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What Is Sumak Kawsay? A Qualitative Study in the Ecuadorian Amazon region.

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What is *Sumak Kawsay*?

A Qualitative Study in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Abstract: A qualitative study of the main characteristics of *sumak kawsay* (*buen vivir*, living well/good life) in the Ecuadorean Amazon shows that it has four constitutive elements of which a multitude of interpretations coexist: an indigenous and nature-focused worldview, community, an economy based on solidarity, and ancestral knowledge. Understandings of *sumak kawsay* are rooted in the practices and beliefs of the communities interviewed rather than in theoretical constructions of idyllic community forms, and in this connection differences can be observed between the academic “indigenist” view of it and local discourses.

Keywords: Kichwa, Indigenous people, Ecuador, Tena, *Buen vivir*, Living well

Resumen: Una aproximación cualitativa a las características principales del *sumak kawsay* (*buen vivir*, living well/good life) en la Amazonía ecuatoriana muestran la existencia de cuatro elementos constitutivos del *sumak kawsay* en los que colindan multitud de interpretaciones: cosmovisión indígena y naturaleza, comunidad, economía solidaria, y conocimiento ancestral. Las comprensiones del *sumak kawsay* enraízan con prácticas y creencias de las personas y no con construcciones teóricas de formas comunitarias idílicas, y al respecto, apreciamos diferencias entre la visión académica “indigenista” del *sumak kawsay* y los discursos locales.

1. Introduction

Asking oneself about the meaning of “living well” is part of the human condition. However, since the beginning of this century, we have witnessed an interest in the search for an answer to this question that is unprecedented since the Enlightenment (Beling and Vanhulst, 2016). This phenomenon has been especially revealing in Latin America, where, as a consequence of the emergence of the so-called twenty-first-century socialisms, countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia have made the idea of “living well” emanating from indigenous Andean worldviews the center of political discussion. This idea, commonly known as *buen vivir* (*sumak kawsay* in Ecuadorian Kichwa, *suma qamaña* in Bolivian Aymara, living well/good life in English), has been expressed in the recent constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia as the state’s main objective.ⁱ Although theoretical and conceptual discussions about *sumak kawsay* have acquired international relevance in a matter of a decade (Caria and Domínguez, 2016; Gudynas, 2012; Houtart, 2011; Tortosa, 2011), there is scant research that adopts an empirical approach to the topic with indigenous peoples.ⁱⁱ Evidence from local testimonies is needed for an exploration of its multiple meanings.

This article employs a qualitative approach (participant observation and 30 semistructured interviews) to analyze the constituent elements and meanings of *sumak kawsay* in the urban area of the *cantón* of Tena and in six parishes in this area. The methodology recognizes local actors, mostly indigenous people from the Ecuadorian Amazon, as knowledge-generating agents. The findings show that perceptions of *sumak kawsay* are rooted in people's practices and beliefs and not in theoretical constructions of idyllic community forms. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The next section presents the theoretical framework for analyzing the constituent elements of indigenous *sumak kawsay*. The next describes the geographical area of the study, the

sample population, and the methodological approach, and the following one presents the results of the study. The last section discusses our main conclusions in the framework of the relevant academic literature.

2. Sumak Kawsay as a Theoretical Framework

The term “sumak kawsay” originates from words used by communities on the periphery (the marginalized of the marginalized) whose languages are mistakenly considered as incapable of generating abstract and current thought (Tortosa, 2011). Sumak kawsay is constituted as an alternative to development, modernity, and the conventional concepts associated with them (Larrea, 2010; Viteri, 2002). Adopting a postcapitalist, postsocialist, and postgrowth perspective, sumak kawsay falls under the conceptual umbrella of the currents known as “postdevelopment” or “alternatives to development” (Escobar, 2014; 2010; Gudynas, 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ

Current debates about the meaning of sumak kawsay can be situated on at least three levels (Gudynas, 2011): (1) ideas, (2) discourses and legitimations of those ideas, and (3) concrete practices such as political projects and programs for change, government plans, and normative frameworks. This research is mainly focused on ideas, for its main objective is to analyze the multiple meanings of sumak kawsay in the narratives of mainly indigenous people from Napo Province. The theoretical framework is based on what has been called the indigenous or “pachamamista” stream of sumak kawsay (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). This interpretation is characterized by the relevance of Andean peoples’ original spiritual conceptions in the construction of the concept’s meaning and practice.^{iv} After analyzing the literature on sumak kawsay in terms of this trend, we present a conceptual framework made up of four key themes: indigenous

worldview, nature, community, and an economy based on solidarity.^v In the following we synthesize these dimensions to present a theoretical framework that configures and explains both our methodological approach and the empirical information presented in the results.

