

## Document Profile

**Title:** La selva, nuestra vida : Sabiduría ecológica del pueblo shuar

**Contributors:** Manuel Mashinkias Chinkias, Mariana Awak Tentets; Illustrations: Tonino Clemente;

**Interviews:** Alfredo Puenchir, María Chinkias, Juana Ipiak Wisúm, and others listed in the prologue.

**Publisher:** Bomboiza, Ecuador: Instituto Bilingüe Intercultural Shuar; [Quito, Ecuador]: Ediciones Abya Yala

**Date:** 1988 (2nd ed.)

**Digital copy:** [Available from CORE](#)

### Description and Contents Summary:

This ethnographic pamphlet contains two monographs that present the intimate relationship of the Shuar people of Ecuador to the Amazon rainforest. In the decades preceding the pamphlet's publication, colonization by agribusiness and prospectors transformed the Shuar way of life, affecting their agriculture, hunting, fishing, and even their social practices. This colonization upset the balanced relationship that the Shuar had developed with their land—a relationship built upon spiritually-founded ideas of conservation and respect.

The authors conducted both field and bibliographic research to complete this pamphlet. Manuel Mashinkias, the author of the first monograph, conducted interviews with Alfredo Puenchir and María Chinkias at the Shimpis Center, Association of Sucúa, in September 1984. In November of 1984, Mashinkias conducted more interviews with Shuar people in the Shuar language. Mashinkias begins with a biography of Alfredo Puenchir, thus acknowledging the interviewee's contribution to the research and providing an intimate entryway into Shuar culture. The author then describes the ecology of the rainforest in which the Shuar lived and catalogues the Shuar's traditional knowledge of the natural environment. The monograph concludes with a summary of how the life of the Shuar changed due to the penetration of global capitalism and the destruction of the rainforests.

Mariana Awak Tentets, the author of the second monograph, is a member of the Shuar. This section also begins with a biography of a Shuar woman (Juana Ipiak Wisúm). Awak Tentets then discusses the Shuar people's conception of the natural environment, their harmonious relationship with it, and the threat that colonizers seeking to more aggressively use the land pose to the traditional Shuar lifestyle. Working with the Bomboiza Association, Awak Tentets conducted research in 1983 to confirm that their family's experiences aligned with those of others in their village.

In their discussions of Shuar culture, the authors extensively incorporate Shuar words for rituals, deities, foods, and other practices and objects, which are defined only in the end-of-text glossaries (i.e. not in footnotes), thus providing authenticity to the accounts and demonstrating respect for the Shuar. Having the appearance of field sketches, a few line drawings that depict scenes of the Shuar people and the environment appear throughout the pamphlet. The drawings humanize the Shuar and underscore the importance of field work in the authors' research.

The intended audience seems to be the colonizers and the facilitators of colonization of the Amazon rainforest: the farmers and ranchers entering from northern Brazil, businesses seeking rainforest lands, and government officials making decisions about land usage. The authors want to stress that all of these actors should preserve the land and look toward the Shuar community as an example of responsible inhabitation.

### Significance:

Beginning in the 1960s, the construction of new highways facilitated a boom in deforestation of the Amazon rainforest that allowed settlers to establish new permanent residences (Rudel). Encouraged by colonization programs that countries including Ecuador, Brazil, and Bolivia implemented, farmers and ranchers quickly cleared the forests and exhausted the soil, and others exploited the region's timber and

minerals (Rudel). Mashinkias and Awak Tentets show how the lives of the Shuar changed because of this internal colonization and the resulting environmental destruction. Criticizing economic expansionism, the authors emphasize the fragility of the forest and its need for preservation. They assert that the infiltration of national and global capitalism disrupted the traditional land stewardship of the Shuar and endangered the Amazon ecosystem. The authors argue for sustainable use of the land by demonstrating how the Shuar had used it for centuries—working with nature rather than against it.

Furthermore, the authors argue that the harmonious relationship that the Shuar had with the rainforest gives them a deeper understanding of human existence and of spiritual purpose. The authors support allowing the Shuar agency over reserved areas of land so they could revive their traditional way of life and argue that the perspectives of the Shuar, which were frequently ignored or overlooked, should always be considered in any decision-making about Shuar lands. A central message of the pamphlet is that conserving the land is not only about preserving the environment but also the Shuar identity and way of life.

Viewpoints that are missing are those of agribusiness, small-scale farmers, mining companies, workers, government officials, and others who have encroached on the lands of the Shuar. Individual accounts from colonizers could reveal complexities in the environmental and social problems discussed in the pamphlet, which it fails to capture. In particular, if intensive monoculture and other forms of capitalistic exploitation are so destructive, why are people still motivated to contribute to or even orchestrate systems that perpetuate those harms? People who disagree with the authors' stance of self-determination for the Shuar might support the assimilation of the Shuar people into capitalism and mainstream Ecuadorian society or the radical turnover of power from colonizers to indigenous people and total breakdown of colonial and capitalist systems.

The authors appear optimistic that though much damage has already been done to Shuar culture and to the Amazon River Valley, colonizer peoples can still effectively save the rainforest from further destruction by learning from the Shuar. Thus, the pessimistic viewpoint that damage is irreversible is missing. The perspectives of other indigenous peoples in Ecuador and generally in the Amazon Rainforest are also important, as their experiences of and responses to colonization vary.

If placed beside other texts about indigenous peoples that were published in different time periods, this pamphlet can help elucidate the changes in the style of research on indigenous peoples and the attitudes of scholars. Since Awak Tentets is Shuar while Mashinkias is not indigenous, the pamphlet could also inform an investigation of ethnography performed by researchers inside and outside the community of interest.

**Page Count:** 129

**Dimensions:** N/A

**Geographical Subject:** Ecuador, Amazon River Valley

**Subject:** economic conditions, human ecology, life of the Shuar, rainforest/Andes, traditional uses of the environment

**Language:** Spanish (primary) - includes Shuar vocabulary

**Copies in WorldCat:** 44

**Copies of the second edition:** 4

**Number in the United States:** 31 (0 second editions)

#### **Work Cited**

Rudel, Thomas K. "Roads, Speculators, and Colonization in the Ecuadorian Amazon." *Human Ecology*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1983, pp. 385–403. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4602714](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4602714). Accessed 19 Apr. 2020.

*Document profile prepared by Sabrina Smith '23 and Margaret Zheng '23 as part of the course "Arts of Extraction: Latin American Representations of Ecological Injustice" taught by Bret Leraul, Visiting Assistant Professor and Writing Fellow (2019-20) with the assistance of Margaret Schaus, Lead Research and Instruction Librarian, and Charlie Espinosa '15, Archivist.*