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## Epistemic territories of kawsak sacha (living forest): cosmopolitics and cosmoeducation

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the experience of Kichwa Indigenous peoples of Pastaza in Ecuador, and their agency in enforcing their rights to their ancestral cultures and lands. In their political action, they express the revitalization of their ecological and cultural knowledge as conditional to the protection of their territorial integrity. Including ancestral and land-based knowledge in education supports politics of inclusion, ontological recognition, and revitalization of ecological and cultural knowledge of Indigenous people. It also enforces their political legitimacy and sovereignty over their lands and conservation practices. The theme of education and power in Ecuador has been addressed within the decolonial thinking of modernity/coloniality, placing knowledge and pedagogical designs at the core of political debates between indigenous organizations and the central state. We will discuss Kichwa's cosmology of Kawsak Sacha (living forest) and the way it inspires both territorial governance and educational practices.

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Kawsak sacha; cosmopolitics; cosmoeducation; kichwa; Indigenous people; Ecuador

## Introduction

The end of the colonial presence in Ecuador is officially marked in 1822, but the date does not signal the start of a liberation era for all the people living in the country. The new independent administration inherited an ethnic- and race-based social classification that had persisted for centuries (Brand et al., 2016). The subaltern status of Indigenous and Afro descendent groups shifted from the hands of Spanish rulers to those of the white-mestizo administration (Clark & Becker, 2007). The ethnic and racial domination persisted in a system that treated the minoritized peoples in terms of exploitation and physical mistreatment, denial of their identities and territorial rights, injustice, and paternalistic tutelage. Hence, social, economic, and political relations are articulated by the coloniality of power, as stated by Quijano (2000), who recognizes race as a modern construction introduced by the colonial rulers to justify slavery, serfdom, resource extraction, and other forms of exploitation that served, and continue to serve global capitalism. Coloniality persists nowadays also as a structural and mental category, a tool for empowering the ruling social classes while disempowering the minoritized subjects (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

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Research has shown how public education has been crucial in nation-state building, and in the acculturation and assimilation of ethnically diverse citizens in different countries (Dekker et al., 2003; Green, 1997). The politics of cultural imperialism caused by the creation of one official national culture has contributed to the obfuscation and destruction of diverse cognitive experiences. Mignolo (2018) emphasizes the importance of knowledge over economics, politics, or history, affirming, ‘Ontologies are cosmologic/epistemic creations’ (p. 135), and their absence from a knowledge system is the denial of the very existence of these realities. For these reasons, indigenous struggles for the principle of interculturality have to be understood within the frame of the political ontology of beings (Stengers, 2018). Within this ontological perspective, Castro-Sotomayor (2020) recognizes the fundamental ecological dimension shaping specific identities, which for Indigenous peoples, can survive in conditions of environmental conservation, with human and more-than-human attachments preserved in intercultural encounters.

Therefore, it is essential to draw attention to life in the territories, community struggles, and political projects aimed at keeping alive the ancestral ecological and cultural knowledge that is fundamental for indigenous community survival, cultural heritage, natural conservation, livelihoods, and territoriality.

Our paper aims to contribute to a growing discussion on indigenous knowledge and educational challenges in Ecuador (Arias-Gutiérrez & Minoia, 2023; Machoa et al., 2021; Semali et al., 1999; Valarezo, 2019). The geographical focus of our study is the Pastaza province in the Amazonian region. Pastaza hosts a rich biological and cultural diversity and shelters seven recognized nationalities in Ecuador: Achuar, Andwa, Kichwa, Sapara, Shiwar, Shuar, and Waorani. Like in other territories of Amazonia, they are under strong pressure for cultural assimilation, migration, loss of land, and continuous attacks from extractive industries (Leifsen, 2020; Sempértegui, 2021; Uzendoski, 2018; Valladares & Boelens, 2019; Vallejo, 2014). Their political agency has acquired relevance since the formation of the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana* (CONFENIAE), in 1980, followed, in 1986, by the foundation of the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE) that became a main institutional player recognized in the new state constitution (Becker, 2011). These organizations’ central aims are the recognition of indigenous rights and the territorial self-determination of native peoples in their ancestral land.

Observing intercultural policies in the Amazonian region of Ecuador and how knowledge transmission takes place, including the visible elements in public spaces and schools, goes beyond a mere case study and points to alternative possibilities for a socio-ecological transformation beyond the prevailing notion of formal education. Indeed, educational plans proposed by indigenous organizations aim to engage the youths to become conscious of ecological, cultural, and political instances in their own community spaces, especially as they are under pressure from extractivism.

In our analytical journey, we will first justify the importance of education for the construction of national identities in plurinational states and illustrate the problems of political negotiation between the Ecuadorian state and indigenous organizations about intercultural education. Subsequently, we will enter the conceptual fields of education for ecological knowledge and care, from the point of view of the Kichwa cosmology, and will observe community practices that are revived by schools. We will mainly focus on the *Kawsak Sacha* (living forest) concept that has inspired a political programme that started from the Kichwa community of Sarayaku and was then adopted by the whole Kichwa nationality of Pastaza. This programme, spread into other communities, is a planning initiative that engages everyone in the survival of the forests, involving schools, and also non-indigenous students and teachers in pluriversal education and fostering

socioenvironmental justice: *'framing knowledge as a social activity (that) entails learning to perceive and receive Indigenous epistemologies as part of the geopolitical present'* (Sundberg, 2014, p. 40).

