

Afro and Indigenous Life– Visions in/and Politics. (De)colonial Perspectives in Bolivia and Ecuador¹

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Abstract

Ancestral cosmologies or “life–visions” are increasingly visible today, both within the realm of Afro and Indigenous community–based struggles, and within the frame of State constitutions, rights, and politics. This article looks at what happens when ancestral life–visions are positioned as central principles of State politics and public policies. Can these philosophies, rationalities and logics–otherwise guide the remaking or re–founding of society and State, particularly when the authority, organization, and practice of politics and State remain bound to Western frames and capitalist interests?

Keywords

Abya–Yala, African Descendent Knowledges, Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, Life–visions, Living–well, New Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Plurinationalism, Sumak Kawsay, Suma Qamaña

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Resumen

Hoy día, las cosmologías o “visiones ancestrales de la vida” son cada vez más visibles tanto dentro del mundo de las luchas comunitarias Afro e indígenas, como dentro del marco de las constituciones políticas del Estado, de los derechos y de la política. Este artículo examina lo que sucede cuando las “visiones ancestrales de la vida” se convierten en principios centrales del Estado, de la política, y de los órdenes públicos. ¿Pueden estas filosofías, racionalidades y lógicas, dirigir de *otra* manera la renovación o la re-fundación de la sociedad y del Estado, particularmente cuando la autoridad, la organización, y la práctica de la política y del Estado siguen vinculadas a marcos occidentales y a intereses capitalistas?

Palabras claves

Abya-Yala, Conocimientos Afro-descendientes, Constitución de la República del Ecuador, Nueva Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, Plurinacionalismo, Sumak Kawsay, Suma Qamaña, Visiones de Vida, Vivir Bien

It is in the Andean region of South America —or what we might better refer to as Abya-Yala² South— that ancestral cosmologies, cosmo or “life visions” are increasingly visible today, both within the realm of Afro and Indigenous community-based struggles, and within the frame of State constitutions, rights, and politics. These two simultaneous moments and the struggles, contradictions, and tensions they pose are the subject of my reflections here. The organization of these reflections is in three parts: (I) Mapping the “cosmo” scene: constitutional openings and the modern, Western, colonial logic; (II) Collective life—visions in/of territory and place; and (III) Politics advanced, coloniality revisited?

² Abya-Yala, which signifies “land in full maturity,” is the name coined by the kunas of Panama and widely adopted by indigenous peoples in 1992 to refer to the territory and the indigenous nations of the Americas. Of course the problem is that while this term recuperates indigenous roots, it leaves out the presence and struggles of African descendants.

I. Mapping the “Cosmo” Scene: Constitutional Openings and the Modern, Western, Colonial Logic

References to the cosmic or “cosmo” —to cosmovisions, *cosmocimientos* or cosmo-knowledges, and *cosmoexistencias* or cosmo-existence, among other “cosmo” constructions— are increasingly common in the America of the South. While some might argue that they are part and parcel of a new “ethnic” or “ethnized” language of fashion, I believe instead that they are demonstrative of the shift that we are experiencing in the region, a shift where the principles and base of struggle and transformation are no longer simply about identity, access, recognition, or rights, but about perspectives of knowledge that have to do with the model and logic of LIFE itself.

Such shift began to become publically evident in the late nineties and the beginning of this decade, with the mobilizations by indigenous movements against free trade agreements and the posturing of the “culture of life” to counter the “culture of death” that is the neoliberal project. But it has also been present within indigenous and Afro communities themselves, in what the Afroecuadorian leader and intellectual —known as the grandfather of the movement and the “worker” of the process— Juan García, refers to as the work “*casa adentro*,” or “in-house.” By this he means the work that helps strengthen the ties of belonging, the building of collective memory, the thinking with the “knowledges that we have been told are not knowledges, that are of no value”: to unlearn the learned and relearn the *propio*, our own, as a way to understand life, our vision of history, of knowledges, and of being in the world (Walsh and García). Such work by necessity also has to be carried out—of—house, *casa afuera*, to intercede in and, in so doing, to help build a different vision and practice of humanity, life, and living.

