

Indigenous Politics, *Sumak Kawsay*, and Community Tourism: A Case Study from Amazonian Ecuador

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This essay explores the relationship between visions of the ideal society that emerge from social movements and local, small-scale socio-economic and cultural projects that might contribute to achieving these ideals. It discusses the concept of *sumak kawsay*, a term meaning “living well” in the Kichwa language, which has been used in Ecuador to refer to a holistic concept of well-being involving economic, environmental, and social factors. *Sumak kawsay* originally emerged in the discourse of Ecuador’s indigenous movements, and the country has incorporated the concept, along with its Spanish-language version of *buen vivir*, into its most recent constitution in 2008. *Buen vivir* has also been included in Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution. I contrast *sumak kawsay* with past development strategies and examine the case of the Waira Churi, a Kichwa music and dance group turned tourist and cultural center in the Amazonian region, whose experience with community tourism seems to exemplify the *sumak kawsay* ideal. I argue for greater consideration of small-scale indigenous collective economic projects and suggest that community-based tourism can play an important role in making *sumak kawsay* possible in indigenous communities.

Introduction

Anthropologists have devoted considerable intellectual energy to analyzing the wave of political organizing led by indigenous peoples in Latin America beginning in the 1980s and 90s (e.g. Jackson and Warren 2005; Conklin 1997; Ramos 1998, 2003; Rogers 1996). As leaders of “new social movements,” Latin American indigenous activists placed ethnic identity at the core of their political struggles and recruited global support for their causes by emphasizing the “middle ground” they share with environmentalists arising from the connections between their

indigenous identities and the lands they inhabit (Brysk 1996, 2000; Cepek 2008; Conklin and Graham 1995; Selverston 1995; Yashar 1998). Together with transnational allies, indigenous groups opposed state-led development strategies that threatened their lands and undermined the lifeways that shaped their value systems for generations. At the same time, they put forth new ideas for improving the wellbeing of their communities without undermining their preferred forms of sociality and exchange or causing serious destruction of their natural environments.

In the case of Ecuador, indigenous activists at the national level resisted development policies they understood as incompatible with their ways of relating to the environment and each other. They promoted instead a holistic notion of wellbeing referred to as *sumak kawsay*, which means good, beautiful or harmonious living in Kichwa, the most widely spoken indigenous language in the country.¹ The indigenous movements' vision of *sumak kawsay* implies a balance between all aspects of daily life, including socioeconomic conditions, social relations, and the environment (Gualinga 2002:1). The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), frequently invokes *sumak kawsay* as a goal of the indigenous movements, and in 2011, the CONAIE and other indigenous organizations hosted a "Meeting of Peoples and Nationalities for Sumak Kawsay," which included sessions on "interculturality," "plurinationality," and "recovery of the peoples' sovereignty" (CONAIE). This ideal of human wellbeing as defined through the interconnectedness of material fulfillment, harmonious relationships, and environmental health provides a radical contrast to notions of the "good life" based on dualistic understandings of the nature-culture divide (Cortez 2010) and the individualistic pursuit of wealth and "hedonistic happiness" (Radcliffe 2012:243).

When Ecuador's current president Rafael Correa, a left-leaning U.S.-trained economist, came to power in 2007 under the banner of a "Citizen's Revolution," he and his supporters promoted *sumak kawsay* as a development model that would allow the country to move beyond the neoliberal capitalist strategies of the past. Prior to Correa's government, multiple regimes had failed to deliver on promises to chart a new course for the country. In contrast, Correa's government has followed through on many of its commitments to increase public investment in social programs

¹ *Sumak kawsay* is usually translated as "living well" or "good living" in English. In Spanish, *sumak kawsay* is most often translated as *buen vivir*. Throughout South America, other indigenous peoples also have similar concepts in their own languages (e.g., *suma qamaña* in Aymara).

(healthcare, education, housing, etc.), halt and/or reverse the privatization of state industries, increase taxation on foreign corporations, and strengthen regulation of the economy. In 2008, the Ecuadorian people approved by referendum (69% in favor) a new constitution to implement these reforms and guide the Citizen's Revolution toward a new path for the country. *Sumak kawsay* appears in the preamble of this document as a central objective of the state: "We women and men, the sovereign people of Ecuador...hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living, the *sumak kawsay*" (2008 Ecuadorian Constitution). *Sumak kawsay* also appears throughout the body of the constitution. For instance, in Section II, 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."

Here I provide an example of what *sumak kawsay* might mean for indigenous people at the local level and examine the relationship between ideals emerging through political activism and projects envisioned by local actors. I relate the experience of an indigenous Kichwa music and dance group turned community tourism provider in Amazonian Ecuador called the Waira Churi whose experience with community tourism appears to exemplify the ideal of *sumak kawsay*. Since the 1990s, the group has sought to maintain Amazonian Kichwa traditions while earning money to support the wellbeing of its members.

Based on this case study, I argue that scholars and activists ought to pay attention not only to the broad transformations that social movements and alternative approaches to development can bring about, but also to the political, economic, and cultural potential of small-scale, locally initiated projects such as community tourism. I suggest the need to consider not only how *sumak kawsay* has been articulated as an ideal of contemporary indigenous movements and a guiding principle for Correa's "post-neoliberal" regime, but also how indigenous peoples at the local level are actively designing their own small-scale projects in ways that make "living well" possible.