### Education for epistemic territories

The theme of education and power in Abya Yala (the pre-Columbian name of America) has been addressed within the decolonial thinking of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2007). Knowledge and pedagogical designs are at the core of identitarian politics for Indigenous peoples, as a means for the preservation of their emplaced cultures and livelihoods. The right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions in their languages is also recognized by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP: UN General Assembly, 2007). Emancipatory struggles from minoritized communities often include negotiations on education policy rooted in the principle of interculturality (Ortiz-T., 2019). Legitimation of local indigenous knowledge in education could contribute to reversing the legacy of coloniality of knowledge that has caused the historical marginalization of indigenous epistemologies by Eurocentric rationality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pp. 141–145). Deep incorporation of knowledge into intercultural education programmes can contribute to the construction of epistemological pluralism and thus, challenge violent mono-epistemological practices of Eurocentric rationality that drive unsustainable exploitation of nature (Baker, 2012).

As anticipated above, the colonial legacy of Ecuador marks, still nowadays, the political relations between the central government and Indigenous nationalities and ethnic groups. Their contentiousness with the capitalist world involves the recognition of interculturality and linguistic diversity as means for self-reliance and self-determination and the realization of the plurinational state as per the 2008 constitution. The respect for the principles of interculturality regards an ecology of encounters of diverse cosmologies in politics and education. It involves a recognition of the subjectivity of animals, plants, and earth beings as well as humans, inspired by the cosmology of *sumak kawsay* (*buen vivir*) considering people as part of the *Pachamama*, thus requiring a respectful relation with nature (Viteri-Gualinga, 2003). It also involves geography of territories as spaces of communal meaning and semiotics hosting diverse assemblages recognizable through ancestrally transmitted names and reiterated practices (Heikkilä & Fondahl, 2012).

Indigenous territories do not have to be thought of as static or primitive as they are continuously reproduced and embed some of the elements of cultures they are in contact with. In those parts of the Amazonian forest where the entanglement of human and non-human beings is preserved, emplacement is a territorial form that requires symbolic and political control (Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). Territories are conceived as emplaced historical and cultural articulations between relationships and principles that configure and shelter the cosmopolitics of those who dwell in them. In Amazonian territories, community practices are validated and eco-cultural ancestral knowledge of the Indigenous people (*Sacha Runa Yachay*) are reproduced and revitalized in unity with the earth (*Sumak Allpa*) (Viteri & Lamiña, 2020). Therefore, the pedagogical connection with non-human and more-than-human beings and with territories through various subjects in schools and indigenous languages can help reduce the epistemic distance between schooling and students from rural and indigenous communities (Smith, 2012). To be deeply and radically intercultural, education should reflect embodied, sensory, spiritual, and/or emotional understandings that constitute the formation of diverse ecocultural identities and pluriversal cosmologies. Youth experiences in their land are fundamental for the formation of political subjectivities and positionalities to confront issues of environmental disasters and territorial uprooting (Wildcat

et al., 2014). Therefore, land-based education is a fundamental practice of interculturality, requiring local autonomy in the design of curricular activities and special attention to environmental stewardship. This makes the matter of localization also pedagogically relevant. Moreover, territories are claimed as political spaces linking communities and their representative organizations in struggles for territorial justice (Minoia & Tapia, 2023). Including a focus on territories and distinctive territorialities in education models supports a discussion on inclusion, recognition, and updating of the eco-cultural knowledge of diverse populations living in the same country, and enforces their political legitimacy and land sovereignty.

This argumentation makes land-based education fundamentally political, as it supports the acquisition of indigenous territorial rights, democratic representation, and social and environmental justice. Education contextualized on issues of indigenous territories, political legitimacy, and land sovereignty is thus, a framework that can support the coexistence of pluriversal knowledge and reviving livelihoods and cosmologies.

Confrontation between the indigenous organizations and the central state on the very right to education encompasses both pedagogical and infrastructural aspects. While community schools were named by President Correa *escuelas de la pobreza* (schools of poverty), from an indigenous perspective, on the contrary, they should be strengthened and would require pedagogical research to revitalize marginalized knowledges and facilitate learning in multicultural environments. In terms of infrastructures, also at the core of political debates during the past decade, decisions made by the Ecuadorian state about the location and spatial distribution of schools have resulted in the closure of thousands of culturally embedded community schools that were closely connected to families. Instead, there has been a significant investment in centralized models known as *escuelas del milenio* (millennium schools). These large-scale educational units, serving wide areas, require commuting and often cause the de-rooting of youths, and even whole families, from their ancestral lands (Hohenthal & Minoia, 2022). Even in the case of strong political support and cooperation between state and indigenous instructors, the co-production of knowledge programmes involving representatives of diverse epistemologies may work on incoherent terrains. Knowledge in intercultural domains involves different ontologies from heterogeneous assemblages (Blaser, 2014), although these differences are not always understood or made explicit. While education is seen by the central state as a model for the whole country, reproducing knowledge as a rational category that is self-sustained outside living experiences, indigenous knowledge is a relational practice linking schools to communities, connecting knowledge to nature, cultures, ecologies, and territorial organization (Tom et al., 2019).

