they destroy the shores, the trees, the fish, the *lagartos* [caimans], the *charapas* [a species of Amazonona turtle], I knew what was going on there, it was very ugly, ugly, ugly … they were finishing the trees, the monkeys, the birds. There was all that in that zone. Now, not anymore. The road came there as well, and the *madereros* [timber commercialists] invaded… (Interview with Bernal Santi, Sarayaku, February 22, 2019)

Other protagonists of the formation of Centro Alama Sarayaku, including Raùl Viteri (whom most of the people I spoke to believe to be the most influential person behind the CAS, and its first president) have also worked for *petroleras* and knew what they cause. It is of no surprise therefore that Sarayaku stayed firm in resisting oil exploration in its soil in 2002–2003. At that time, the president was Franco Viteri, son of Raùl Viteri. When I asked him how he resisted co-optation on behalf of the company as it usually happens. he told me:

> 'I was not co-opted because I didn't go to university and I was not an engineer!' (Interview with Franco Viteri, Srayaku, March 14, 2020)

His phrase means much more than what it says, if one knows the context of Sarayaku, Franco himself, and his cosmovision. What he means is that he had not been transformed by "civilisation", he had not gone to university, he had not become an *indio permitido*.[8] Therefore, he was free to decline the dream of a good middle-class job in order to

[8] *Indio permitido* is a concept that was coined by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and refers to the modernized indigenous person that is considered acceptable for the Latin American state and the dominant popular culture.

protect his community. Of course, it was tough, 'and that's why I took Ayahuasca in order to take the right decisions.' This, is in turn, another example of employing cultural aspects in order to legitimise a political decision.

Franco's son Tulio, who is studying to become a biologist, is also dreaming of returning to his community after finishing his studies. He says that he is now learning how natural elements are viewed by those "*de allà*" -by those "over there." The phrase "*de allà*" is not, of course, only a geographical indication. It also means those on the opposite side of Sarayaku's spiritual cosmological perspective, which he is also familiar with, and whose perspective he would like to combine (and also contrast) with the rational, scientific, knowledge he is now acquiring at university.

The proposal of kawsak sacha, therefore, should be seen in this context as an effort to produce a new legal category that safeguards Sarayaku's cosmology, and through that, its territorial integrity. Kawsak sacha is about the legal rights of the *forest beings*, both the visible and the invisible ones, the *sacha runakuna*.[9] Therefore, it is also about safeguarding the territory in which those beings exist, making it an extractivism-free zone, because extractivist activities would violate the living space of all the *forest beings*, not just the human ones.

Earlier in this text, we saw how Narcisa Gualinga summarised what seismic exploration means for the *dueños de la selva (*the spirits-owners of the jungle). They would be killed, and the lake (in her example) would dry up. Cesar Santi, ex-president of Tayjasaruta also shared with me a similar perspective:

> [The animals coexist with Sacharuna], for example, I saw her, I saw her in lakes, in the river. Who do [you think] the fish live with? They don't live by themselves; they always have a leader, there are anacondas Yacumama, with them. Without those, no fish will be born anymore, for example with a big oil well, that would be part of the seismic line of the company, a powerful explosive would [be] set off, and with that noise they [the beings] won't be able to drink well, they may even die … and they will all migrate from our territory of the Amazonia. (Interview with Cesar Santi, Sarayaku, February 23, 2019)

Therefore, kawsak sacha is an essentially anti-extractivist strategy that utilises local cultural elements to justify and legitimise itself, eventually protecting not only the *commons* of the community but also its *uncommons* (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2017).

[9] The jungle/forest beings as they are called in Sarayaku. They are also called *sacharunas*.

The narratives of Narcisa Gualinga and Cesar Santi remind us of the Peruvian Quechuas in de la Cadena's study, when it comes to mining Mount Ausangate: 'it would be equivalent to destroying the Earth-beings something that Ausangate itself wouldn't tolerate' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 270). I am convinced that most of Sarayaku Runa deeply share this spiritual understanding of the jungle; there are also some critical voices though who challenge this spiritual dimension yet would like the jungle to be protected as well.