I begin by providing a brief history of the region where the Waira Churi live, focusing specifically on various efforts to "develop" Ecuador's Amazonian region (often referred to as the "Oriente") through colonial incursions, state-sponsored colonization and agricultural intensification programs, and oil extraction. I then provide a brief description of the area today, followed by a discussion of recent debates among scholars and activists about *sumak kawsay*. Then, I describe my methodological

approach and relate the experience of the Waira Churi, situating their project in the context of the rising popularity of community tourism among indigenous peoples. I question the simplistic idea of cultural performance for tourists as necessarily inauthentic or based on “invented traditions” and explore the role tourism has played in the group’s history, including both the benefits and challenges they have experienced. I end with a reflection on the possibilities for envisioning collective efforts at multiple scales to achieve *sumak kawsay*.

A Brief History of Rukullakta

The Waira Churi live in the community of Rukullakta, which is located approximately 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of the Ecuadorian capital of Quito, just north of the town of Archidona and eight hundred meters (2,624 feet) from the road that today links Quito to the city of Tena, capital of the province of Napo. The first experiences of indigenous people from Rukullakta with Europeans and their ideas of “progress” began in 1542, when Spanish explorers Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Orellana passed through the region in search of “El Dorado,” a mythical paradise where they hoped to find an abundance of gold, silver, and cinnamon (Whitten 1981:5). Their journey was the first European quest for wealth in the Amazon region (Hemming 2009). Eighteen years later, in 1560, Captain Bartolomé Marín founded Archidona as the first Spanish colonial headquarters in the Amazon. It became a Jesuit mission town used to reach indigenous groups along the Napo River, a tributary of the Amazon River (Muratorio 1991:19). Archidona, along with two other small colonial towns—Baeza and Ávila—was also established to collect cotton as tribute from Kichwa-speaking Quijos people, the ancestors of Rukullakta’s current inhabitants (Hemming 2009:46).

Local residents resisted the colonial incursion. In 1579, Quijos warriors led by Chief Jumandy and shaman-warriors Beto and Guami rebelled against the Spaniards. They opposed the forced labor, violence, and associated processes of cultural assimilation. The rebels killed colonists, burned settlements, and cut down trees that the Europeans had planted (Hemming 2009:46-47). The acts served as symbolic acts of defiance against foreign efforts to destroy the social and cultural fabric of Quijos society. More than four centuries later, the colonial experience and the rebellion led by Jumandy continue to play a central role in the political consciousness of Ecuador’s Amazonian Kichwa people (Uzendoski 2006).

Contemporary indigenous resistance began in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s and 70s, Ecuador's ruling military juntas initiated what historians refer to as the "Developmentalist Era." During this time, the Ecuadorian state played a pro-active role in promoting economic growth and industrialization. A critical element of the program involved transforming the country's agricultural system from a series of large, underproductive feudal estates in the Andean highlands to a more efficient capitalist agrarian economy (Waters 2008). With this goal in mind, the national government passed the first land reform legislation in 1964, creating the Ecuadorian Institute for Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC in Spanish). The IERAC was charged with administering land redistribution and, importantly, turning the Oriente into a "productive" region.

The way in which IERAC officials defined "productive" land, however, was based on Western, capitalist attitudes toward the natural environment. They viewed land not under intensive cultivation, especially if held communally, as "useless" or "vacant" (*tierras baldías* in Spanish), an idea that has long been used in Latin America to justify dispossessing indigenous peoples of their lands (e.g. Cambranes 1985; Sanders 2003). Indigenous residents, in contrast, perceived their lands as sources of important cultural, economic, and spiritual resources. Their lifeways depended on horticulture, hunting, fishing, and gathering, which did not mark the landscape in the same way as large-scale agriculture and, most importantly, were not primarily oriented to commodity production.

State officials moved to transform the Oriente through a combination of "colonization" and intensive development projects (Whitten 1981:14). Colonization involved granting land titles to migrants from the highlands and coast, with the condition that they use the land for market production. The national government also promoted the cultivation of African palm oil trees, the expansion of cattle ranching, and the extraction of oil through various incentive and subsidy programs (Bebbington et. al 1993:184). These practices led to significant increases in deforestation and population growth. According to one study, "Between the years 1965 and 1985, the amount of land planted to crops increased from negligible levels to 225,000 hectares, doubling between 1983 and 1986 alone. Over the same period, pastures increased from 226,000 to 484,000 hectares, and the population of the lowlands increased at a rate of 4.9 percent annum between 1974 and 1982" (Bebbington et al. 1993:184).

Study Location in Ecuador



Faced with the prospect of losing access to the lands where their families had lived for generations, some indigenous people in the Oriente decided to turn their land into pasture for cattle ranching in order to gain access to official land titles (Perreault 2003; Bebbington et al. 1993). Leaders of Rukullakta's Saint Peter Cooperative (now the Pueblo Kichwa de Rukullakta, or PKR), formed in 1965, were among those who adopted this strategy (Erazo 2013). Nevertheless, Rukullakta residents experienced significant challenges with this new way of relating to the environment and each other. According to the founder of the Waira Churi, Carlos

Salazar, residents were not adequately prepared for the shift to cattle ranching: "We needed technical advising, and at that time there was none. So, since we are people of the rain forest, we didn't know how to raise cattle, and they all died" (Interview, January 8, 2010). The lack of technical training provided by government programs served as a major impediment to gaining long-term benefits from cattle ranching.