An overview of intercultural education in Ecuador, as a field of political negotiation, may enlighten some of the challenges caused by the incoherent trajectories of state politics in the field of social, cultural, and environmental justice, despite its claims. On the other side, the indigenous organizations have suffered from a standardized institutional negotiation, made of laws, regulations, public budgets, bureaucratic processes, etc., and from various historical changes of government strategies.

### Political negotiations for an ecology of knowledge

Since Ecuadorian independence, formal education was imposed to its diverse population as a uniform system and in *castellano*; other languages and all types of cultural expressions were forbidden for a long time. Diversity was seen as a distortion from normality to be reduced into a homogenous national whole. Numerous accounts on education in rural areas of Ecuador narrate how state

nationalism on the basis of a white-*mestizo* identity caused the marginalization of non-mestizo students, shame, and denial of indigenous origin, breakdown with their families, rural-urban migrations and, finally, the very extinction of many indigenous cultures (Camacho & Hernandez, 2007; Gómez Rendón, 2008; Kreiner & Chavez, 2021; Macas, 2005).

State uniform education accompanied a social and demographic change in the rural and indigenous areas. During the past 50 years, a rapid process of territorial detachment of peoples traditionally living in native areas has been visible especially since the state offered new land in Amazonian territories to landless farmers from the Coast and the Andes (Bilsborrow et al., 2004). At the same time, exploration of oil and mining by foreign companies spread causing eviction of indigenous populations from their ancestral territories. These forced migration flows and the derived socio-territorial changes caused community desegregation and a loss of ancestral ties with the land, either in terms of livelihoods or of cultural and ecological knowledge.

Education, as a tool for epistemic reconstitution, has been an issue high up on the agenda of the indigenous movement since the first bilingual school was founded in the 1940s by Dolores Cacuango, an indigenous activist based in Cayambe. Other localized projects of community schools were established in other territories in Kichwa and Shuar languages (e.g. the Alternative Project of Bilingual Education of CONFENIAE) (Rodríguez Cruz, 2018). In 1984, the State approved that in schools of areas of predominantly Indigenous populations, the respective languages should be used as the main language of instruction, alongside *castellano*, the language of intercultural communication. In 1989, the Ministry of Education recognized CONAIE as the organization responsible for the institutionalization of the *Dirección Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* (DINEIB) (MOSEIB, 2013), and in 1993 – after a long participatory process that involved representations of the 15 nationalities and 18 Indigenous peoples of Ecuador – the curricular model del *Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* (MOSEIB) became official.

The new *ecología de saberes* (knowledge ecology) introduced in the reformed curricula aimed at integrating all subjects with ancestral knowledge and cosmovisions. Crucial is also the principle of a close relationship between schools and communities, families, and nature through practical units of teaching/learning on the land, aimed to enforce the ‘lands-beings-knowledges’ (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). MOSEIB expressed as the learning objectives in philosophy and life sciences, the necessity to enforce the links between communities and lands and maintaining ancestral forests and livelihoods (Ministerio de Educación, 2017). As argued by Luis Macas (2005), Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) was conceived as a political necessity for the epistemic reconstruction of ancestral knowledge that had been for long unrecognized and hidden by the politics of indigenous subalternity and decomposition promoted by both colonial and Ecuadorian states (p. 36). IBE could make it possible to practice social inclusion, ontological recognition, and revitalization of ecological and cultural knowledge of Indigenous people and nations in formal education.

The CONAIE-led national plan guided the promotion of IBE during the following two decades (Conejo Arellano, 2008; Rodríguez Cruz, 2018). Unfortunately, the movement did not involve other non-native cultures in this project, especially the Afro-Ecuadorians, who, despite their wide presence in different areas of the country, have remained unrepresented in the educational offer.

At the same time, the territorial struggles continued under the coordination of the indigenous organizations and the further politicization of the indigenous movement. In 1992, the historical rally *Allpamanda Kawsaymanda Jatarishun* (‘For the earth and for life let’s stand up’) started at Union Base (Puyo) and was organized by the *Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza* (OPIP) and involving 2,000 kichwas, achuar, and shiwiar, among other nationalities of the Pastaza

province. Their claims included the legalization of the territories and defence of life, involving the safeguarding of the living forests against oil, mining, and rubber extractivism that was bringing death to the ecological system of the forest. The march was successful and brought to the government's decision to grant more than one million hectares of land to the Indigenous groups of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Whitten et al., 1997).

However, despite this law recognition, Indigenous peoples of the Amazonia remained involved in continuous confrontations with state and private companies interested in natural resource extractivism and violating their territories via legal trickery and violent occupation. The Correa's government, named *revolución ciudadana* (citizens' revolution), caused tremendous disruption of the cultural and territorial sovereignty of the Indigenous people (Wilson & Bayon, 2017). What was superficially interpreted, especially internationally, as an innovative indigenous-state-collaboration under the *buen vivir* slogan, was, in reality, a decade in which the extractivist-modernization project was accelerated (Lalander & Merimaa, 2018) together with a discursively veiled but *de-facto* strong, opposition to the IBE schooling (Martínez Novo, 2018). This shows that, after an initial collaborative approach of the state towards CONAIE and indigenous intellectuals, the Ecuadorian state has rather promoted what Catherine Walsh (2005) recognizes as *functional*, superficial interculturalism: a form of western multi-culturalism or manipulation of cultures. In fact, IBE programmes are organized around a central curriculum in Spanish, alongside one native language – kichwa unificado or shuar – and minor additional subjects (Fabritius et al., 2016). Their applications have been challenged by structural limitations, starting with the involvement of teachers lacking indigenous language and cultural skills, and underfunding of IBE schools (Martínez Novo, 2018), until the current COVID-19 crisis (Veintie et al., 2022).