Certainly the Constitutions of nations like Bolivia and Ecuador have helped enable the more public presence of the “cosmo” today. In contrast to the historical denial and subalternization of indigenous and African descendent peoples, their knowledges, and life-based philosophies or ways of being, these Constitutions afford radical turn-arounds recognizing, as is the case of Ecuador, nature as the subject of rights and ancestral knowledges as necessary components of science, technology and education. Or, in the case of Bolivia and Ecuador, the principle, concept, and ancestral philosophy of *vivir bien* or *buen vivir*, literally translated as “living well,” as the organizing frame for the

construction of a radically different society. The excerpts below from the Preambles of both Constitutions are illustrative.

First Ecuador:

We women and we men [...] RECOGNIZING our millennial roots [...] CELEBRATING nature, *Pacha Mama* (Mother Earth) of which we are a part [...] CALLING FORTH the wisdom of all cultures [...] and as inheritors of the social struggles of liberation against all forms of domination and colonialism, and with a profound commitment to the present and future, have decided to construct a new form of living—with, in diversity and harmony with nature and to reach *el buen vivir, el sumak kawsay* [living well or collective well being] (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008. My emphasis).³

[Nosotras y nosotros [...] reconociendo nuestras raíces milenarias [...] CELEBRANDO a la naturaleza, la Pacha Mama, de la que somos parte [...] y que es vital para nuestra existencia [...] APELANDO a la sabiduría de todas las culturas [...] COMO HEREDEROS de las luchas sociales de liberación frente a todas las formas de dominación y colonialismo, y con un profundo compromiso con el presente y el futuro, decidimos construir una nueva forma de convivencia ciudadana, en diversidad y armonía con la naturaleza, para alcanzar el buen vivir, el sumak kawsay].

Now Bolivia:

The Bolivian people, of plural composition, from the depth of history, inspired in the struggles of the past, anticolonial indigenous uprisings [...] popular, indigenous, social and union struggles [...] build a new State [...] based in equality and respect among all, in the principles of sovereignty, dignity, complementarity, solidarity, harmony, and equity in the (re)distribution of the social product, where the search for *el vivir bien* (living well), with respect to the economic, social, judicial, political, and cultural plurality [...] and in collective coexistence [...] leave the colonial, republican, and neoliberal state behind (Constitución de la República de Bolivia, 2009. My emphasis).

[El pueblo boliviano, de composición plural, desde la profundidad de la historia, inspirado en las luchas del pasado, en la sublevación indígena anticolonial [...] en las luchas populares de liberación, en las marchas indígenas, sociales y sindicales [...] construimos un nuevo Estado [...] basado en el respeto e igualdad entre todos, con principios de soberanía, dignidad, complementariedad, solidaridad, armonía y equidad en la distribución y redistribución del producto social, donde predomine la búsqueda del vivir bien; con respeto a la pluralidad económica, social, jurídica, política y cultural de los

³ All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

habitantes de esta tierra; en convivencia colectiva [...] Dejamos en el pasado el Estado colonial, republicano y neo-liberal.

My interest here is not to analyze these Constitutions (something I have done elsewhere), but rather to highlight the attention given to non-Western life-visions as a counter frame to—and a recognition of—the legacies of colonial domination and Western capitalist interests. Without a doubt, such attention is reflective of the political-epistemic insurgence of indigenous and African-descendent social movements over the last two decades, an insurgence that goes beyond resistance as such (understood as defensive opposition), moving toward a proactive protagonism of creation and construction that leads to new arrangements of thought, knowledge and of being and thinking, of life, living and societal articulation. Arrangements that interweave ancestral principles, cosmogonies, life-philosophies, and historical struggles against the persistence of colonial-imperial matrices of power imposed from without and within the Nation, including the political project of *mestizaje*. And arrangements that are indicative of the urgency to rethink and reconstruct society and State through the guiding principles and political projects of interculturality and plurinationalism for society in its totality.

Certainly there is much to say about the contradictions and obstacles present in the region today with regard to these Constitutions, State, movement insurgencies, political projects, and ongoing struggle, but I will leave that to the third part of this paper. Here I want to first make clear the central grounds of my position, thesis, and argument, which is that the struggles of, openings towards, and interests in Afro and indigenous ancestral principles, cosmogonies, and life-visions today, necessarily recall and call forth the matrices of power and domination that have—in the past and present—worked to negate, obfuscate, and eliminate these cosmo constructions in favor of modernity, the universality of a Western capitalist logic, and what Anibal Quijano (2000) has referred to as coloniality. Coloniality is understood here as a permanent matrix of power that articulates race-capitalism-Western modernity in/for the control of labor, knowledge, being, spirituality-existence-life visions-nature (fig. 1).