Collective cattle ranching also entailed a fundamental re-shaping of social relations among Kichwa people in the region. The *minga* (reciprocal labor exchange) has historically been the main form of collaboration and typically involves individuals or groups laboring on collective projects such as building houses or clearing gardens for family or friends in exchange for food and drink, especially manioc beer (Uzendoski 2004). Yet, according to Juliet Erazo,

As indigenous collective organizations sought land title and development funding from the state and development groups, participation in most *mingas* went from being a practice that reaffirmed one's desire to continue in a reciprocal relationship with family and friends to an activity that was required due to one's membership of a communal land management organization. [2011: 1024]

Leaders also faced other challenges in implementing collective economic projects. For instance, they struggled to prevent cattle from the cooperative's herd from being slaughtered for weddings or fiestas, as many cooperative members viewed the animals as more valuable as objects to be circulated in exchange relationships than as a means to accumulate capital for the collective (Erazo 2013).

Large collective economic endeavors thus constituted a significant departure from the forms of sociality and exchange that indigenous residents had historically maintained. Former president of the PKR, Nelson Chimbo, explains, "Our fathers did not initially create an organization that was our own. Instead, they copied something that came from outside" (Interview, January 12, 2010). Describing the cooperativist model as "foreign, not our own," he argues that this approach led to the failure of many community projects. The possibility of losing their land thus pressured indigenous peoples to adopt organizational forms and economic practices that departed significantly from the ways they had historically related to one another. While PKR leaders, as well as many rank-and-file members, supported the idea of "organized living" that

collective efforts on a larger scale implied, they also recognized the difficulties involved in translating support for access to land into communal economic projects (Erazo 2010, 2013).

At the same time, state policies led to greater integration of Kichwa peoples in the Rukullakta area into national Ecuadorian society. For instance, most PKR members historically had residences both in the more densely populated western portions of the organization's territory and in the more sparsely populated eastern portions, where their larger gardens and hunting areas were located (Erazo 2011). During the developmentalist period, when the Saint Peter Cooperative was first forming, Cooperative leaders successfully convinced many indigenous residents to spend greater amounts of time near the administrative center in Rukullakta, which is in the western part of PKR territory. While more consistent residence near administrative centers allowed leaders to more effectively recruit members for collective projects, one of the main reasons most members shifted their residence patterns was to take advantage of expanded educational opportunities. This was the case for the Waira Churi, who began spending greater amounts of time in their homes in Rukullakta in order to allow their children to attend schools in town. A major result of this gradual shift in residence, however, was an increased reliance on the cash economy to meet basic needs and in some cases more rapid cultural assimilation, as young people spent larger amounts of time in Archidona interacting with non-indigenous people. For the most part, then, development on indigenous lands in the form of "colonization" and "agricultural modernization" led to increased deforestation, social conflict, and varying degrees of culture change, including greater dependence on the monetary economy, among Kichwa people.

Perhaps the most extreme example of the deleterious consequences of state-led development strategies in Ecuador, however, is the oil industry. Large-scale oil drilling began in Amazonian Ecuador in 1972, when Texaco began commercial extraction near the northern Amazonian town of Lago Agrio. In the decades that followed, oil operations blossomed into Ecuador's largest export industry and the main source of government revenue (currently 30-40%). Yet, the oil industry has brought about a series of negative consequences for indigenous peoples. Soils and rivers have been polluted from frequent spills, loud noise from machinery has scared wildlife away, deforestation and colonization have increased due to the construction of new roads, and many individuals have suffered

debilitating and even fatal health conditions associated with exposure to petroleum wastes (Bebbington 1993:184; Hurtig and San Sebastián 2004).

Due to the negative consequences of oil production, many Ecuadorian indigenous groups have fought against its expansion. Sawyer (2004) provides a vivid ethnographic account of the resistance of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP) to oil operations in the 1990s. The PKR has also recently been brought to the forefront of the struggle. On October 8, 2008, the Ecuadorian government signed a thirty-year contract with Ivanhoe Energy Ecuador, the Ecuadorian subsidiary of Canadian company Ivanhoe Energy Inc., to conduct oil operations in the region. The PKR, after convening open assembly meetings in all seventeen constituent communities, firmly and officially declared its opposition to the contract. Moreover, it protested the exclusion of local people from the decision to allow the foreign company to conduct operations. On September 23, 2010, the PKR filed a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights arguing that their rights to property, participation, information, and judicial protection under the Charter of the Organization of the American States and the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights (IACHR) had been violated. The PKR's petition to the IACHR was due to the "disrespect provoked by the concession given to Ivanhoe and the effects this has had on [the organization's] collective rights" and "in defense of its rights and its model of development" (Varela). Despite the challenges associated with resisting an industry that provides a large portion of the national government's budget, the majority of Rukullakta's leaders remain opposed to the government's efforts to permit Ivanhoe to operate in the area without their consent and firmly reject the extractivist approach to development represented by the oil industry.

In many ways the experience of Rukullakta epitomizes the challenges many indigenous peoples around the world face today. The legacy of colonialism remains fresh in the political consciousness of indigenous leaders, and the need to maintain control over their lands remains at the core of their activism. At the same time, many Rukullakta residents increasingly depend on the monetary economy to meet their basic needs. While horticulture still provides a large portion of Rukullakta residents' regular food supply, most residents require some source of cash to purchase commodities they need or desire, such as school supplies, clothes, soap, cooking supplies, radios, stereos, and televisions. Some residents migrate to major cities in the Oriente (Tena, Puyo, Coca, Lago Agrio) or other regions of Ecuador to seek employment, whether

temporary or long-term. Yet, since less than twenty percent of PKR residents have a high-school education and barely one percent has a university education, for most Kichwa people the options for gaining access to cash are limited primarily to agriculture, construction, or work for oil companies (Pueblo Kichwa de Rukullakta 2008). According to the PKR's most recent management plan in 2008, 80% of its residents live below the poverty line, defined as monthly incomes of less than \$483.10, and 17.5% live in extreme poverty, defined as annual incomes of less than \$679.