In 2011, via the Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural (LOEI), Correa's government closed the experience of IBE and removed CONAIE from any institutional responsibility for education. The reformed programme on intercultural education closed many community schools and opened new large-scale *Millennium* schools that embodied the state modernization project (Valladares & Boelens, 2019). At the higher education level, it closed the Indigenous University Amawtay Wasi (UIAW) (Martín-Díaz, 2017) and other IBE programmes in public universities and technical institutes forming IBE teachers; on the other hand, it opened four new universities framed in what Valladares and Boelens (2019, p. 17) define as 'disciplinary governmentality', incorporating ideas of technical excellence and delegitimizing alternative forms of knowledge. These changes were part of a national development plan called 'Plan Nacional del Buen vivir 2013–2017' issued by the *Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo* (Senplades, 2013).

After the fall of Correa's government, the new president Lenin Moreno also used education as a political strategy. Moved by the need to get a strategic alliance with the indigenous movements, and because of financial restrictions, he stopped investing in modernizing education and, with the Latacunga decree of 2018, relaunched the IBE system in cooperation with CONAIE (Vargas, 2018). Also, during the national uprisings of October 2019, the confrontation has included, among other stakes, the request to enforce the wider distribution of community schools, against the centralized model of the government that has caused the migration of families and de-rooting of youths from their ancestral land (Iza et al., 2023). Education was also at the core of the following national uprising of June 2022, which ended with an agreement between the government of Guillermo Lasso and CONAIE that included an increase in funding for the IBE.

Demands for intercultural education extend beyond primary or secondary schooling and encompass scientific research as a response to the imperative of preserving marginalized knowledge. They have achieved the reopening of the UIAW, in 2022, through a decentralized model

of teaching although so far the course programmes have been offered in Quito and online. At the same time, efforts to interculturalize the curricula in public universities are still weak, even in institutions based in indigenous territories. Debates are currently held, for instance, at the Universidad Estatal Amazónica, the major public institution of higher education based in the Amazonian region (Arias-Gutiérrez & Minoia, 2023). Among other difficulties, including the pandemic period that has affected the overall state of education in the region, the problem of lacking highly educated Indigenous peoples from Amazonia makes their voices unheard in Academia.

On the contrary, at the lower educational levels, the influence of indigenous organizations is stronger. Especially in areas at the margins of the state modernization project, it is possible to recognize other ontological and epistemic worlds offering ways to enact pluriversal tenets. Therefore, a closer focus on local initiatives reveals other forms of agency that exist beyond the state intervention.

In Pastaza and other provinces, community projects have indeed created alternative plans of territorial governance and pedagogical programmes, which are locally grounded and inspired by their indigenous cosmology and livelihoods, territorial belonging, and practices of communitarian and environmental care (Hohenthal & Veintie, 2022). In this paper, after the presentation of the research methodology, we will present local experiences that allow pluriversal ecological knowledge and indigenous cultures to be maintained and nurtured. The focus is on *kichwa* territories of the Pastaza province, and the proposal of *kawsak sacha* (living forests) enacted within the cracks of the structural failures of the state intercultural curricula.

### Researching *kawsak sacha*

The political contextualization of the previous section was necessary to set the background in which we have worked to document alternative education-related practices of Kichwa people to express their cosmopolitics (Escobar, 2020). Our study was based on a broader research project connecting two universities: one located in Europe and the other in the Amazonia region of Ecuador, and involved the Ecuadorian indigenous organization CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon). The overall goal of the research was the preservation of ancestral cultures within the educational system and the creation of supporting actions for indigenous students in accessing education. The action responded to situations of structural marginalization caused by poor socio-economic conditions, geographical remoteness, and discrimination against indigenous languages, cultures, and ways of life – conditions that other academic programmes often overlook.

Fieldwork was conducted as an action research, employing indigenous decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012): for instance, connecting with life experiences of marginalized groups to represent their views, respecting ceremonies and oral stories as spaces of knowledge revival and transmission, engaging in discussions to interpret observed events, directing the research process according to the directions indicated by indigenous researchers as relevant, and sharing findings in community assemblies.

The research has engaged the authors in various capacities, depending on their positions. The author from the indigenous community was involved in the research topics as an active member of the indigenous organization CONFENIAE. The other authors conducted their fieldwork during specific periods of presence in Pastaza from 2015 to 2020, until the outbreak of COVID-19 and then through conversations online. Moreover, the analysis will include reflections shared by other members of the larger research team. Observations and discussions revolved around how activities



proposed in schools reflected the worldviews of Indigenous peoples in the communities and, more particularly, with the cosmopolitics of the *kawsak sacha* (living forest). We realized that the *kawsak sacha* concept had become central in our study as it defines both a worldview and an existential struggle that the Kichwa people of Sarayaku have formalized in the Kawsak Sacha declaration (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, 2018b). Kawsak Sacha has also inspired the *planes de vida* (Life Plans) of the whole Kichwa nationality of Pastaza, i.e. planning documents for their territories based on their cultural and ecological values, officially adopted in 2022.

