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(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

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Sumak Kawsay is not Buen Vivir



By Javier Cuestas-Caza

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the paradigm of development-consumerism is responsible for the desolating panorama of social injustice and unrestrained exploitation of natural resources that leads to self-destruction of life on the planet (Huanacuni-Mamani, 2010). From the Global South, the voices that question in depth the philosophical and civilizational presuppositions of the Eurocentric developmental model are becoming stronger and more frequent. No one is surprised that these voices emanate from the population disillusioned by the promises of global culture (Álvarez, 2014;

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Estermann, 2013). From the Andes, a philosophical otherness arises, denominated "Andean Philosophy", which is a sapiential manifestation of an ancient tradition that questions the civilizational centrism of the Western (Estermann, 2015). The purpose of Andean's thought is reflected in the *Sumak Kawsay*.

At this point, it is important to recognize that the thought about *Sumak Kawsay* has evolved within epistemic communities, which are responsible for determining the validity of their postulates. Epistemic communities are networks of knowledge-based communities, for example: the scientific community, a group of professional specialists, or a school of thought. Their members share knowledge expertise, beliefs, or ways of looking at the world (in the sense of a Foucauldian episteme); due to their specialized knowledge, epistemic communities have sufficient legitimacy in the policy area within a particular field (Haas, 2016; Oxford Reference, 2018). It is also important to understand that epistemic communities are associated with changes in social patterns. Through their institutionalized influence, they persuade decision makers towards decisions and practices consistent with the ideas of the epistemic community in question (Haas, 2016).

The first epistemic community is known as *indigenous-culturalist* (Villalba-Eguiluz & Etxanoa, 2017). This epistemic community understands the *Sumak Kawsay* from a cultural frame of reference, as a philosophy of life based on ancestral indigenous knowledge and practices, where *ayllu* (family-community) coexists in harmony with the *pacha[i]* through certain principles and values. On the other hand, the second epistemic community has been denominated as *post-developmental* (Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán, & Domínguez, 2014; Le Quang & Vercoutère, 2013) making reference to the western frame of reference under which they have studied the *Sumak Kawsay*. For this epistemic community, Buen-Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay* are the same. In the practices, post-developmentist current seeks to bring together, as a collage, the best of *Sumak Kawsay* and other postmodern theories. In addition, from the post-developmental perspective, Buen Vivir could be considered as the South American version of the Degrowth, which emerged in Europe as an alternative search for capitalist development models. Finally, the third epistemic community called "*socialist-statist*" (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2014; Le

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The image in the header is *Amér Invertida*, painted in 1943 by Joaquín Torres García, an Uruguayan artist. More information on his work can be accessed [here](#).



Quang & Vercoutère, 2013) is the one that is further from the central ideas that shape *Sumak Kawsay*. Its interpretation of ancestral knowledge has been superficial which has resulted in an appropriation of the term *kichwa* and its subsequent institutionalization as a political project (Simbaña, 2012) through the 2008 Constitution and the renamed *Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir*. In any case, I intend to point to one epistemic community as better than another one. The contributions of the three have been fundamental in the theorizing of alternatives to development. However, beyond the common denominator of the critic to the meta-narrative of the development, the consensus become diffuse.

In this document, I try to deepen and broaden the discussion on the translation of the term *kichwa*, and discuss its meaning from each epistemic community, its cultural referent and its relationship with development. I start from the question: are Buen-Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay* the same? Despite being widely used as synonyms, my answer is no. My answer has three arguments: an imprecise translation, a different epistemology, and a different ontology. These three arguments are the result of an extensive bibliographic review of more than 150 documents from academic databases and gray literature as well as partial results of the ethnographic and coexistence work in progress in the province of Imbabura in Ecuador as part of the research of my doctoral thesis. The ethnographic work has been carried out during the months of August to December 2017 in the cantons of Ibarra, Otavalo and Cotacachi as well as in the communities of Angochagua, Peguche and Zuleta. The analysis of texts and information collected was guided by referential elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Decolonial Theory.