Indigenous Worldview

In the original indigenous worldview of *sumak kawsay* there are no linear processes that establish anterior or posterior conditions or conditions to evolve toward (Acosta, 2011) and no dichotomies when it comes to categorizing. The indigenous notion of complementarity of opposites is emergent in the Andean worldview and understands the articulation of the territory's forces as aimed toward coexistence with the environment and integral well-being (Simón Yampara, interview, cited in Saavedra, 2010). *Sumak kawsay* is holistic and endowed with a spiritual charge in relation to feeling part of the community and nature. What makes one feel part of this totality is the spiral perspective of nonlinear time (Houtart, 2011). For this reason, the world cannot be understood from the perspective of the Western "I" (Acosta, 2011).

Nature

Respect for and harmony with nature stand out in the various aspects of indigenous cultures that *sumak kawsay* combines. The relationship with nature refers to the relationship with Pachamama (Mother Earth), which, like "our mother's womb, . . . shelters us, feeds us . . . because it is life itself" (Chancoso, 2010). In the *ayllu* notion, the separation between human beings and nature is diffuse: nature is ontologically indivisible and inseparable from human beings and animals (Gudynas, 2009). A

biocentric vision of life implies a radical change in the way it is interpreted and valued, recognizing the intrinsic value of nature in a broad sense (Gudynas, 2016).

Community

In the indigenous worldview, community, not individuality, is the focus of attention. Relations with the community are natural and intense and include material and affective components that work against exclusion (Medina, 2001). As David Choquencagua (2010) has put it, “We are part of the community, as the leaf is part of the plant.” This conception is clearly reflected in the *minga*, one of the bases of indigenous social organization. The *minga* is collective work in which the entire community participates in an activity of common interest such as building a house or cleaning a neighborhood road. It endures in many communities as a ritual and ceremonial call for the community. Collective participation in it allows responding to community interests through reciprocity, solidarity, and internal redistribution of self-centered goods and services (de la Torre and Sandoval, 2004).

Economy Based on Solidarity

The indigenous worldview involves a view of economic life that is different from the market economy (Cortez, 2011). The basic value of the economy under *sumak kawsay* is solidarity (Acosta, 2011). For indigenous peoples there is no traditional notion of poverty associated with lack of material goods (Acosta, 2011). This view of life involves not accumulating wealth but prioritizing reciprocity (Taxo, 1999). The *sumak kawsay* economy is related to production focused on community redistribution of surpluses and fair exchange among participants (Chuji, 2010). These issues have to do with an integrated dimension of materiality and spirituality (Simón Yampara, interview, cited in

Saavedra, 2010: 55) that operates under the construction of consumption patterns in which economic goods are subordinated to the laws of operation of natural systems (Acosta, 2011). Carlos Viteri (2003) has called this economy self-sufficient, sovereign, community- and solidarity-based, fair, and sustainable. The economic base of the family unit and the community is present in the *chacra* (small farm) as a basic institution of food sovereignty. The family's *chacra* plays an important role as the basis of the indigenous economy and participation in the community (Lehmann and Rodríguez, 2013).^{vi}

3. The Area, the Sample, and the Methodology

Our fieldwork was carried out in Tena, the capital of Napo Province,^{vii} in the urban area of Cantón Tena and in six small remote parishes (Shandia, Serena, Ahuano, Misahualli, Pano, Talag, and Archidona). The urban area of Tena (population of 15,561) is the province's political and commercial center, where all government offices are located. The rural area is characterized by the intersection of several rivers (Misahualli, Napo, Pano, and Jatunyaku) that are of vital importance for the communities of the area and by the multitude of chacras linked to small family houses. Rural areas are not easily accessible and, with the exception of Tena, have few public services. Each parish (a political-territorial division of lesser rank than the province and the *cantón*) has mainly a clinic and a school built in recent years.