The different positionalities served to stimulate reflections on the significance of this research and the potential for a decolonial collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. Often, the foreign researchers needed explanations from local colleagues on things they could not grasp fully, because of the *incommensurability* of their lived experiences as Marisol de la Cadena (2015) has well explained it. A concern they expressed was about the nature of their role, and the kind of contribution this collaboration could offer, if it was proposing reports on facts already well-known and extensively discussed by Indigenous populations. The answer from the Ecuadorian author was:

It is by no means repetitive since there has been little argumentation on this topic. Even in the plans for Kawsak Sacha of the Kichwa Nation, I feel that there is a need to add substantive arguments (...) The relationship between forestry, politics, and education is an argumentative thread that has not been explored, especially through scientific publications. Therefore, I believe our contribution is to introduce this point of discussion in scientific publications, building upon what has previously been generated, even if it has been in the common debates within the Indigenous organizations.

To understand the *kawsak sacha* as the content of the political agenda for territorial governance and environmental conservation, and to revamp knowledge, we decided to use conceptualizations presented in formal declarations by people of Sarayaku and governmental planning agencies, through interpretations and commentaries we exchanged with Indigenous people and members of indigenous organizations based in the Pastaza province. The production of multiple documents is a sign of the strong political agency of the Indigenous people. This agency had already been manifested through a case of violation of their rights to consultation, their communal properties, and cultural identities by the Ecuadorian state, before granting rights for extractivism in their territories – a case that reached successfully the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Corteidh, 2012).

Their voice has been heard beyond the limits of their territories: at the national level, their worldview has been manifested in political debates and negotiations with the state institutions. For instance, Life Plans are recognized also institutionally by the National Development Plan 2017–2021 which includes them as tools to ‘affirm interculturality and plurinationality, revaluing diverse identities’ (Senplades, 2017, pp. 60–61). Their conceptualization of living forests has also inspired a wider international cooperation among more than 30 Indigenous people and nationalities for the protection of the bioregional Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazonia (Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative, 2021). Their struggles against extractivism have inspired other Indigenous peoples and multiple activist organizations (Minoia & Mõlkänen, 2021).

A characteristic of the political relationship between Indigenous populations and the state is the attempt to formalize aspects of indigenous life and philosophies within development plans. Pluriversal worlds seek not only to understand each other but also to integrate, to advance interculturality and plurinationalism in Ecuador. These attempts, however, also increase the constant risk of bureaucratization of the indigenous struggles and appropriation of indigenous terms in the politics of the state, diminishing the potential for radical change in the country. Therefore, we share the

worries expressed by the Indigenous people we consulted, for which the state's equivocations on Indigenous concepts may reproduce a coloniality of knowledge and being. Using the terms of Yates and Núñez Núñez (2021), equivocations represent 're-translations being enacted from the borders of coloniality – translations that are worked through Andean concepts to destabilize hierarchies of power, knowledge, and language' (p. 578).

In the next section, we will present documentary conceptualizations and educational activities that are inspired by the *kawsak sachá* worldview, showing the connections between the *kawsak sachá* cosmology, its supporting politics (*cosmopolitics*), and educational practices it inspires in Kichwa communities (*cosmoeducation*).

### **Cosmopolitics of *kawsak sachá***

Oil block 74 and 75 – The wisdom of the jungle vs mechanical technology

We are naturally farmers, collectors, hunters, medicinal plants, ayawaska, stories and ancient memories. We are walkers of pampas and mountains in the heart of the jungle to the sound of a million melodies that never tire of happiness.

Men, women who walk in the dark without fatigue and regrets, sliding gently along the murmur of the waves and backwaters of the River Bobonaza y Rotunous.

The dough, girl of yuca finely elaborated by women feeds us with energy blessing the strength.

The jungle, our house equipped with shigua panga (palm) leaf mattresses together with the gentle warmth of a wood fire transmits the message of spiritual prosperity.

We are the jungle itself of the isango and tilimango ticks that penetrate and shake our skin to the sound of nocturnal butterflies and white blanket mosquitoes, we are leaders, politicians, professionals and intellectuals, we are true revolutionaries

We are hundreds and millions of eyes that carefully monitor the treasure of its habitat to protect every millimeter from predators and enemies of mother nature.

We are Sacha Runas by DNA in defense of our Home la Selva Viva. Strangers do not know and will not defeat us.

(Angun G)

Sarayaku Selva Viva, oil free (<https://sarayaku.org/en/la-sabiduria-de-la-selva/>)

*Kawsak Sachá* directly translates to 'living forest', which emphasizes how the Sarayaku and the Kichwa territories consist of multiple living beings that relate to each other as ecological communities. It is a living and conscious being, a subject of rights, and the primordial source of *Sumak Kawsay* (*buen vivir*) and, as such, provides a living space for its diverse populations and revitalizes their emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, 2018a). For the Kichwa People of Sarayaku, *Kawsak Sachá* is the sacred reserve that must be preserved for living together beyond human exceptionalism (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, 2018a). It is a space dedicated to the reproduction of species, reflecting a collective consciousness that recognizes its dependence on animals and takes care of them and where the spirits, grandmothers, and grandfathers who inhabit the territory are safeguarded. The inhabitants of the forest, *Sacha Runakuna*, are living beings both visible and non-visible that dwell in different forest places ranging from swamps to waterfalls and inhabit the territory. Hence, *Kawsak Sachá* crosses the boundary between natural and social worlds as it extends the social assemblage to the other-than-humans and includes people as part of the ecological web of the forest. To establish contact with the spirits of nature, the *Kichwa* people have developed various levels of ritual practices also for daily practices, such as hunting, fishing, farming, healing, etc. (Calapucha & Tanguila, 2012).