An Alternative Model: *Sumak Kawsay*

As Ecuador's indigenous peoples have reflected on their experiences with "development," many have argued for the need to consider new ideals for society. The concept of *sumak kawsay*, as discussed above, refers to a more holistic notion of well-being than the concept of development implies. Indigenous and non-indigenous activists and scholars have widely discussed the different possible interpretations of *sumak kawsay*, as well as the extent to which it represents a true departure from the paradigm of development. Eduardo Gudynas (2011, 2014) argues that *sumak kawsay*, or *buen vivir*, is an inherently plural concept that can embrace multiple meanings, combining some aspects of "classical ideas of quality of life" with indigenous ideas of "fullness [of] life in a community, together with other persons and with Nature." For instance, he describes critical development studies, radical environmentalism, and feminist perspectives as three approaches from non-indigenous traditions that can make positive contributions to *buen vivir* as an alternative to development (Gudynas 2011).

Other scholars have examined the difficulties associated with the implementation of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* as a political project that might move beyond development. Catherine Walsh (2010) argues that institutionalized uses of *sumak kawsay* are based in practice on alternative understandings of development from the West, such as Amartya Sen's capability approach and ideas of sustainable human development. Sarah Radcliffe highlights the challenges of overcoming neoliberal governmentality, and the historical exclusion of indigenous peoples from political participation, in Ecuador's *buen vivir* development regime (2012:245). Atawallpa Oviedo Freire (2014b) similarly suggests that voices from the indigenous grassroots have not been sufficiently taken into account in implementing Ecuador's national development plan based

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on buen vivir. He writes, “Native peoples are not even asked if they want to live in ‘cement prisons.’ They are simply told that that is development and progress” (Oviedo Freire 2014b: 209).

Concerns with the lack of involvement of indigenous peoples in the implementation of the political project of buen vivir have led some activists and scholars to make a distinction between *sumak kawsay*, as the original ideal envisioned within indigenous movements, and buen vivir, as the government strategy that has appropriated this concept as part of development plans based on similar logics as conventional development (Oviedo Freire 2014a). As Arturo Escobar (1995) has argued, development discourse tends to represent non-Western or non-capitalist societies as backward and deficient and in need of external intervention to “catch up” to so-called developed nations, which are used as the yardstick for progress. Josef Estermann (2014) builds on Escobar’s reasoning and argues that in order for *sumak kawsay* to be possible, there must be paradigmatic shifts that move beyond development’s ethnocentrism and take non-Western philosophies seriously. He argues, for instance, that buen vivir, like development, is rooted in a linear conception of time, and that *sumak kawsay*, due to its basis in Andean philosophy, is fundamentally non-teleological and embraces a more cyclical notion of time (Estermann 2014: 70). Likewise, according to Estermann, *sumak kawsay* requires the incorporation of Andean principles of relationality, including correspondence (the interconnectedness of the cosmic and everyday spheres of life), complementarity (especially in regards to gender), and reciprocity (Estermann 2014: 66-70). Gudynas (2014) describes this interpretation as the “substantive use” of buen vivir, in contrast to its “generic” or “restricted” uses, and he argues that it is imprudent to try to draw clear lines between authentic and inauthentic versions of *sumak kawsay* or buen vivir, since these concepts are part of an on-going process of construction. While I agree with Gudynas that multiple interpretations of *sumak kawsay* can contribute to moving beyond development, I argue that the case of the Waira Churi provides an example of the sort of small-scale, culturally appropriate initiatives that might fit with a more substantive conception of *sumak kawsay*.

Methods

My discussion of the Waira Churi is based on a total of fifteen months of participant observation between 2010 and 2014, yet my primary period of fieldwork on this topic was in January 2010. During the primary

period of fieldwork on this topic, I lived in Rukullakta with the Waira Churi and carried out several semi-structured interviews with members of the group, PKR leaders, representatives of the bilingual education system in the area, and one cultural activist from the provincial office of the Ministry of Culture (see Jarrett 2011). I conducted an additional month of participant observation with the Waira Churi in January 2011. I returned to Ecuador in September 2011 as a Fulbright grantee to conduct research on traditions associated with the holly tree *Ilex guayusa*. From September 2011 to July 2012, I lived with the Waira Churi, and the group's president, Edmundo Salazar, was one of my two main collaborators. Finally, I lived with the Waira Churi from May-July, 2013, and June-July, 2014, while continuing further research on guayusa.

Community Tourism

Community tourism has the potential to provide indigenous peoples with access to cash, which they require to meet their needs, while maintaining the sort of balanced social and environmental relations implied by the notion of *sumak kawsay*. While conventional forms of tourism have existed in the Oriente for decades, indigenous peoples in Ecuador now promote "community tourism" as a new model, based on the idea that local people should be the main beneficiaries when tourists come to encounter indigenous peoples and learn about their environments and cultures. The goal of community tourism is for income to directly support local livelihoods, allowing community members to engage in economic practices that do not degrade their lands. This strongly contrasts with past development strategies, which have relied on large-scale economic projects involving intensive exploitation of natural resources and ethnocentric notions of "productivity" that systematically undervalue indigenous value systems.