We opted for a qualitative methodological approach because of its usefulness in providing more detailed information on the multiple realities in which the participants are involved—their perceptions, the meanings that justify their actions, and the experiences that they associate with *sumak kawsay*. Oral tradition is essential for the analysis of the Ecuadorian Amazon's indigenous communities because it dominates the daily relations

of exchange. The criteria for inclusion in the study took into account age, gender, ethnicity, territory of residence, and role in the community. Initially, subjects were recruited through the indigenous organization known as Kallari.^{viii} Subsequently, the sample population was completed through a snowball technique (Noy, 2008). Participant observation was employed throughout the research to allow a better understanding of the values, meanings, motivations, and logics that made up the participants' discourses and actions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

We made three field trips to collect information between March 2016 and April 2017.^{ix} The final sample was ultimately determined by the saturation and redundancy of participants' information (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). Thirty semistructured interviews were carried out (Table 1). The interviews, which lasted between 35 and 120 minutes, took place informally and face to face. They were recorded in audio with the authorization of each interviewee and then transcribed. Some interviews required a guide-translator to facilitate interactions. Fifty-three percent of the interviews were with women and forty-seven percent with men. Participants' ages were classified into four segments: 22–29 years (13 percent), 29–45 years (37 percent), 46–65 years (40 percent) and 66–85 years (10 percent). Seventy percent participants were indigenous, 17 percent mestizo, and 13 percent white. Five (16.6 percent) were part of the community but did not originate there. Forty-seven percent of the interviews were carried out in the urban area and 53 percent in the rural areas.

Table 1
Main Characteristics of Interviewees

<i>Participant Code</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Location of Interview</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>
Maya	40	Independent merchant	Shandia	Mestizo
Esteban	41	Worker in the cooperative	Talag	Indigenous

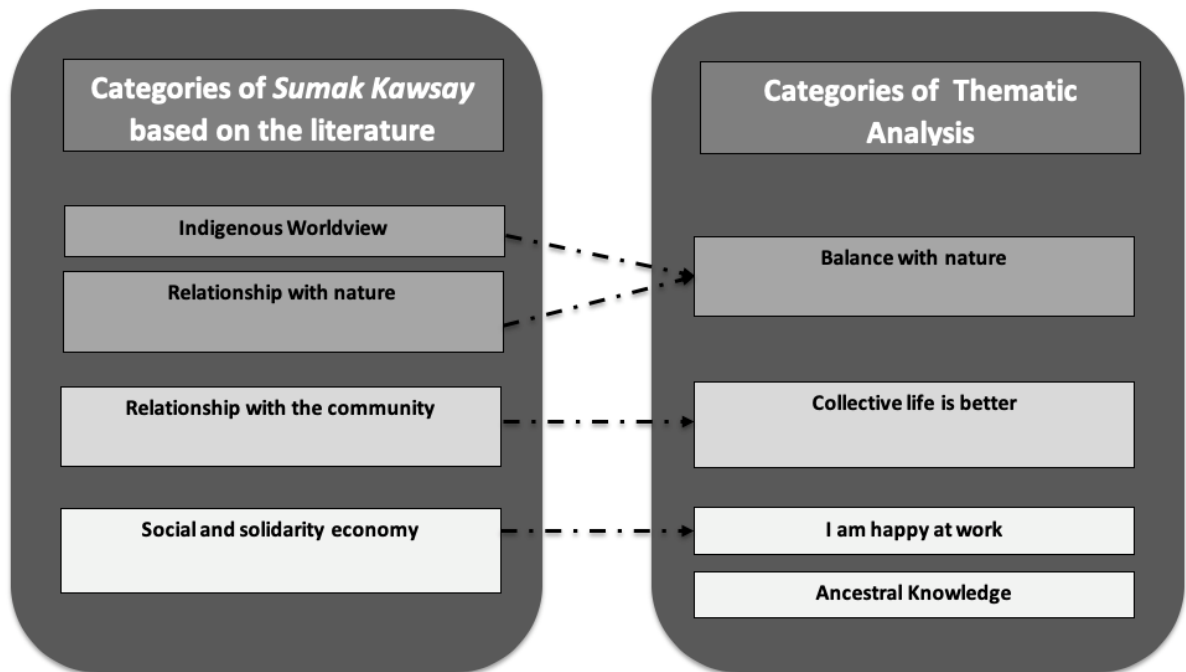
Miguel	28	Merchant	Tena	Indigenous
José	45	Worker in the cooperative	Tena	Indigenous
Laura	52	Community leader	Zapallo	Indigenous
Sofía	55	Civil servant	Pano	Indigenous
Emilia	45	Community leader	Tena	Mestizo
Elena	45	Civil servant	Tena	Indigenous
Marcela	40	Civil servant	Tena	Indigenous
Marco	50	Civil servant	Pano	Mestizo
Alex	47	Community leader	Tena	Indigenous
Lina	73	Grandmother	Pano	Indigenous
Adriana	82	Grandmother	Shandia	Indigenous
Julian	67	Shaman	Ñakanchi	Indigenous
Hugo	59	Bilingual school	Tena	Indigenous
David	65	Cultural center	Tena	Indigenous
Sandra	22	Farmer	San Rafael	Indigenous
Amelia	60	Farmer	Guinea Chimbana	Indigenous
Tomás	49	Farmer	Rio Blanco	Indigenous
Juan*	47	Health/environment	Archidona	Indigenous
Rubén	29	Environmentalist	Tena	Mestizo
Sara	38	International cooperation	Tena	Indigenous
Ana*	47	Ex-civil servant of the co-op	Tena	White
Martín*	44	Volunteer	Talag	White
Oscar	40	International cooperation	Tena	Indigenous
Antonio*	45	International cooperation official	Tena	White
Beatriz	60	Housewife	Pano	Indigenous
Claudia	23	Medic	Shandia	Indigenous
Manuela	60	Schoolteacher	Shandia	Mestizo
María*	55	University professor	Tena	White