ALLI KAWSAY BETTER THAN SUMAK KAWSAY

First, like other authors, I defend the idea that there is an incorrect translation between Buen-Vivir and Sumak Kawsay. For the majority of actors related to the "indigenous-culturalist" discourse, *grosso modo*, *Sumak*, translates as harmony, plenitude; and *Kawsay* as life, coexist. The most common translation is Life in Plenitude (*Vida en Plenitud*), although it is also possible to find: Beautiful Life (*Vida Hermosa*), Harmonious Life (*Vida Armónica*), Balanced Life (*Vida*

en Equilibrio) or Harmonic Living Together (Convivir Armónico) (Kowii, 2011; Simbaña, 2012; Pacari, 2014; Iñuca, 2017).

If we looked for an expression similar to Buen-Vivir in the Kichwa language, it could possibly be found in the term *Alli Kawsay* and not in the term *Sumak Kawsay*. *Alli Kawsay* expresses the integrality and aspiration to improve the quality of life in interdependence with the beings of the environment, at the personal level (*runa*), at the family level (*ayllu*), at the community level (*llakta*) and at intercommunity level within a territory. The social subjects involved come and go in search of the *Alli Kawsay* through day-to-day actions. The expression *Alli Kawsay* combines "inherited cultural notions" and "learned cultural notions" such as money, the market, and capital (Guandinango, 2013; Guandinango & Carrillo, 2015), although we could certainly refer to them as forced or imposed cultural notions (Cuestas-Caza, 2017).

Alli refers to the "good", to a social, material and ethical life in the human sphere (Guandinango & Carrillo, 2015). In this way, *Alli Kawsay* seems to express in a better way the postmodern combination that seeks Buen-Vivir. *Alli Kawsay*, represents a frequent expression in the everyday linguistic, historical, spiritual and experiential level of the Kichwa communities of the north of Ecuador (Guandinango, 2013; Iñuca, 2017). For Iñuca (2017) *Alli Kawsay* refers to the pragmatic and everyday life of the Kichwa, while *Sumak Kawsay* refers to the ideal and imaginary of beautiful life. In this way, we understand that *Sumak Kawsay* (Life in Plenitude, Beautiful Life) does not translate as Buen-Vivir (Good-Living). In this sense, the incorrect synonymy present in many academic texts could be interpreted as a subtle form of epistemic neocolonization through the sophisticated use of language, which speaks "by" or "over" the Andean populations but with Western glasses.

SUMAK KAWSAY AS AN INPUT OF THE BUEN-VIVIR

Once the subject of translation has been overcome, it is necessary to discuss the content of the terms. Both in the case of the socialist-statist current, and in the case of the post-developmental current, the *Sumak Kawsay* appears only as part of the epistemological content that is combined with other theoretical referents.

First, the socialist-statist epistemic current (which I prefer calling "neo-developmentalists") took the indigenous concept of *Sumak Kawsay* and turned it into a political project, renamed Buen-Vivir. In 2008, with no time for deeper discussions or interpretations, a swift career began to include the concept of Buen Vivir in Ecuador's national legislation and planning. Thus, the new Constitution of 2008 and the renamed *Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir* would become the main instruments for the institutionalization of Buen-Vivir in public policies and in the life of Ecuadorian society. On paper, "rational" proposals to achieve Buen-Vivir seemed to be related to post-developmentalists criteria such as building a new post-capitalist socioeconomic system, to what Ramirez (2010) called as citizen bioequality or republican biosocialism. In the first instance, the discourse was accepted for its novelty, its intellectual base and the political euphoria of the moment. However, the practice would end up clarifying the scenario, only to realize that the Governmental Buen-Vivir (GBV) was just a new adjective to development. The basis of the speech of the neophyte Governmental Buen-Vivir (GBV) focused on a social transformation through equity and harmonious relationship with nature (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2014). Regrettably, when economic resources were scarce, the nature rights declared in the new Constitution fell into the background. Hence, it is possible to explain, for example, the failure of the Yasuní ITT Initiative to leave oil underground, which was a post-developmentalists proposal of non-extractivism that ultimately ended up reinforcing the "progressive neo-extractivism" (Gudynas, 2011) in Ecuador. Thus, the ideal of the Andean *Sumak Kawsay*, turned into rhetoric, was gradually removed from the governmental discourse to give way to a politicized, coopted and criticized Buen-Vivir. Almost 10 years after the inclusion of Buen-Vivir it is possible to affirm that the epistemological content that sustained GBV was related to theoretical sources such as: Eco-socialism Human development, Sustainable development, Endogenous development, Social justice and Happiness economies (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2017).