To be sure, many anthropologists have critiqued alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism and community tourism. James Carrier and Donald Macleod note that many non-conventional forms of tourism, such as "ecotourism," can be used to refer to a wide range of activities in practice, thus sometimes making these terms more of an advertising strategy than a true commitment to environmentally sustainable or socially responsible operations (2005:316). Others suggest that tourism can perpetuate colonial relationships between locals and visitors, distort "authentic" cultures, and lead to a loss of intrinsic value and meaning attached to cultural heritage (Errington and Gewertz 1989; Garland and

Gordon 2009; Ingles 2004:239). Most of these are legitimate concerns that deserve critical attention. Nevertheless, the case of the Waira Churi indicates the importance of considering the particular context in which a group begins to work with tourists, the reasons why tourism remains a source of considerable interest for indigenous peoples, and the strategies different groups have used to maintain control of their tourism operations.

Ecuador already has a large tourism industry and the infrastructure—inexpensive and reliable public transportation, diverse options for tourist lodging, and a relatively stable political system to ensure security—needed to attract visitors from around the world. In fact, tourism is the country's third largest economic activity, following oil and banana exports (Pacheco and Serrano 2007:80). In the Archidona area, tourism is an especially attractive option due to its proximity (about a thirty-minute trip on a public bus) to Tena, the provincial capital and a hub for domestic and foreign tourists coming to visit the Oriente. Most of the major high schools and universities in the area offer specialties in tourism management, and it is common to see signs for community tourism destinations on major roads in the region. Many of these small-scale projects are run by individual families or communities, who see tourism as an opportunity to supplement their incomes.

In order to recognize and support community-based tourism projects, the Ecuadorian government passed a law in 2002 that gave community tourism operators the same legal recognition as established private tourism companies. This action upset the existing dominant players in the industry but laid the foundation for community tourism as a viable option for indigenous groups. The law also recognized the Plurinational Ecuadorian Federation of Community Tourism (FEPTCE) as the entity responsible for defining what constitutes community tourism and regulating community tourism projects (Ballesteros and Carrión 2007:15). The FEPTCE has defined community tourism as, "any solidary tourist activity that allows for the active participation of the community from an intercultural perspective, the appropriate management of the natural environment, and the valuing of cultural heritage, based on principles of equitable distribution of local benefits" (Solis Carrión 2007:31). Although this ideal can be difficult to achieve, many indigenous peoples in the Oriente see community tourism as a promising means of gaining income while being able to remain in their communities and maintain many of the daily practices that they find meaningful.

The Case of the Waira Churi

The Waira Churi group was founded in 1990 by Carlos Salazar. Carlos was born in a small community near the parish of San Pablo de Ushpayaku, a few kilometers from Archidona. When he was four years old, his mother died in a nearby river, and his father quickly remarried. After his mother passed away, he enrolled in boarding school at the Josephine mission in Archidona. When he completed his studies, he began working as a Kichwa-speaking catechist and interpreter for Spanish-speaking Josephine priests from Italy. His job required that he travel to distant rural communities throughout the Oriente to deliver Catholic teachings to Kichwa-speaking residents. Carlos is an eloquent speaker, both in Spanish and Kichwa, and a charismatic but serious man, and he quickly gained the trust and respect of many families throughout the region. He had always enjoyed music, and as a child he learned to play numerous Kichwa instruments, such as the *pingullu* (a narrow vertical flute made from palm wood), *llawta* (a horizontal flute), and the *turumpa* (a mouth bow made from bamboo and plant fibers).

During his visits as a *catequista*, he saw that residents of more isolated communities maintained many of the music and dance traditions and other rituals that were commonplace when he was a child, and he became interested in reviving interest in these practices among Kichwa people around Archidona, where they were less common. After he retired, he decided to create a traditional music and dance group with his three sons that would keep this heritage alive by performing at community fiestas and events in and around Archidona. He chose to name the group the *Waira Churi*, or “son of the wind,” in recognition of his difficult but formative childhood.

The group now includes his wife, his three sons and their families, and two of his daughters and their families, all of whom live in or near Rukullakta. His other daughters, who live in other communities, sometimes participate when they come to visit, and a few distant relatives and family friends have been a part of the group for varying periods of time. In 2003, the group officially established itself as a legal entity, the “Waira Churi Association of Autochthonous Music and Dance,” with a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, coordinator, dance and music leader, tourist promotion officer, and a “social issues” officer. These positions, which were established as part of the requirements for state recognition of the group as an association, generally rotate every year, though some leaders have remained in their roles for multiple years

at a time. During my time with the group, there were usually between five and ten participants at any given performance or tourist activity. Member participation is voluntary, though leaders typically attempt to persuade those available on the day of a performance to attend. Involvement of individual members can fluctuate based on the state of their relationship with other members, whether or not they have stable jobs or school commitments, and based on their general level of interest in participating on that particular day.

Over the years, the Waira Churi gained recognition in the local area, winning multiple annual dance competitions in Archidona and Tena and developing a reputation as one of the most "authentic" Kichwa cultural groups in Napo. Their use of local materials to make their outfits (bark skirts, animal tooth necklaces, beaded tops, face paint made from plant dyes) and instruments (flutes, drums, and other percussion instruments from palm trees, plant fibers, turtle shells, bee's wax, and wild game hides) and their adherence to a strict stylistic standard for their dances, led them to be seen as worthy representatives of traditional Kichwa culture. Due to their increased visibility through successful public performances, they have made connections with a variety of local political and cultural leaders, some of whom send visitors to their residence in Rukullakta to see the group perform or invite them to events in cities and towns throughout the region.