What I refer to as the coloniality of Mother Earth or Mother Nature has had its roots in the projects of civilization, Christianity and evangelization, development (understood as modernization and progress), and education. Projects that have worked at the ontological, existential, epistemic, territorial, and socio-spiritual levels, imposing a notion of a singular world governed by the central binary of humans (read: man) over nature. This binary of man over nature is fundamental

because it establishes the dominance of masculinity over nature,⁴ understood as feminine, unwieldy and in need of protection and control. In this sense, man is not part of nature, but her superior. All associated with, or thought to be closer to nature, most especially women, native peoples and blacks, are considered inferior, lacking in reason and intellect, animal-like and tied to the corporal or the body rather than the mind. Of course it is with relation to this central binary as well that a singular world is propagated and put forth; it is world/view that

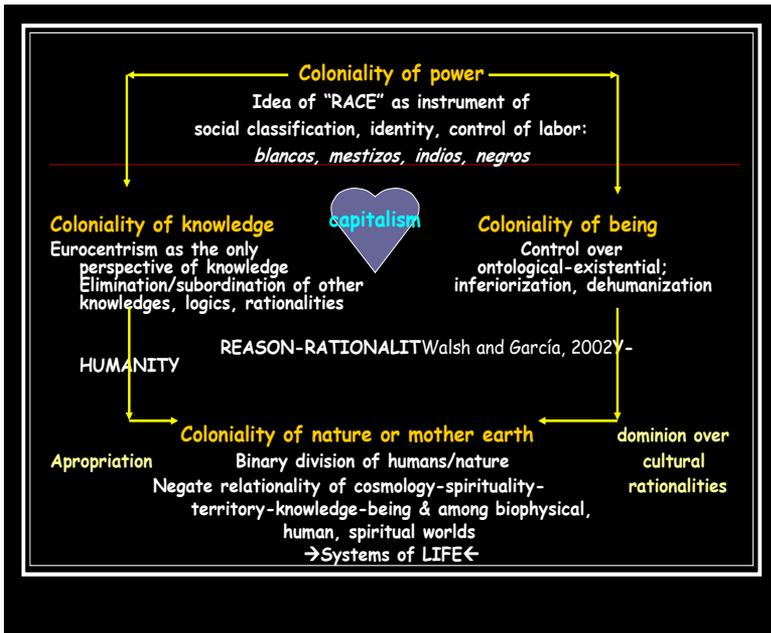


Figure 1

⁴ In fact and as Alberto Acosta notes, "The desire to dominate Nature, to change it into exportable products, has always been present in this region. In the early stages of Independence, when faced with the earthquake in Caracas of 1812, Simon Bolivar said the famous words, which marked that time, "If Nature objects, we shall fight against it and make it obey us." ("Toward the Universal Declaration of Rights of Nature. Thoughts for Action").

categorizes as “primitive” and “pagan” the sacred relations that connect the worlds of above and below with the earth and with the ancestors as living beings, negating as well the feminine force of life and creation. This coloniality of Mother Earth or Nature has worked to negate what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has referred to as the Andean model of symmetry based in complementary asymmetries, as well as the fluid and open dualities that have defined Andean cosmovisions.⁵ However, for reasons of time and space, I will not elaborate on this here.⁶

What I wish to highlight in closing this first part is the persistent operation of these mechanisms of power in not only dehumanizing Afro and indigenous peoples by classifying them as closer to or constitutive of nature, but also in systematically trying to disarticulate communities and cosmovisions, to break the intimate relation of territory, territoriality, knowledge, and nature, which as Afro intellectuals like Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez and Juan García point out, give base and place to collective memory. Furthermore, in the words of Arboleda Quiñonez,

For Africans and their diaspora, modernity and its narrative of modernization have meant perpetual and straightforward spoliation or pillage. Exile/banishment [...] constitute a mental global key in the lived experience of Afrodescendants, of their ‘torturous pass from inexistence to existence’, in Fanonian terms, for which they continue to struggle (Arboleda Quiñonez 473).

Modernity and its alter-side, which is coloniality, have endeavored to undermine the principles, visions, and systems of life of Afrodescendent and of indigenous peoples, while at the same time promoting a Western logic and rationality. It is a logic and rationality that, with the desire/zeal of civilization, modernity, and development, have been assumed by the Nation-State and are reflected in its political and social structures and institutions. It is for this reason that the transformation of these structures and institutions, along with the reestablishment of the communion between humans and nature, are understood and positioned today in the region as acts of decolonization and liberation, not just for indigenous and Afro peoples but for society as a whole.