Secondly, we have the post-developmentalists current, which has generated the most dissemination and theoretical discussion, surpassing even the geographical boundaries where Buen-Vivir emerged. The post-developmentalists current conceives Buen-Vivir as

a critical paradigm of eurocentric, anthropocentric, capitalist and economistic modernity, but also as a new intercultural political project (Vanhulst, 2015), a comprehensive policy proposal (Altmann, 2016) even as part of a trans-developmental project (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015). The discourse of this current is characterized by the biocentrism that promotes the preservation of nature, in other words, that promotes a reunion with nature (Acosta, 2015) which includes human beings and indigenous peoples as the centerpiece of biodiversity conservation (Le Quang & Vercoutère, 2013). For post-developmentalists, the utopia or semi-utopia represented by Buen-Vivir (Acosta, 2015; Altmann, 2016) is under permanent construction (De la Cuadra, 2015). Post-developmentists deny development as a universal meta-narrative and what they are looking for are multiple strategies of future emanated from the own vision of each town. One such strategy would be Buen Vivir (Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán, & García-Álvarez, 2016). Hence, this current also suggests that Buen-Vivir is a plural concept and that the existence of “Buenos Vivires”[ii] should be considered (Acosta, 2015; Loera, 2015). Academics related to this current usually use the terms Buen-Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay* indistinctly within the texts although in practice they prefer to speak of Buen-Vivir and not of *Sumak Kawsay* (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016). This decision would seem obvious since in fact, it is not possible to compare the whole with a part and it is exactly what happens in this case. The epistemology of “post-developmental theoretical Buen-Vivir” is based on a process of intellectual liquidity (Bauman, 2013). In other words, it uses certain elements of Andean thought (such as *Sumak Kawsay*) and combines them with diverse intellectual wellsprings like: deep ecology, ecofeminism, intercultural feminism, degrowth, post-extractivism, human scale and barefoot economy, among others (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2017) to construct a kind of postmodern collage (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016).

In this context, *Sumak Kawsay* has been converted into a useful input to gain symbolic capital in think tanks. This process has overshadowed the reflection about the epistemological content of the term *Kichwa*, leaving it still at a very abstract level, which requires further research and systematization. However, from the extensive literature review and ongoing field research, I would dare to sketch that the epistemology of *Sumak Kawsay* rests on critical and

decolonial thinking, community thinking, reciprocity and solidarity, and aesthetic-symbolic relationality.

DIFFERENT ONTOLOGICAL MATRICES

Sumak Kawsay and Buen-Vivir belong to two different ontological matrices. In the first place, Buen-Vivir (governmental version or theoretical-post-development version) constitutes a modern word for the Aristotelian happiness. That is to say, its ontological matrix is located in the West, in reality Buen-Vivir is not a new term. In fact, for centuries, Buen-Vivir has been a term commonly used to represent happiness (*eudaimonia*), pleasure (*hedoné*) and wellbeing. Professor Alberto Fierro in his work "La Filosofía del Buen Vivir" (2009) details the course of the term in question, from the Greek philosophers like Aristotle or Epicurus, to the most contemporary ones like Spinoza, Kant or Schopenhauer. For example, while for Aristotle, *Eudaimonia* is his favorite word to express Buen-Vivir (Good Living) and the supreme end of life to which humans aspire without exception, for Epicurus, the Good Life is more a proposal of pleasure. This proposal is related to happiness around the body and the bodily senses that seeks to liberate humans from all kinds of fears: to the gods, to death and to eternity (Fierro, 2009). For his part, Schopenhauer speaks of "eudemonology" to designate the study of happy life, but the Good Life that this author mentions is actually a euphemism to refer to living life in the most bearable way possible. Professor Fierro (2009) rightly points out that in the variety of philosophies of those centuries, we can hardly find more common theme about good living, than the question of whether happiness is possible or impossible. Later in time, in 1973, the term happiness appears for the first time in the indexes of the journal *Psychological Abstracts International* and for 1974 the term "subjective wellbeing" is officially introduced as object of study through the publication of several articles in the journal *Social Indicator Research*. At that time began a race to quantify happiness through different measuring instruments, which has led to extensive research on subjective wellbeing (García-Martín, 2002).