At first, Carlos remembers, "We didn't even think about having tourists come." Yet, over time visits became more common, so the group decided to more seriously consider community tourism as a means of gaining additional income. In 2009, they officially changed their name from the Waira Churi Association of Autochthonous Music and Dance to the "Waira Churi Tourist and Cultural Center." They now receive numerous tourists every month for anywhere from an afternoon to a long weekend. While the frequency and quantity of visitors can fluctuate considerably, most months they have between one and three presentations. Weekend-long visits are more rare, occurring once every few months usually. By receiving visitors at their "center" (their residence) in Rukullakta, the Waira Churi allow outsiders to learn about Kichwa culture, expanding on Carlos's original vision of preserving and celebrating Kichwa expressive culture through music and dance to include a variety of other cultural experiences.

The Waira Churi offer demonstrations of local food and beverage preparation, where visitors can learn how to make *chicha*, a traditional drink made from manioc, peach palm, or plantains. They also sometimes

invite visitors to early morning guayusa tea and late-night ayawaska ceremonies. During guayusa ceremonies, participants drink gourds full of highly caffeinated guayusa tea and elders tell stories and play music. Ayawaska ceremonies allow participants to drink an extract from the hallucinogenic *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and receive ritual cleansings. While ayawaska ceremonies can be deeply personal, private affairs, and among some Amazonian groups are highly structured, the Waira Churi do not seem to mind if visitors participate occasionally and are generally open about the practice. Nevertheless, they do not identify themselves specifically as providers of “ayawaska tourism,” which has become popular among some groups in the region.

While the majority of their visitors come to the Waira Churi’s center in Rukullakta for dance presentations and brief cultural demonstrations, some tourists accompany Carlos and his family to their secondary residence near the community of Parayaku, about an hour drive on bumpy roads in a pick-up truck from Rukullakta. At the Waira Churi reserve, visitors go on guided hikes in the forest, learn how to garden and set hunting traps, fish in the river, swim in the waterfalls, and sleep in houses made entirely from local materials.² The Waira Churi also participate actively in community events in Rukullakta, Archidona, and other nearby communities and towns. They have also performed in Tena and Quito for government ministers, foreign ambassadors, and other political leaders.

For most of the group’s members, dance performances and tourism are not their main source of income. Nonetheless, these activities do generate supplementary income for members in a flexible manner, and the group’s work has generated numerous additional benefits for its members. Active use of the group’s primary forest reserve for tourist activities provides an added incentive to avoid more intensive uses for this portion of their land. Sharing traditions with others has led many group members to take great pride in their cultural identity. Finally, the Waira Churi’s work as a cultural center has promoted Kichwa ethnic unity, and income from tourism has allowed the group to resist occasional offers to work as “consultants” for oil companies, which often pursue cultural leaders to help them convince communities to accept their activities.

² Many houses in Rukullakta are now built with concrete blocks and zinc roofing.

Agency

Although in a less structured way than the Pueblo Indians (Sweet 2009), the Waira Churi have been able to exercise a great deal of agency in determining the conditions (timing, price, activities provided) of visits to their community. For instance, while many other groups rely exclusively on referrals from private tourist lodges, the Waira Churi have established numerous contacts with personal friends in Quito, Tena, and around the country who periodically bring visitors. They have thus often been able to negotiate the terms of potential visits with these interlocutors and sometimes even negotiate directly with tourists. They do have relationships with nearby lodges that sometimes send visitors or request that they come to perform, but because they have developed an independent reputation as a premier cultural center in the area, they are not dependent on single contacts for the success of their group. Additionally, as mentioned above, since the group does not have strict participation requirements for members, individual members for the most part have the freedom to decide their individual level of involvement at any given time.

Economic Benefits

Being able to receive a greater proportion of tourist dollars has allowed members of the Waira Churi to double or even triple their monthly incomes, which can sometimes be as low as \$40 or \$50. The money is always distributed to all participants. Each household head (male and female) receives an equal amount, and children who contribute receive a somewhat smaller portion. One of Carlos's daughter-in-laws explained that the money is typically used to pay for basic necessities—buying clothing and supplies for the children, providing food for the family, funding improvements in their home. She also told me that she often loans some of this money out interest-free to other women in the community, who come asking for help when they find out the group has recently had visitors. The informal distribution of these funds through social networks in the community further increases the multiplier effect of community tourism. It also reflects the importance of reciprocity within Kichwa communities, where access to cash is often sporadic and social relationships are maintained through ties of mutual support, the most obvious manifestation of which is the minga. As mentioned above, reciprocity is a key principle of *sumak kawsay* (Estermann 2014).

Moreover, a variety of people in the area benefit indirectly from the Waira Churi center. These include the owners of local stores in Rukullakta and Archidona, transportation companies (taxis, bus cooperatives), and hardware stores (when members of the group construct new buildings).

Environmental Benefits

Community tourism has also helped the Waira Churi to preserve their lands. In my conversations with visitors to the Waira Churi's reserve in Parayaku, their primary motivation is to see the rainforest, learn about Kichwa culture and ethnoecology, and to support local people. Since healthy forests and adequate natural attractions are critically important to the success of their project, the Waira Churi have preserved a significant portion of their land. They maintain thirty hectares (approx. 75 acres) of their nearly seventy hectares (approx. 170 acres) in Parayaku as an old-growth forest reserve, complete with three waterfalls, numerous streams, and dozens of large trees. The reserve allows them to offer a diversity of experiences for tourists, but it also benefits their livelihoods by serving as their main source of medicinal plants, game to hunt, and wild foods to collect. The rest of their land consists of *chakras* (horticulture plots), where they grow medicinal plants, subsistence crops such as manioc and plantains, as well as gardens where they grow cash crops (cacao and coffee). The extra income from tourism provides an incentive to conserve their reserve area and avoid planting new gardens or raising cattle in this area. Work in community tourism thus allows the Waira Churi to lead fulfilling lives without having to compromise their culturally, spiritually, and economically valuable natural places.