*Outside participants, involved in community processes but not originally from the community.

The guiding document for the interviews focused on the four themes of *sumak kawsay* drawn from the literature (Figure 1) and revolved around the following questions: What does *sumak kawsay* mean to you? What aspects contribute to *sumak kawsay*? What do you think is required to maintain or improve *sumak kawsay* in your community? The interviews followed the method suggested by Creswell, Sobczak, and Lee (2003),

beginning with a series of general questions on various topics to obtain more information and encourage fluent dialogue.

Figure 1. Categories from the literature review and contextual themes.



4. Results

Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2014), a method that is not directly linked to a certain epistemological position or to a preexisting theoretical framework and therefore makes it easier to avoid assumptions in interpreting the data. Following Braun and Clarke (2006: 87), we grouped the six stages necessary for its implementation into three phases: categorization (Stages 1 and 2), normalization of the texts (Stages 2, 3, and 4), and thematic analysis (Stages 5 and 6). The codification process, after multiple analyses and the establishment of consensus, revised the initial categories in a synthesis of the meanings of sumak kawsay in terms of four themes.

Balance with Nature

The conception of the individual and the way of experiencing spirituality in the participants' testimonies are linked with feeling part of nature (Sara, interview, Tena, April 7, 2016): "We say, 'Maintain balance with four worlds, *awa-pacha* (heaven), *allpa-pacha* (earth), *uku-pacha* (hell), and *kai-pacha* (current life).' Then it is a lived relationship, a mutual interaction, always maintaining that balance. That is *sumak kawsay* for us" (Tomás, interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016).

The holistic relationship of man-nature-spirituality is also appreciated as follows: "I have always come to the conclusion that, in nature, all living beings, all matter interrelate. . . . What we do today is perhaps what awaits us in the future" (Rubén, interview, Tena, April 18, 2016). Nature is understood as a whole that is an integral part of the person: "Sumak kawsay coexists with Pachamama, without damaging the structure and environment of nature" (Oscar, interview, Tena, April 10, 2016). "In Kichwa we call nature Pachamama, and Mama is like a mother, the mother who gives you life. So we also relate mother to nature that gives us life, even medicines come from there, food, trees to build houses, water comes from nature, so if we are not in nature, we are incomplete. That is why indigenous persons could not live without their chacras, without farms" (Emilia, interview, Tena, August 8, 2016). The chacra's being determinant of the population's identity is a recurrent notion in the interviews: "The happiness that a chacra brings is part of their identity and their culture, in order to reclaim their ways of life and recover their ancient status. For example, a Kichwa woman who does not have a chacra is not a Kichwa" (Antonio, interview, Tena, March 23, 2017).

Beyond the conception of nature as part of the person, in some interviews defense of nature is necessary for life: "Caring for the forest is very important because all our

wealth is already there. If the forest is giving us water, we are breathing through this forest” (Alex, interview, Tena, March 21, 2016). A younger interviewee shows a clear vision of nature as a source of economic resources (Miguel, interview, Tena, April 4, 2016):

I have training in tourism, and if nature and natural resources do not become tourism resources, development based on tourism would not have been possible, and community tourism even less so. I think that all the communities have managed to understand that, without nature, without water, without the forest, without land, without managing natural resources well, they cannot benefit from tourism, so I see a very close relationship between man and nature, at least in tourism.