In reality, Buen-Vivir, appears again to (re) conceptualize itself, (re) structure itself and (re) adapt to a complex context marked by the ecological crisis, plethoric social inequalities and the critique of

capitalist hegemony (Cuestas-Caza, 2017). The “classic” Buen-Vivir” (Oviedo, 2014) and the “current” Buen-Vivir (neo-developmental or post-developmental) share the Western DNA. In this way, when academics and politicians allude to *Kichwa* words “as a discursive construction critical to conventional developmentalism but firmly based on the Western episteme” (Bretón-Solo, 2013, p. 80) what they are really doing is ignoring the ontology of the terms Buen-Vivir and Sumak Kawsay.

On the other hand, *Sumak Kawsay* is an ancestral Andean conception of life that has remained valid in many communities of the Ecuadorian Andes until today (Kowii, 2011). Its conception is located within a framework of reference different from Western thought, known as Andean philosophy. The purpose of Andean's thought is reflected in the *Sumak Kawsay*, which is a mode of existence that is in equilibrium with all other elements of *Pacha*. This mode of existence includes other beings, animals, plants, minerals, stars, spirits and divinities and is governed by the principles of relationality, complementarity, correspondence, reciprocity and cyclicity (Estermann, 2013, 2015). *Sumak Kawsay* represents the ideal of the indigenous social project, understood as an epistemic proposal based on the Andean ways of life and their institutions (Rodríguez, 2016), as it is (or was at some point) Aristotelian *eudemonia* for Western's thought. For Tavares (2013), *Sumak Kawsay* is an interpellation, an exhortation, and in a certain way, a claim to the foundations for Western's thought. In that sense, it proposes the deconstruction of its ideological foundations.

The ideal represented by the *Sumak Kawsay* emerges and develops within an Andean cultural reference, which resists cultural homogenization through language recovery (*runashimi*) and Andean practices such as: *minika*, *waylla*, *ayni*, *tuminkuna*, *wakakuna*, *ayamarkay*, among others. In this way, it is possible to understand why the imposed category of "Indian" or "indigenous" does not correspond with the self-definition of the original peoples, who defend the use of the word "rune" that would be translated as a human being. This simple example in the use of language allows us to identify the ontology behind Andean thought, different from the colonial and racist matrix of the West. Table 1 summarizes the

differences between *Sumak Kawsay* and Buen-Vivir discussed throughout the previous sections.

Table 1. Differences between Sumak Kawsay and Buen-Vivir

Word	Sumak Kawsay	Buen-Vivir (governmental version)	Buen-Vivir (post- developmentalist version)
Approximate translation	Vida Hermosa; Vida en armonía	Alli Kawsay	Alli Kawsay
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical and decolonial thinking, • Community thinking, • Reciprocity and solidarity • Aesthetic-symbolic relationality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Human Development • Ecosocialism • Social justice • Eudaimonia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecofeminism • Community economy • Deep ecology • Degrowth • Post-extractivism • Decoloniality
Ontology	Andean cultural matrix, Otherness	Western cultural matrix (solid)	Western cultural matrix (liquid)

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

I argue that Buen-Vivir is not synonymous with *Sumak Kawsay* and I dare say that neither is the *Suma Qamaña* of the Aymara communities, nor the *Balu Wala* of the Kuna communities of Central America, nor the *Ñande Reko* of the Guarani communities, nor any another indigenous term that expresses the ultimate aspiration of life. Under the three differences presented in this document, lies the existence of a “cognitive extractivism” (Simpson & Klein, 2017) regarding the use of the term indigenous, mainly because the socialist-statist and post-developmentist currents continue to be developed under the hegemony of western or westernized intellectuality. In this way, it is explained that useful knowledge continues to occur in the center and the periphery plays a role of passive receiver where their knowledge has been subalternized and subordinated (Jo, 2013). Ramon Grosfoguel (2016) points out that encompassing and marketing with the knowledge of the original peoples within Western knowledge removes political radicalism and its critical origin. This type of extractivism, newly minted, does not seek horizontal dialogue between equals, but seeks to extract ideas as raw materials.