Renewal of Cultural Pride

Likewise, community tourism has instilled a sense of cultural pride in the Waira Churi as urbanization and ethnic discrimination have led some other Kichwa people to view their heritage as a barrier to a meaningful, satisfying life. Beth Conklin (1997) describes two ways in which the performance of cultural traditions for outside audiences promotes Amazonian peoples' self-esteem and pride. First, the opportunity allows them to celebrate their distinctiveness. Secondly, the act of donning traditional dress and body paint links them to the totality of their ethnic history (Conklin 1997:725). A song by Carlos, one that the Waira Churi

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often perform, reflects this sense of connection to ethnic history and hope for cultural renewal.

Rukuyaya kawsaymanta (The Life of a Grandfather)

Thinking about the life of an elder, day and night, we live
sad and cry

Grandfather taking his blowgun, hunting birds and feeding
the family, having lost him, we live sad and cry

Grandmother cooking manioc and chili pepper and feeding
the family, having lost her, we live sad and cry

Grandfather walking the forest paths, playing his flute,
having lost him, we live sad and cry, we play our music
with sorrow

In Napo Province, the elders played the flute and drums
and lived to dance

As their children, we all live playing and dancing the
mestizo way

Today, we come together, examining our elders' ways and
dancing their music

The nostalgic tone of Carlos's song reflects a dual sorrow—first, at the loss of his own elders; second, at what he understands as a vanishing way of life. While he recognizes his group as part of a new generation in a novel sociocultural context, he ends by re-affirming the value of looking to the past for enduring values. By performing *Rukuyaya kawsaymanta* for both Kichwa and non-Kichwa audiences, Carlos continually reestablishes his connection to a way of a life he sees as meaningful and beautiful, the quintessential *sumak kawsay*. Through community tourism, he re-creates this ideal and makes it possible in a new historical moment by sharing his knowledge and skills with Kichwa and non-Kichwa alike.

While many anthropologists express concern about the tourist gaze leading to the “invention” of traditions or diminishing the value of previously meaningful rituals and customs, the Waira Churi case seems to fit with Conklin's analysis of cultural performance as a means for local peoples to connect with their ethnic history. Furthermore, in contrast to the pessimistic view some anthropologists have of indigenous peoples' relationships with outsiders, Li's description of these connections seems more appropriate in the Waira Churi case. These relationships seem to appear more often as “complexity, collaboration, and creative cultural

engagement in both local and global arenas, rather than simple deceit, imposition, or reactive opportunism" (Li 2000:172-173). As Carlos's son and current Waira Churi president, Edmundo Salazar, put it, visitors "*nos dan más ánimo* [energize, inspire us]."

Young members of the Waira Churi explain how participation in the group has made them feel more comfortable in self-identifying as Kichwa and speaking the Kichwa language. One of the young people told me how many of his friends were ashamed to speak Kichwa at school for fear of being ridiculed and perceived as inferior by fellow classmates, but his association with and participation in the Waira Churi has given him more confidence in expressing his ethno-linguistic identity. The case of the Waira Churi, then, suggests that community tourism can play an important role in making possible the ideal of *sumak kawsay* by improving participants' economic and environmental wellbeing and affirming the value of their cultural identities.

Promotion of Indigenous Solidarity

Finally, the Waira Churi's experience with community tourism carries strong political significance. As Esteban Ruíz Ballesteros and Doris Solís Carrión suggest, "For indigenous organizations and associations...community tourism has a noticeably political dimension, since it becomes a means for recognition and self-administration of their territories and resources" (2007:12). Some indigenous groups hope that community tourism can make up for the loss of potential income from allowing oil operations on their lands. The Waira Churi's work in tourism, as well as many of their other subsistence practices, would be directly affected if Ivanhoe Energy began large-scale operations in the area, especially since some of the proposed drilling sites lie upriver from the waterfalls on their land.

Some Waira Churi members have explained to me that, because of their reputation in the area as respected cultural leaders, representatives from the company have even offered them jobs as consultants in hopes that they might convince communities to authorize operations. As Susana Sawyer notes, influencing local political and cultural leaders through job offers or direct payments is one of many strategies oil companies use to divide communities in opposition to their activities. She writes,

The strategies of penetration are all exactly alike: breaking community unity, corrupting local leaders, fomenting

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dependency and paternalism through gifts of crumbs, negotiating unilaterally with the community, providing monetary [community] works, instigating denigrating campaigns against provincial and regional Indian organizations, and militarizing the [oil] Block" (2004:71).

Community tourism has provided the Waira Churi with additional income needed to resist these offers and allowed them to publicly promote Kichwa ethnic pride, an important symbolic blow to the company's efforts to divide communities that remain in opposition.

Challenges

Notwithstanding their undeniable achievements, the Waira Churi have experienced some difficulties in implementing their community tourism project. First, they are constantly in need of credit to construct new buildings, maintain their lands, and invest in advertising, but few options exist for gaining access to funding. As a result, they sometimes depend on unreliable local politicians, who occasionally hire them for election events without adequately compensating them, or on periodic long-term visitors (usually between a week and a few months), such as university students or volunteers from the United States, in order to finance infrastructure improvements. Likewise, there is considerable competition in the area from lodges, hostels, and other community tourism centers. For instance, in the city of Tena there are about twenty tourist agencies, and in the province of Napo there are at least ten other existing community tourism groups.