Collective Living Is Better

The community is at the center of *sumak kawsay* in this context (Tomás, interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016). Community is understood as the basic unit and structure of life: “One lives in families. Sometimes they have taught us that life is something private—for example, if we are a couple we are only two persons—but at the community level it is different. Families live together. . . . We help each other, we share ideas, we share work, we do community work” (David, interview, Tena, August 14, 2016). Community is also understood in a broad sense: living in a community is living in balance and harmony with oneself, others, and nature. A woman who works in public administration said, “I interrelate with all people, with our relatives, and I have to talk to them; sometimes we have a meeting, talk, chat, comment in the sessions. We have sessions in the community: for peasant security, water, sports, school issues. We all know

each other, friends, brothers and sisters, in the community” (Sofia, interview, Pano, March 21, 2016). This view runs parallel with others that identify the community more with its family nucleus. A grandmother from a rural area said, “I don't participate that much, but to me the community is my children. I live well, I work with my children. They are community for me” (Lina, interview, Pano, April 17, 2016).

The notion of community as nature is much more intense in the indigenous population, where deceased ancestors are spirits that always accompany them and are also in nature and their homes. It is common for people to ask permission to enter the forest and its waters. The *minga* stands out among collective forms of coexistence: “For us, *minga* is democracy. It is the general participation of all for the well-being of each family or community” (Hugo, interview, Tena, April 17, 2016). “Social work, collective work, is much better than working alone—having that connection, meeting between all communities through the *minga*” (Tomás, interview, Rio Blanco, April 9, 2016). This work is based on principles of solidarity and reciprocity, and participants generally expressed this in the plural, referring to belonging to a group: “If we have to work, we all work” (Beatriz, interview, Pano, April 17, 2016) and “Collective life is better, as they say there is strength in unity” (Tomás, interview, Rio Blanco, April 9, 2016). A cultural activist also expressed the importance of collective work and the plural nature of it: “In two, three hours we can clean one or two hectares, but with one [person] it takes a year” (Hugo, interview, Tena, April 17, 2016).

The notion of poverty in the interviews is associated with isolation from the community, being rejected by family or even migration to the city: “Many people leave their communities for the cities with the idea that they will earn lots of money and that there are many jobs there. They go to the city and they become isolated from their communities, their families, and they are alone in the city . . . and the communities are

also weakened if young people go to work in the city” (Martín, interview, Talag, April 29, 2016). The family and the community are forms of wealth that allow people not to feel that they live in poverty.

I Am Happy at Work

The conception of wealth that emerges from the interviews regarding the meaning of *sumak kawsay* goes beyond a materialistic economic notion; on the contrary, it corresponds to a social and solidarity economy (Manuela, interview, Shandia, April 28, 2016). There is a denial of poverty understood as the absence of income: “Poverty is not only not having money. Sometimes we are poor in thought, poor in spirit” (Oscar, interview, Tena, April 10, 2016). The idea of being autonomous and sovereign with respect to life’s necessities is recurrent in many of the interviews from the rural areas: “I believe that for me there is no poverty. People in poverty do not like to work” (Maya, interview, April 29, 2016). These ideas are linked to voluntary simplicity regarding consumption. A civil servant said, “The more money you have, the more needs you have” (Marcela, interview, Tena, April 7, 2016). The conception of the economy moves away from accumulation and display of goods toward respect for nature. Other statements show that lack of income sometimes leads to simplicity: “I have been poor. I have not gone up or down. I have only been on the *chacra*. That is why I have not been able to have more things” (Lina, interview, Pano, April 17, 2016). According to Tomás (interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016), “Poverty, no, but if you want to go up in class, yes. Money is almost not important in the countryside, but when you have children and you want to educate them, they need clothes and food to be able to study here. You need money for that.” Martín (interview, Talag, April 29, 2016) elaborated on this idea:

I think it is better to be poor in the country than in the city, because the city is very dangerous, and if there are no opportunities people can become involved in crime, gangs or drug trafficking. Here there are other types of wealth, and if they own their own land they can at least grow food and build their house, and they already have family and community, and that is also wealth, which cannot be counted in money.