Synonymy used by most academic evidences the presence of an epistemic neocolonialism through the sophisticated use of language, speaking "for" or "on" Andean populations but with Western glasses. Accepting the fact that *Sumak Kawsay* and Buen-Vivir are not synonyms or exact translations is part of the resistance to an epistemic globalization that starts with the recognition of the "others", of the alterities that are not (or do not want to be) part of Western hegemonic discourse. Here it is necessary to emphasize that the academic world of the South has been and is a prisoner of the criteria of scientificity imposed by modernity and positivism. Giving voice to silence with the theoretical instruments of silencers distorts the culture that is intended to rescue (Tavares, 2013). In that sense, the use of the *runashimi* (Kichwa language) would be the fundamental basis of the identity strengthening of the native peoples.

Although Buen Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay* are not synonyms, their discussion has certainly opened the doors of both the Western and the Andes to initiate an intercultural dialogue on an equal terms, where two different civilizational matrices can establish an exchange despite the fact that their principles can be considered irreconcilable (Tavares, 2013). This dialogue is indispensable to compensate for the wear and tear suffered by Buen-Vivir and thus Andean thought, after years of neo-extractivist governmental policies.

Finally, despite the categories or translations that the study currents can make on Buen-Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay*, central questions remain: How do native peoples understand and live *Sumak Kawsay*? Regarding the case study in Imbabura, I could affirm that there is indeed a different life horizon to the western version. The experience in the communities has helped me to show that the social project of indigenous life is certainly based on the principles of Andean philosophy. This alterity rests on a deep relationship with nature and on an institutionalized communitarian sense, which is evidenced mainly in rituals, parties and different celebrations. For the communities investigated, *Sumak Kawsay* is understood as a "recreated tradition" that represents their social project of life, their utopia if you like, and although it is a recent term in his vocabulary, they have begun to appropriate it.

How to build a true epistemology of *Sumak Kawsay* outside the westernized interpretation?[iii] *Sumak Kawsay*, according to several interviews, is still a very abstract concept, which needs to be nourished by the empirical study of the practices and knowledge of native peoples. The studies should be based on real coexistence and mutual learning, leaving aside characteristics of classical ethnography to introduce elements of decolonial and critical ethnography. Hence, the academy has a great responsibility that goes beyond westernized ethnography and the intellectual comfort of cross references. In that sense, I agree with Oviedo when he points out that:

“The least and adequate for a responsible and serious investigator is to try to enter the consciousness of a people, from there dare to create theories, although the main thing would be to internalize a culture to speak with propriety and depth. If a philosophy is not lived in the first person, it becomes manipulative and deformable. Thus, for more good intentions that encourage some people, even being able to be descendants of the native peoples, their positions may end up being part of the indoctrination and perennial civilizational catechization” (Oviedo, 2014, p. 293).

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[i] In the Andes, the concepts of space and time are concurrent and indivisible and are represented in a single term, which is Pacha. Pacha, followed or preceded according to other words, serves to: a) determine the spaces (cosmogonic or metaphysical); b) delimiting historical phases (ages and periods); c) express the relative times (present, past and future); d) talk about fundamental changes (natural and social); e) mark harvest times; f) define time-space as a globality of conjunction and in other tasks (Manga, 1994).

[ii] The post-developmental current is not entirely homogenous. There is a trans-developmental variant led by professors Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevera who are currently theorizing about the construction of a Global Good Living, which could be understood as a meta-narrative contrary to the idea of plural Good Living. The monograph: "Good living goals as an alternative to sustainable development goals" could be ready for the summer of 2019.

[iii] There are several indigenous and non-indigenous scholars who have worked on the theorization of Sumak Kawsay, among which I can mention: Mónica Chuji, Nina Pacari, Ariruma Kowii, Floresmilo Simbaña, Benjamin Iñuca, Atawallpa Oviedo, Pablo Dávalos, Philipp Altman, among others. In addition, there are other academic initiatives working on issues related to Sumak Kawsay such as the UNESCO Chair on Indigenous Peoples of Latin America of the "Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar" and the originative intercultural and community higher education proposal of the Pluriversidad "Amawtay Wasi".

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