⁵ See interview with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui at: [<http://clickgenero.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/entrevista-a-la-sociologa-silvia-rivera-cusicanqui/>].

⁶ I have discussed these concerns in greater depth in “Género en perspectiva decolonial.” Keynote talk given at the event “Género, poder y cultura. Reconociendo la diversidad.” Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima. September 8–10, 2011.

II. Collective Life—Visions in/of Territory and Place

In both indigenous and Afrodescendant cosmovisions, Mother Earth is central. She is the mother that protects her children, to which she gives the spaces, sustenance, and elements—cosmic, physical, affective, spiritual, cultural, and existential—necessary to live. She is the body of nature that receives and gives the seed of life in its infinite manifestations. Human beings are an expression of nature, her children. As such, and in contrast to Western ways of thinking, there is no division between humans and nature; the equilibrium, development, and survival of society rests in this harmonic relation of integration.

Indigenous and Afro “cosmo” or life—visions are holistic in that they conceive life and living with regard to the totality, unite the material and spiritual and promote a practice of co—existence and “living with” across difference. Yet while both challenge Western frames, the “place” and principles from which these life—visions are conceived and constructed are not quite the same.⁷

Suma qamaña or *vivir bien* in Bolivia, and *Sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* in Ecuador, roughly translated as “living well,” form the center of an Andean indigenous cosmovision, based in four central principles:

1. The first and most basic, from which are derived the others, is the principle of *relationality*. It affirms the integral co—existence of the cosmos with all of its constitutive variables, including the affective, ecological, ethical, aesthetic, productive, spiritual, and intellectual, among others.
2. The second is *correspondence*: the co—relation of the cosmic, the human, and the extra human; the organic and inorganic; life and death; good and bad; the divine and the human, etc. (Medina 69–72).
3. The third is *complementarity*, which gives specificity to the previous two. This principle affirms that no entity, action, or occurrence exists isolated from the other, that there exists a

⁷ My reference to “place” here recalls the arguments of Arturo Escobar (2005) regarding the ways that globalization hides the specifics of place and locality, perpetuating the homogenization and normalization of histories, difference, and social struggles.

complementary duality, a complementarity of opposites and of difference, the inclusion of which constructs the social totality.

4. The fourth principle is *reciprocity* or *ayni*, the pragmatic expression of correspondence and complementarity in all interactions: among humans, between humans and nature, and between humans and the divine. In this sense it puts forth an element unthinkable for Western rationality: an ethics based in cosmic as well as human dimensions, a kind of cosmic obligation (Estermann 131–132).

These four principles taken together are expressed in the concepts of *qamaña* and *kawsay*, or Life.⁸ They express the experience and profound meaning of living as product of the harmonious tension of polarities that emerge in intercultural co-living and co-existence. *Sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir*, and *suma qamaña* or *vivir bien*, then, are the foundations of an Andean life-vision in all its aspects and activities, including the social, cultural, spiritual, economic, and environmental, among others, in the harmonic, equitable and solidarity-based relations among humans and with nature, and in the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, cultures, rationalities, and logics of thinking, acting, and living.

While this integral way of understanding and being present in the world is also part of Afrodescendant life-visions, their experience is distinct, as peoples stolen from their native lands and forced to construct community elsewhere. As Juan García notes,

Today after so many years and so many dreams sketched by others, we the descendants of the former enslaved continue here living poor but with much dignity. Anchored in the ancestral right that our ancestors won, but without forgetting the commitment to maintain alive the forest and healthy the mother earth. Our tradition teaches that these territories fed our enslaved bodies and planted in our hearts the real significance of freedom (García 2007, 2).