There is also a line of argument inspired by religious beliefs that seems to accept poverty as a kind of spiritual wealth: “I am a millionaire, a multimillionaire, I am the daughter of a king; especially living by the word of God, I do not suffer poverty, because in this land we have everything. Working with our hands gives us everything. We lack nothing” (Maya, interview, April 29, 2016). This conception of God and his wealth is mainly held by rural women: “I love how God has given us creation. We as humans suffer, but we are rich in God” (Adriana, interview, Shandía, April 27, 2016). Maya added, “I pray as I walk. I continue on the path of the Lord. I have God for that in the morning and in the afternoon. I am always praying with all my heart, strength. and mind.”

These statements concur that the Amazon’s wealth lies in nature and in the chacra. The chacra appears repeatedly as a fundamental source of wealth: “The chacra is a member of the family and generates a quality of life that is invaluable” (Antonio, interview, Tena, March 23, 2017). A farmer in the forest added, “By having a chacra you do not need to go into the forest, because it represents a tenth of the forest, a sample of the forest” (Tomás, interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016). A rural woman said that her work on the chacra was pleasant: “We spend a great part of the day on the chacra, and I am happy at work” (Manuela, interview, Shandia, April 28, 2016). A grandmother shared this advice, “To live well you have to move forward, walk well. That is happiness. I feel

happy when I work on the chacra with the machete so that the crops grow well” (Lina, interview, Pano, April 17, 2016).

This conception of wealth is part of a long-term view that is far from a productivist vision, but it also requires being open to generating income to rise above the contradiction of feeling surrounded by wealth, working, respecting nature, and being poor. As Beatriz explained this paradox (interview, Pano, April 17, 2016),

They say that we in the Amazon are poor, lazy, that we don’t like to work, but we still work. But no one buys our products at a high price. A bunch of bananas sells for two dollars. We cannot eat breakfast, lunch, and a snack with that, because our products sell at low prices and we do not have money to survive. If they paid us a little more, then we would have money, invest in something, then we could not say we are poor.

On this matter, several interviewees alluded to the need to be productive while respecting nature. “It is not only increasing production by using agrochemicals, because that damages not only the environment but also my health and the future well-being of my family, so *sumak kawsay* is doing things well in the entire environment” (Oscar, interview, Tena, April 10, 2016).

In alluding to respect for the environment and generating income, several interviewees referred to productive work linked to interaction with nature and the family and community, “the shared work, the social, collective work that we do [referring to the Kallari association], pursuing the same objective for mutual benefit” (Tomás, interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016). The testimonies alluded to the compatibility of local forms of respect and care for nature with others of a larger scale and even with the international

sale of products: “It is a cooperative of 22 communities, and it is already selling its products on the world market, and its agriculture is in harmony with its chacras. I have brought some machines from Canada to teach how to work when they have the chocolate ready, how to temper it, how to make recipes. I can share my knowledge, and they have taught me about their agriculture” (Martín, interview, Talag, April 29, 2016). Synergies are generated between practices and local knowledge and experiences from other realities.

Ancestral Knowledge

Knowledge is transferred between generations in a practical and oral way, through spaces such as the forest, the mountains, and the chacra (Miguel, interview, Tena, April 4, 2016). A shaman from the forest claimed that “learning should be in the forest and the mountains, not in the classroom. . . . Teaching about botany is theory and practice. It is about teaching so that the forest and mountains survive” (Julián, interview, Ñakanchi Kaasay, March 20, 2017). A community leader living closer to the urban area said that older adults’ knowledge was essential for her (Emilia, interview, August 8, 2016):

I believe that I will never starve to death even if I don’t have money. It is a matter of how you manage and do things, having learned many things in the kitchen, on the chacra. . . . I learned to knit my *shigra* [indigenous backpack] from a granny. She has given me a lot of knowledge, and then I go to the practice and I learn there., My mother and father have given me a lot of knowledge.

Participants recognize the transmission of knowledge as a connection to sustainable ways of life. However, there are differences between older interviewees and younger participants such as Sara, who expressed the need to return to the practices of

their elders: “We must return to the values of the past, such as planting on the chacra, to try to fix damaged areas as much as possible” (interview, Tena, April 7, 2016). Older participants assumed these practices and mentioned other ancestral ones: “We fish, but not with the chemicals some people use that kill all the fish. We have a remedy from all knowledges. There are leaves that we squash and with that we go fishing, only with what our grandparents taught us” (Beatriz, interview, Pano, April 17, 2016). According to David (interview, Tena, August 14, 2016), “Families retain their ancestral principles. Those of us who have learned from them know that, for example, a plant has life, and we cannot mistreat something that has life. Our principles are formed from an original, ancestral vision from those who lived here. If we are going to cut a tree we ask for permission.”