The connection occurs through protective beings who safeguard the fundamental components of nature. The living forest worldview drives the life and environmental struggles of peoples and

nationalities in their ancestral territories. The *kawsak sachá* proposal presented in the declaration of the Sarayaku people expresses this protective role declaring itself as a radical response against the ecocide especially caused by the extractivism of oil and mining, understood as ‘systematic extermination of an ensemble of living interrelated selves’ (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, 2018a, p. 3). In later years, this proposal was taken up by all the Kichwa nationality of Pastaza, organized by the Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza – OPIP, then renamed as PAKKIRU (Pastaza Kikin Kichwa Runakuna) and launched through a massive event in San José de Wapuno, Arajuno Canton, in 2022, with the active participation of hundreds of delegates from more than 200 Kichwa communities and other Indigenous peoples of the Pastaza province.

The Community Life Plan allows for the exercise of self-determination. It is a tool to ensure that petroleum remains underground and does not disrupt the various forms of life that inhabit the forest. The Indigenous peoples’ call for ‘leaving the oil underground’ which is coherent with the idea of the unity of planet Earth, challenges the subdivision imposed by the state, which recognizes the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples only on the surface of their territories while keeping underground resources under its jurisdiction. This rule has granted the state the freedom to prospect and extract underground resources, even against the will of the people living on those lands. Against the necrotic interventions of extractivism, which destroys the Amazonian cultural and ecological diversity, the life plans express political visions originating from the indigenous thinking, which seeks to ensure the recognition of their collective cultural, social, environmental, and territorial rights (Secretaría Técnica de la Circunscripción Territorial Especial Amazónica, 2021).

The life plan outlines three fundamental elements for well-being in the Kichwa cosmology that are distinct from economic development goals while providing a framework for building a sustainable model of subsistence. These values are *sumak allpa* (Fertile Land), *runakuna kawsay* (Living in Community), and *sacha runa yachay* (Forest Wisdom). While the knowledge and worldview of Kawsak Sacha are present and practised by the Kichwa people, their systematization and theorization began with the conceptualizations of Sumak Kawsay introduced in publication outlets by Carlos Viteri-Gualinga in 2003. This concept was further developed through various scientific works, with one notable contribution being made by the Instituto Quichua de Biotecnología Sacha Supai (IQBSS), which systematized and theorized Kichwa knowledge and worldview (Vacacela, 2007).

Fertile Land or *sumak allpa* emphasizes the maintenance of healthy territory that signifies the ecosystem without contamination, where the whole territory is managed sustainably and the areas considered sacred are respected and conserved. Living in a community or *runakuna kawsay* refers to maintaining a prosperous communal life that includes the collective well-being of families physically, as well as politically, culturally, and spiritually. This principle indicates effective institutions of governing that respect equality, collective decision-making, and sustainable production practices. The recognition of life plans at the national government level goes beyond acknowledging their cultural and community organizational components as they make the cosmopolitics explicit.

The third principle of Forest Wisdom or *sacha runa yachay* directly translates as the knowledge of the humans living in the forest, and deals with knowledge and technologies such as ancestral forms of medicinal, spiritual, and productive knowledge. The *kawsak sachá* programme also proclaims the possibility of reversing the historical trajectory that has led to the disappearance of ancestral practices that used to be important for the Kichwa and all the other Indigenous peoples of the Amazonian region. Thus, it also inspires research and educational activities in the communities, to revitalize knowledge supporting the indigenous life systems.

### Cosmoeducation of *kawsak sacha*

On the way to the chakra, around the campfire, during a brief break from work, or in the early mornings while drinking guayusa, the grandparents tell us stories. They impart their wisdom, which seeps through our senses and activates our genes. There is also another form of teaching, that of the school, which often conflicts with everyday teachings. The school still serves as a place where minds are asked to conform, and where teachers provide information that does not relate with our lives. (From the research notes of a team member; our own translation)

These perceptions from the field express the shortcomings of the curricular reform of intercultural education that had asked to integrate formal subjects with ancestral knowledge and worldviews. The same researcher also emphasized the validity of pluriversal knowledge on natural elements, as documented by Calapucha and Tanguila (2012), indigenous researchers who delved into Amazonian cosmologies and provided diverse conceptualizations of terms like ‘forest’, ‘land’, and ‘water’ (Table 1).

‘Sacha, allpa, yaku.’ These are terms that, from the Kichwa worldview, convey the warmth of life, the sense of belonging, the inseparable connection with nature, and the correlation between actions and words. (From the research notes of a team member; our own translation)

The pluriversal knowledge of nature offers additional lenses that intensify the connection between learners and the subject they study. These are lenses of multi-dimensional understanding, encompassing social relations, spirituality, and agency to protect from environmental damages and territorial losses. Understanding *kawsak sacha* requires indigenous methodologies for research and teaching that would better represent the diversity of knowledge, respecting the sacredness of places and deep relationships among human settlements, forests, and the underground world.