One evening we were sitting around the fire in Narcisa's hut, and we were discussing the visit of an anthropologist who spent two weeks in Sarayaku some time ago. According to Juan,[10] that anthropologist was promoting the idea that Westerners (he was Ecuadorian of European descent) do not understand how the locals view the jungle, with all its beings, which is something about which he was often writing. Juan got a bit angry:

> So I told him, look. I can take you to this or that hill or lake that lies far from here. But, if we arrive and it starts raining, or there is lightning, or you hear some sounds you cannot explain because nobody else is around, it does *not* mean it was Amasanga! Maybe it was somebody hunting nearby, and you just couldn't see him, or maybe it is just a coincidence that it rained! I don't agree with everything our elders say, they say nice things, but they also say stupidities! You see, *that man* [the anthropologist] was trying to persuade *me*, an Indio de la selva, about the forest; well he did not!

At that point, Narcisa intervened in agreement:

> You know in the past the shamans would see the *seres*, but not all the time! They would need to take Ayahuasca, and even then it was rare. Now people claim to have sensed *seres a cada rato* (all the time)!

It is interesting here to note the irony: the anthropologist had made a considerable effort to understand the Amazonian cosmovision, had learned Kichwa, and was advocating the perspective of the locals in his work. One would argue that—ontologically speaking—he had *gone native*. At the same time though, Juan, an *Indio de la selva* as he put it, was moving towards the opposite direction, while Narcisa (even though not completely accepting Juan's position) was also irritated by this New Age, spiritual turn she was observing in the people visiting Sarayaku, anthropologists and tourists alike. Her comment

[10] Pseudonym used.

also highlights an irritation towards a possible *instrumentalisation* of this New Age trend by her own people, in order to please a Western audience. Her son Yaku also agreed:

> I am angry at those Amazonians who go to New York—let's say—to give a talk, and they go around half-naked, feathers on their heads, as if they were in the jungle. In New York, it is even cold. It upsets me; they don't even get dressed like that when they are in Puyo, yet they do it for the show in the States!

The idea is that such an appearance, even though not used in Puyo, in New York enhances the sense of authenticity its bearers reflect, increasing therefore both their authority as indigenous and their chances for their case to be heard. It is, however, the cultural performance outside of context that Yaku disapproves of, not cultural resistance itself. Cultural elements, therefore, can be used as aspects of resistance strategy in many ways and for several purposes, even though they are not always approved of by everybody.

As we have already demonstrated in this article, the Sarayaku cosmovision has a strong anti-capitalist dimension as well. It has been argued that Sarayaku is the typical example of a communitarian (or even pre-capitalist) economy (Ramírez-Cendrero et al., 2017) in very capitalist times. While each family owns its *chakras* (land parcels) where it grows subsistence crops (mainly yuca), other spaces are collectively managed (be that a river or forest territory) according to community imposed rules (Siren, 2004). The land is used for the self-sufficiency of the community, not as a commodity, which is true both for the privately owned land as for the commonly owned land, together with its commons and *uncommons*. As it has been analysed in this article, Sarayaku refuse to commodify their natural resources, against the prevalent neo-extractivism of the Ecuadorian neo-developmentalist state, which has brought the community against the state on many occasions. In fact, what is considered to be the common good for the stat, is not viewed in the same manner by the community, for which what the Western ontology calls *nature* is not just a sum of natural resources to be exploited for whatever compensation. It is rather a system of human and beyond-human relations that has to be protected at whatever cost.

There is no labour market in Sarayaku; the labour force is distributed according to a system of solidarity and reciprocity that finds its expression in the *mingas* (the communal works). There are three kinds of *mingas* that this author has witnessed and participated in: a) the *minga del pueblo*, which takes places roughly one every 45 days tasked with managing, repairing, or building communitarian spaces such as the roads or the schools; b) *family mingas*, which are about reciprocal communitarian work for a single family, in which other members of the wider family, or the ayllu participate; and c) *special occasion*

mingas, which are about communitarian work that needs to be done ahead of the community's big celebratory events such as the *Fiesta de la Primavera* (the Spring Celebration) or the *Uyantza*.

Nature, as we have already seen, is also not considered as a resource to be exploited, but rather as a system of human and beyond-human relations that function under certain communitarian or spiritual rules. In a sense, echoing Polanyi (1944) prior to the Great Transformation, neither labour nor land is commodified in Sarayaku, while there are no particular money-exchanges in the community apart from buying some goods from the few Sarayaku shops or from Puyo; these goods are imported from outside the community (from Puyo mostly) and cannot be produced by the self-sufficient local family economies (pasta, salt, beer, cooking gas tanks, petrol for the canoe engines). Of course, there is an occasional fishing catch that is sold to one family or another, some *lagartos* from the *lagarto*-breeding project, which are normally bought and consumed in *mingas*, and the occasional betting on football[11] (sometimes one or two dollars per player, sometimes a chicken). However, that is a far cry from a functioning capitalist economy, if such a thing can ever exist. Services are also not bought or sold in Sarayaku; they are rather exchanged in a reciprocal manner. At the same time, certain community projects (AeroSarayaku, EcoTourism) exist;[12] the capital generated from those is used—at least partly—for the good of the community and has taken the form of an Internet station, university scholarships, and funds for the activities of the government council. In a way, the proposal of kawsak sacha itself is also another anti-capitalist strategy that is targeted at defending the territory of Sarayaku from capitalist exploitation, by introducing a new legal category that would protect both its commons and its uncommons.