Another difficulty for the Waira Churi is ensuring that the funds the group receives for performances or hosting visitors are used effectively. As Edmundo points out, at times the group has "spent just to spend." The group has thus devoted much of its resources to building new infrastructure for tourists—more huts for housing, for instance—instead of investing in professional training for members of the group, or advertising. As Pacheco and Serrano explain in their discussion of entrepreneurial approaches to community tourism,

The industry [community tourism] has yet to understand that its business does not consist of offering transportation and lodging, but in achieving positive emotional states and memorable experiences...[tourists] buy results: 'pleasant

experiences' capable of providing 'value' in the form of sensations, emotions, feelings, and memorable moments. No one travels to sleep in a hotel bed. [2007:78-79]

Leaders often prefer to spend money on tangible improvements in physical infrastructure, since this allows them to distribute benefits more equally (paying other members to help build structures, paying women to provide food to workers, etc.), and the resulting infrastructure can then be used for other purposes (family gatherings, sports, etc.). Nonetheless, as in the PKR cattle ranching project, using funds to fulfill obligations in exchange relationships or invest in social spaces is sometimes incompatible with successful long-term financial management for economic profitability.

Finally, the Waira Churi sometimes struggle to address criticism they receive from other Rukullakta residents. The opportunities their work in community tourism has provided to make connections with relatively wealthy outsiders and the money (although modest sums) they have made from tourist visits occasionally become a source of jealousy among other residents. Also, the PKR has been working for the last few years on developing an organization-wide community tourism operation, and there has been some question of whether a tax on existing tourism groups such as the Waira Churi might be a part of a collective approach. Waira Churi leaders point out that their profits are generally small sums, and they do not feel it would be fair to be taxed without any benefit given in exchange, such as promotional support.

The case of the Waira Churi raises a number of questions regarding what does and does not constitute community tourism. Is the group truly a center based on "solidarity" that "allows for the active participation of the community" and provides for "equitable distribution of local benefits" as outlined in the FEPTCE's definition of community tourism, even though their members are mostly from the same kin group, and benefits are distributed only among these individuals? How should "the community" be defined in the context of community tourism? According to Erazo, "the notion of a long-standing, bounded 'community', even within a patrilineal descent line, is not consistent with the living patterns of the people of this region in the past" (2010:1024). The scale at which solidarity should exist is not entirely clear. Should community boundaries originally legalized for the sake of protecting collective land claims be the same ones used for collective economic projects? Or should groups be free to organize at the level of the extended kin group, as they

have done historically through minga exchanges? As indigenous groups like the Waira Churi become increasingly involved in the tourist industry, challenges such as these will likely remain.

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples in Ecuador's Amazonian region have had a variety of negative experiences with "development" since the beginning of the colonial period. As they have reflected on the unsuccessful and frequently destructive effects of these approaches, they have formed social movements and put forth new ideals toward which to strive. One of these ideals is *sumak kawsay*, which implies a holistic sense of wellbeing balancing economic, environmental, and social relations. Its realization has led indigenous peoples both to seek institutional transformations through political activism and also to implement small-scale projects at the local level. Community tourism has become one of the more attractive options for indigenous families and organizations looking for ways to generate income, often in a way that allows for the balance implied by *sumak kawsay*.

The case of the Waira Churi demonstrates the potential for individual families or communities to imagine and implement their own projects, which fit their unique strengths and experience. For the Waira Churi, community tourism has led to economic improvements, the preservation of their forest, increased cultural pride, and greater solidarity with efforts to resist the operations of extractive industries in their territory. Despite the challenges the group has faced with regards to access to credit, competition from other tourist providers, effective use of funds, and maintaining harmonious relations with other Rukullakta residents, the Waira Churi have developed a promising project that seems to suggest community tourism can play an important role in enhancing holistic wellbeing for indigenous groups.

At the same time, it is important to note that while I have emphasized the Waira Churi case as an example of a local project epitomizing the *sumak kawsay* ideal, not all group members or residents of the area would necessarily use this term to describe their work. My argument is not that the Waira Churi explicitly identify with the *sumak kawsay* ideal as envisioned by Ecuador's indigenous movements or the scholars and activists who debate the concept, but rather that their experience serves as an example of what *sumak kawsay* might look like at the local level. This is not to say that they would never describe their

involvement in community tourism as contributing to a “beautiful life” or “good living.” It is important to emphasize, however, that while local actors do not always explicitly identify their efforts with broader political projects, their experiences sometimes converge with these ideas, and it is worth taking note when this is the case.

Lastly, while I have sought to highlight the value of small-scale initiatives such as the Waira Churi’s tourism center, I do not underestimate the importance or the potential of larger collective efforts. Small-scale projects need not imply a lack of support for other larger-scale initiatives, whether organized by government entities, non-governmental organizations, or indigenous organizations. Indeed, the Waira Churi remain active members of the PKR, participating in periodic assemblies and mingas organized to maintain Rukullakta’s water supply system, as well as other events and meetings. One member of the Waira Churi worked for the PKR for a number of years, first as an unpaid intern and later as a paid accountant. Another was actively involved in the organization’s cacao and coffee commercialization project. Likewise, the Waira Churi maintain friendly relations with many government officials and often perform for events hosted by the Ministry of Culture, as well as other government entities at the national, provincial, and local level. As Gudynas (2014) notes, for *sumak kawsay* to lead to truly liberatory and transformative social change, its multiple dimensions and interpretations should be combined in creative synthesis, rather than viewed as mutually exclusive. The true *sumak kawsay*, it seems, is only made possible when collective endeavors exist at multiple scales and are suited to the diversity of contexts in which they operate.

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³ The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the United States Government, the U.S. Department of State, or the Fulbright Program.

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