Kichwa communities have also proposed a *yachay nampi*, i.e. a path of land-based education involving training for the preparation of didactic guides and pedagogical materials based on the

**Table 1.** Constituent elements of nature (Calapucha & Tanguila, 2012, p. 237) (our own translation).

Kichwa Amazonian worldview: definition and possessing spirits	Scientific explanation
<p><b>Sacha:</b> A space where animals, plants, and local spirits inhabit.</p> <p>- <i>Amazanka:</i> The masculine energy and the most powerful beings in the jungle. The lord of all animals and can manifest through any animal or as a person. Kichwa mythology tells us that Amazanka oversees whether humans respect animals, ensuring that they do not kill excessively and do not mock the hunted animals.</p>	<p>Selva: A vast, uncultivated area densely populated with trees. It represents a disorderly abundance of something.</p> <p>Bosque: A predominantly woody plant community that covers a large expanse of land. In its natural state, the forest maintains self-regulated conditions over an extended period.</p>
<p><b>Allpa.</b> The space where agricultural activities are carried out.</p> <p>- <i>Nungulli:</i> The feminine energy that governs the land, fertility, and production.</p>	<p>Tierra: Surface of the Earth not occupied by the sea. Land dedicated to cultivation or suitable for it.</p>
<p><b>Yaku.</b> Space where fish, anacondas, and yaku warmis reside.</p> <p>- <i>Tsumi</i> is the master of the hydrosphere, controlling the power of rivers and rains, dressing in the colours of the rainbow. Its material representation is the anaconda. The rainbow is just one manifestation of Tsumi.</p>	<p>Agua: Common name applied to the liquid state of the hydrogen and oxygen compound H<sub>2</sub>O. Ancient philosophers considered water as a fundamental element representing all liquid substances.</p> <p>Hydrosphere. Set of liquid parts of the Earth’s globe.</p>

Kawsak Sacha, along with Sumak Allpa, Sacha Runa Yachay, and Kawsak Sacha, into the intercultural bilingual curriculum.

The problem, as already noticed by other scholars who have researched on intercultural education, is the lack of communication between the functioning system of schools and universities and the indigenous world in which they are located (e.g. Arias-Gutiérrez & Minoia, 2023; Rodriguez Cruz, 2018; Veintie et al., 2022). If Kawsak Sacha is ‘*the place for the transmission of knowledge from the Yachak [shamans], where they delve into the world of wisdom of the lords of the living places and the sublime worldview for methodical learning*’, and ‘*a being with whom the Yachakkuna (Shamans) communicate to receive knowledge and transmit it, with the support of otherwise individuals*’ (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, 2018a), then *yachak/yachakkuna* should be recognized as valid transmitters of knowledge, also in school premises. Unfortunately, this happens only rarely and outside the formal educational planning as we also verified in our conversations with school teachers and families. The exclusion of *Yachak* from the teaching staff due to their lack of recognized educational degrees, which would qualify them for faculty positions, results in an educational gap, given the local teachers’ limited proficiency in local languages and traditional cultures, philosophies, ecologies, and livelihood skills. In some community schools, local experts, elders, and shamans are still involved in sharing myths, dream interpretation, and traditional practices, and teaching practical skills such as identifying and caring for medicinal plants, woodwork, and fishing. However, in most cases, the intercultural programme is assigned to non-indigenous teachers and is reduced to organizing folklore festivals.

In fact, as researchers, we observed the presence of alternative methods of active teaching and learning occurring beyond the confines of traditional classrooms and formal curriculum planning. For instance, students are asked to be active members of their communities, participating in community assemblies, local festivals, and other cultural events. Schools also organize very important activities to enforce collaboration with students’ families and communities. Examples of those events are *mingas*, *guayusas*, and *uyanzas*.

*Mingas* are practical units of teaching and learning through community work, events that epitomize the ancestral form of the Kichwa collective action and solidarity, as well as the conservation of the living forest. All families are invited to help, and they are offered food and drinks in return.

More and more, schools and university students organize *guayusa* ceremonies in the early morning (3–4am). Leaves of *Ilex guayusa*, a tree from the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, are used to prepare an infusion that is consumed with a ritual that involves conversation, sharing dreams, planning daily activities, and purifying and energizing oneself. The practice of *guayusa* in schools or university study groups creates a close-knit environment for learning and the transmission of knowledge across generations. It activates collective memory about stories, legends, and ancestral histories. In some cases, it includes readings, recitations of poetry, and singing. This practice directly addresses the theme of identity, which goes beyond reproducing something exotic or exaggerating cultural diversities; it is a reconnection with a sense of belonging and rootedness.

*Uyanzas* (also known as *jista* in some communities) are traditional celebrations that provide students with practical experiences to learn indigenous knowledge or Sacha Runa Yachay. Extensive preparations for the celebration include travels to the forest for hunting and fishing and students participate in the travels to learn from community members. Walking and relationship to places significantly contribute to knowledge-making processes, which suggests that travelling in the forest can be an excellent pedagogical practice that helps students learn about their environment and its ecosystem. The travels can last up to 15 days primarily focusing on fishing. Moreover, students partake in hunting parties with other community members, which usually demands spending up to

three days in the forest. Participation in the preparations helps students to learn different kinds of skills related to ancestral knowledge such as those needed for forest travel, hunting, and fishing. For example, as the boys participate in hunting, they learn the skill set demanded to perform this traditional practice including how to make a basket, how to remove the skin of the animal, where to go for the hunt and at what time. Other examples of activities related to the celebration include the preparation of *chicha*, a fermented drink, traditional body painting, and the making of ceramics. In the end, schools gather the groups for short reflections with students on what they had learned, where, and when. *Uyanza* is then a powerful activity offering a pluriversal learning experience. Walking among peers, learning from the more-than-human world, and engaging with cultural artefacts, such as pottery and baskets imbued with history, symbolism and knowledge, are all actions that contribute to the process of building students' eco-cultural relationality.