In the area of health, they clearly appreciate the importance of ancestral knowledge: “We have *chulviyuyo* that counters inflammation, nettle for pain, as a pain reliever, painkiller. . . . Elders, our grandparents, our parents know about plants, but we young people do not know. We are losing our culture” (Sandra, interview, San Rafael, April 30, 2016). As a community leader explained, “Our people have not been using Western medicine. Rather, they have empowered themselves using natural medicine, so for us, especially myself, that is a joy because I always follow the ancient wisdom of my mother and father, which is very rich” (Alex, interview, Tena, March 21, 2016). A community leader from a remote rural region said, “Spiritual communication has been maintained through the transfer of knowledge from our parents, respect for all the places of the forest, lagoons, rivers, caves, giant trees, and plants” (Laura, interview, Zapallo, April 15, 2016). Another participant supported this argument: “In the ancestral worldview, spirituality has to do not with God but with nature” (Tomás, interview, Río Blanco, April 9, 2016).^x

The Amazonian indigenous population faces challenges in keeping its traditions and identities alive in a society blurred by the immediacy of the media, the Internet, music, movies, social networks and soap operas that excludes them. A participant from outside the community explained (Martín, interview, Talag, April 29, 2016):

In Shandia there was a small store, and all the young people in the community went to watch DVDs. . . . Since then, they all have their mobiles, and they are joining Facebook. They are watching videos on the Internet and junk music that has no content. This influences culture, and young people already use more products, girls wear makeup.

Participants also point to new problems that must be urgently addressed, such as “unifying the Kichwa language, since there are different dialects. Language is identity. Work is currently under way on a unified bilingual school curriculum, which leads to ruptures in identity” (María, interview, Tena, August 23, 2016). Conventional education “is separating us and moving us away from *sumak kawsay*. Now we are understanding another type of *sumak kawsay*, as in “I am happy if I have money. I am happy if I have a degree” (David, interview, Tena, August 14, 2016). There are difficulties in combining ancestral and conventional knowledge: “The idea is for midwives and health professionals to work together, but their philosophies about childbirth clash” (María, interview, Tena, August 23, 2016). The new generation is losing its cultural identity, “We are from here and we are young. The elderly, our grandparents, our parents, know, but we young people do not know. We are losing our culture. We have practically forgotten it” (Claudia, interview, Shandia, August 24, 2016). “I have noticed that young people do not know their language. They probably speak Kichwa, but they do not know grammar

or how to write it. They don't want to recognize their identity” (María, interview, Tena, August 23, 2016). “Now young people don’t want to speak Kichwa, let alone learn about plants. None of my children has wanted to learn about plants” (Julián, interview, Ñakanchi Kawsay, March 20, 2017). “We need support from outside agents to deal with domestic violence, alcoholism, drugs, and violence from oil companies in the communities” (Alex, interview, Tena, March 21, 2016).

This is a critical juncture. The intercultural bilingual school, despite its limited scope, plays a fundamental role in transmitting knowledge adapted to the territories’ new realities.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

This article employs a qualitative methodological approach to analyze the characteristics of *sumak kawsay* in a primarily indigenous area of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The results show that there are four constituent elements of *sumak kawsay* in which various interpretations coexist: (1) indigenous worldview and nature, (2) community, (3) an economy based on solidarity, and (4) ancestral knowledge. Following Artaraz and Calestani (2015), our findings show that understandings of *sumak kawsay* are rooted in people’s practices and beliefs and not in theoretical constructions of idyllic community forms (Fabricant, 2010). Rather than being an eminently holistic or mystical proposal (Spedding, 2010; Stefanoni, 2012), it emerges from, for example, the *minga* and especially the *chacra*. The *chacra* appears repeatedly as unifying *sumak kawsay*’s constituent elements. It is not only a link between community and nature but also a source of wealth, the transmission of knowledge, and the production of hybrid identities. In this regard, we observe differences between the academic “indigenist” view and local

discourses. Exogenous elements coexist in *sumak kawsay* that take it beyond its original conception and homogeneous meaning.