Yet... laws change

In this article, I argue that the community of Sarayaku has translated local cultural elements into a resistance culture that has a strong anti-colonial, anti-extractivist, and—eventually—anti-capitalist character. It has also incorporated their understanding of their spiritual, social, and natural environment into the concept of kawsak sacha—the living jungle/forest, which they are attempting to establish as a legal category, in an ef-

[11] The winning team normally shares the profit either by eating it together (in case it is an animal) or by buying refreshments for everyone.

[12] With the money that the Ecuadorian State paid to the community as compensation for the violation of its rights, Sarayaku started a number of community projects aiming to generate funds for the community itself. Some of them were more successful (an aviation company, AeroSarayaku, a communitarian bank, and a community tourism project), others less (a football team to compete in the local Pastaza league). Yet they were all decided upon collectively by the assembly.

fort to legally safeguard their territory and cosmovision from exploitation. In this way, they aspire to continue leading their lives around the principles of sumak kawsay, which can only be fulfilled in a kawsak sacha. The cosmovision of the Sarayaku people is not unique: it can also be noted in other cases of Latin American indigenous peoples. However, Sarayaku Runa are the first to translate their cosmovision into a proposed legal category. In order to achieve the legal recognition of their cosmovision, what would be required is an ontological shift in Ecuador's legal tradition that would identify both human and non-human beings as rights-bearers, which is a colossal feat to achieve. Moreover, even if they manage to achieve the legal protection of their wider ayllu, if history has taught us anything, it is that laws, and even constitutions, can change in the same way they were introduced, which is not in the hands of the Sarayaku Runa community to control. Legislation, after all, is the crystallisation of the commonly accepted rules for the functioning of a certain society at a given point in time.

In contrast, the resistance culture that Sarayaku runa have already developed is in their hands to expand and solidify. Kawsak sacha may be recognised by law or not, but it can certainly exist without it. That is precisely where the biggest challenge for the community may lie—in its own territory, in its own ayllu—not in the state's parliament.

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Povzetek

Sarayaku je amazonska skupnost Kichwa na obali Rio Bobonaze v Ekvadorju. Pred desetimi leti je Sarayaku prišel na mednarodne naslovnice, ker mu je uspelo argentinsko naftno družbo CGC izgnati s svojega ozemlja in je dobil sodni postopek proti državi Ekvador, ki je, brez posvetovanja s skupnostjo, podelila koncesijo zasebni družbi. Kljub temu pa to ni bilo dovolj, ker Sarayaku ni zagotovilo zaščite pred prihodnjimi ekstraktivističnimi projekti. Da bi to dosegel, je Sarayaku skoval pravno kategorijo kawsak sacha / živa džungla, ki džunglo opredeljuje kot področje, katerega naseljujejo tako vidna kot nevidna bitja, ki jo varujejo in so nosilci zakonitih pravic. Hkrati so prebivalci Sarayakuja z uporabo svoje kulturne perspektive na džunglo ustvarili antikolonialno, antiekstraktivistično in protikapitalistično odporno kulturo. Kako se je ta kultura razvijala? Kako je artikulirana? In kako je kawsak sacha sploh umeščen v razpravo o pravicah narave v latinski Ameriki? Na podlagi trimesečnih etnografskih raziskav v skupnosti Sarayaku in več kot petindvajsetih intervjujev s člani skupnosti, ta članek obravnava ta pomembna vprašanja in trdi, da zagotovitev pravne zaščite morda ni dolgoročna strategija upora, ker je mogoče zakone razveljaviti tako enostavno kot so bili uvedeni in so odvisni od vladnih zavez. Po drugi strani pa je oblikovanje kulture odpora težje izkoreniniti, saj ostaja pod nadzorom skupnosti, ki jo utrjuje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: buen vivir, kultura odpora, družbena gibanja, Ekvador, avtohtona politika, ekstraktivizem

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