Many other activities are taking place as well, also involving innovative tools. For instance, youths involved in higher education programmes in community communication studies collaborate for the production of podcasts and other multimedia content curated by *Lancers Digitales* (<https://lancers.confeniae.net>) and broadcasted through the radio *La Voz de la CONFENIAE* (<https://voz.confeniae.net>), launched in September 2021. Podcasts remain accessible online and contain indigenous songs, stories, myths, political debates on different issues, and calls for action and mobilization.

These activities illustrate the crucial role that schools play in transmitting pluriversal knowledge, which might otherwise rely solely on indigenous families, often facing precarious and mobile conditions outside the community. The preservation and nurturing of pluriversal ecological knowledge and indigenous cultures require collective efforts to counter processes of epistemic erasure. Since schools cater to students from diverse backgrounds, interculturality should encompass multiple cosmologies and foster interactions between people of various origins, beginning with land-based experiences and promoting the engagement of young individuals.

## Conclusion

This article has presented the experience of the Kichwa peoples of Pastaza in Ecuador and their agency in enforcing their rights to their ancestral cultures and lands. This study aimed to understand the significance of the enduring political-institutional struggles that have engaged Indigenous communities for decades through various educational initiatives designed to transmit ancestral knowledge. Radical intercultural education goes beyond mere formalities and aligns with the array of ecocultural identities, particularly within the Kichwa people. Our contribution lies in the examination of the relationships between indigenous cosmology concerning the living forest, indigenous political activism to safeguard their territories from extractivism, and intercultural education that fosters pluriversal knowledge and ways of life. We draw from ongoing dialogues within Amazonian indigenous organizations to illuminate these interconnected aspects.

The theme of education and power in Ecuador has been addressed within the decolonial thinking of modernity/coloniality introduced by Quijano, placing education/knowledge, and pedagogical designs at the core of political debates between indigenous organizations and the central state. Despite efforts to develop intercultural education programmes in Ecuador, to contrast the epistemic and linguistic rights of the country's diverse peoples, many contradictions have emerged, due to a lack of integration of the curricula with the land and territoriality principles, or with real incorporation of indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions. Our study focused mainly on the cosmology of the *Kawsak Sacha* (living forest) and the exploration of

indigenous politics for territorial governance and education that are inspired by this worldview. We could observe activities implemented in communities through schools and higher education that have become substantial in the political struggle for the survival and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Educational actions are also political because their objective is the revitalization of their ecological and cultural knowledge as conditional to the protection of their territorial integrity.

The *kawsak sachá* worldview converges with what de la Cadena (2015) describes as *indigenous cosmopolitics*, i.e. indigenous movements challenging the limits of the political realm as they articulate and make public other-than-humans that inhabit their relational world and do not conform to the ontological separation of nature and society at the core of Western worldview. Territories are fundamental assemblages that configure and shelter the cosmopolitics of those who dwell in them. In Amazonian indigenous territories, community practices are validated, and the eco-cultural ancestral knowledge of the Indigenous people (Sacha Runa Yachay) are reproduced and revitalized in unity with the earth (Sumak Allpa). Moreover, Indigenous people claim territories as political spaces linking communities and their representative organizations in struggles for social, environmental, and epistemological justice. Including territoriality and land-based knowledge in the Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) model supports politics of inclusion, ontological recognition, and revitalization of ecological and cultural knowledge of Indigenous peoples in formal education. It also enforces their political legitimacy and sovereignty over their lands and stewardship practices.

Marin et al. argued the importance of focusing on how learning is 'a process of making nature-culture relations' (2020, p. 273). For instance, learning in the context of the activity of *uyanza* is an important part of Indigenous education, as it allows the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum as a place-, experimentally- and indigenous knowledge-based activity (Walter & Guerzoni, 2020). Strengthening indigenous knowledge-based learning into the intercultural programmes of schools is needed since the scarce study materials available nowadays depict Indigenous peoples through stereotypical imagery of tradition, which bypasses such elements as historical and contemporary indigenous intellectuals, political movements, and integration of innovative technologies for environmental conservation adapted by Indigenous communities to serve their needs and cosmovisions. We agree with Rodriguez Cruz (2018) who argues that the current way to represent Indigenous people in schooling is learning about Indigenous people rather than from Indigenous people, which results in the treatment of indigenous knowledge as folklore rather than as a living system of knowledge.

Although the *kawsak sachá* vision is rooted in local ancestral philosophies, cultural practices, and aspirations of the Kichwa community members, it also represents a principle of great inspiration for radical change towards socio-ecological and territorial justice in the country. Creating opportunities for the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical methods can contribute to a more pluriversal education for younger generations. This includes fostering spiritual and emotional connections and inspiring activism to protect the intellectual property associated with the land, which plays a crucial role in shaping the distinctive epistemological and ontological perspectives that Indigenous peoples hold regarding the environment, and nurturing their profound reverence for all forms of life.

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