One example of the multiple meanings coexisting in *sumak kawsay* is the ways in which people experience spirituality with nature. While some participants do so through religious beliefs (Catholic or Evangelical), others refer to precolonial ancestral beliefs.^{xi} Another example is that the importance of nature and community has both biocentric justifications and other, more utilitarian ones. With regard to economics as a constituent element of *sumak kawsay*, the predominant discourse is against superfluous consumption, but some narratives show that tensions emerge from having insufficient household income, such as consuming few goods and services and feeling rich while being poor. Further, voluntary simplicity conflicts with the attitudes of younger generations. As a way of integrating these feelings, testimonies express the need to generate income through local forms of production that are compatible with caring for nature such as community tourism and exporting cacao produced on the *chacras*. Participants value knowledge as the backbone of the multiple meanings of *sumak kawsay*. Young people seek to recover their parents' practices, while adults interpret them as assumed and elders connect their practices with ancestral knowledge. In all cases, the multiplicity of meanings of *sumak kawsay* is based on the transmission of knowledge between generations to manage the ecological, spiritual, and autonomous bases for meeting community needs (Viteri, 2002). In this context, the intercultural bilingual school becomes relevant as an institution capable of incorporating new knowledge and integrating it locally, taking into account the territory's problems (loss of identity, unification of language, exclusion, violence).

Sumak kawsay's plural and hybrid character allows us to extrapolate alternatives from the Ecuadorian Amazon to other latitudes. For this the challenge is threefold: harmonizing the feelings that fall under its conceptual umbrella, building local

organizational forms of expanded community and ecological coexistence, and adapting proposals to social reality and connecting them with regional, national, and international initiatives.

Notes

1. We use the Kichwa term because this population predominates in the area of this research.

2. Ethnographic and qualitative research by Calestani (2009a; 2009b; 2012), Artaraz and Calestani (2015), Fabricant (2010), and Ranta (2018) in Bolivia and Cuestas-Caza (2018), Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfield, and Rousseau (2018), and Tortosa-Martínez, Caus, and Martínez-Román (2014) in Ecuador is worth noting. The few quantitative studies carried out analyze relationships between subjective well-being, *sumak kawsay*, and socio-demographic variables (Ramírez, 2011; Guardiola, and García-Quero, 2014; García-Quero and Guardiola, 2017; Coral-Guerrero, Guardiola, and García-Quero, 2020). There is an also extensive literature on subjective well-being and happiness in Latin America (see Rojas, 2016).

3. García-Quero and Ahumada (2017) include good living in other currents (eco-feminism, ecology, degrowth, postextractivism, etc.) under the label of “Heterodoxy 3.” They point out that the currents present in this type of heterodoxy to a certain extent break with Eurocentric concepts and knowledge and imply an alternative societal model of coexistence in harmony with others and with the natural environment.

4. The main reason for our position in this theoretical line is that the fieldwork was carried out in an indigenous area of Amazonian Ecuador and that we sought to locate tensions

between theoretical indigenist position, linked mainly to indigenous leaders and intellectuals, and the local population.

5. Guillén, Francés, and Santacreu (2016: 47) identify “economic harmony” as a substantial thematic axis of *sumak kawsay*. They understand “economic harmony” as movement toward a social and solidarity-based economic model that prioritizes the community values of reciprocity and complementarity over those of profit and competition.

6. *Chacras* are spaces for cultivation that provide food, seeds, ornaments, and medicinal plants, constituting traditional production systems that combine attributes of conservation and integrated use of resources.

⁷ Napo has the highest percentage of indigenous population in Ecuador, with 56.8 percent, compared with 38.2 percent mestizos and approximately 4 percent other ethnic groups such as Afro-Ecuadorians. Within the indigenous population, Kichwa represent around 96 percent and Waorani (or Huaorani) 4 percent.

8. Kallari is an indigenous association established in Tena in 1997 and currently includes 850 families located in 21 surrounding communities (Kallari, 2018).

9. We also made an exploratory visit in April 2015 to collect some data for preparing interviews and learning about the communities’ receptivity to our research.

10. This statement clearly exemplifies the multiple meanings of *sumak kawsay*. All the participants assumed the vital importance of nature as a constituent element of *sumak kawsay*, but while some link it with God (Catholics and Evangelicals), others, like the shaman, allude to forms of thought predating the Catholic missions: “Josefina's mission came to, let's say, ‘educate’ the community and changed their way of thinking” (Julián, interview, Ñakanchi Kawsay, March 20, 2017).

11. The coexistence of different worldviews in *sumak kawsay* requires alternative methodologies that allow for deeper ontological and epistemological discussion. The thematic analysis used is more descriptive, but we hope that it will serve as a reference for future research that uses methodological analyses such as narrative or grounded theory.

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