This bond among people, the ancestors, and Mother Earth constitutes “nature” as the spatial-temporal totality of existence, as life with respect to the totality. Freedom is born and grows with this bond; it

⁸ These principles also form the foundation and organization of the Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos y Nacionalidades Indígenas “Amawtay Wasi” of Ecuador.

is the vital force that sustains and gives reason to existence and humanity.⁹

For Afrodescendant communities, existence and living are not individual or worldly concerns. They are thought from the totality, from the relations and interconnections both here on earth and with respect to the larger order (a perspective not unlike that of indigenous cosmovisions). The world, society and the community are considered to be the plurality of coordinated forces. Women and men are nothing more than products of nature. Such life—vision is sometimes referred to, particularly in Ecuador and based on the teachings of Juan García, as an “ancestral mandate.” That is, as a “mandate of the elders that one abides by and transmits, that reinforces collective belonging: an affiliation with those who came before.”¹⁰ It is also known in the Afrocolombian context as *mntú*, understood as “Humanity” —that is,¹¹

Family as the sum of the deceased (the ancestors) and the living, united by the word to animals, trees, and minerals (earth, water, fire, and stars) [...] in an inseparable knot. It is the conception of humanity that the most exploited peoples in the world, the Africans, give back to the European colonizers without bitterness or resentment. A vital philosophy of love, happiness, and peace among men and women and the world that nourishes them (Zapata Olivella 362).

As Zapata Olivella argues in a number of his texts, while *mntú* has its roots in the African philosophy of *bantú*, it is a life—philosophy reconstructed and reconstituted on the soil of the Americas not just for those of African descendant but as a contribution to other civilizations, including the one responsible for the coloniality and enslavement still present.¹²

By sustaining the belief that we are brothers and sisters connected by a greater order¹³ —that is, by nature or Mother Earth— and that

⁹ For a broader discussion see Walsh (2009, 220–225).

¹⁰ Personal conversations. March 2004.

¹¹ The practices of the *ombligada* in communities of the Pacific is one concrete example of this philosophy. See Arboleda Quiñonez and Zapata Olivella in the list of works cited.

¹² See Branche for a related discussion with relation to the concept and philosophy of *malungaje*.

¹³ Illustrative is the fact that in some communities of the Pacific and in places like el Palenque de San Basilio in the Atlantic Colombian coast, people refer to *el buen morir*, or dying well.

differences are not valiative in the sense of superior and inferior, this cosmovision, philosophy, or life–vision looks to link and unite rather than fragment and divide. The function of women and men then, besides the social, is to mediate between the divine and the inanimate, take care of the natural environment, including the land, rivers, waters, animals, and all visible and nonvisible beings. It is for this reason that the protection of natural resources is understood as an ancestral mandate, as a central element in the notion of Afro collective well being (Walsh 2009).

As Arboleda Quiñonez points out, such perspectives ground community–based plans in the Pacific region for the autonomous and harmonious handling of ancestral territories. An excerpt from one of these Plans is instructive:

Black ancestral communities of the rivers of the Pacific possess knowledges that guarantee life and the development of their society without detriment to the natural base of ecosystems. This signifies the recognition of the dynamics, cycles, and cultural knowledges as a base of conservation of the mountains, hills, rivers, mangroves and other spaces of use (Arboleda Quiñonez 477).

From the base of oral tradition in Esmeraldas, Juan García identifies four basic elements that help understand the ways that the ancestral weaves with collective territoriality to build and order a life project and vision:

1. The first element is history, that is, the establishment of ancestral settlements from which a collective life project is built over a period not less than four generations.
2. The second element is the establishment of a communal space of ancestral occupation that permits social, cultural, biological reproduction and the realization of individual and collective activities that encourage a dignified and harmonious life, including activities related to the protection of knowledges, spirituality and nature.
3. The third interrelated element has to do with co–existence or ancestral inheritance: the “living with” different peoples which makes necessary the recognition and respect for others; the living with difference, in solidarity and sharing what one has.
4. The last element is the handling of natural resources, an ancestral mandate assumed by the present generations as an attitude of life that is nourished by a universe of symbols and norms that encourage the respect for harmonious relations between humans and nature.

Together, these elements construct a cosmovision or philosophy of life and living that is radically distinct from that which orients the modern, Western capitalist mode of life. Its base is in a diasporic–ancestral understanding of Mother Earth, in a territorial struggle that is not just about physical survival but also about cosmic and ancestral existence and subsistence. As *Abuelo Zenon*¹⁴ —the voice of collective memory— once said:

When the community loses its ancestral territory, when the mountain stops being the “mother of God” for the families of African origin, when the water of the rivers stops being the fountain of life for the tangible beings and refuge for the intangible ones, then the spirit of the ancestors crosses the sea and looks for the earth of the mother continent to rest (García n.d.).

Such is the struggle, as we will see in the third and final part of this paper, of Afro communities today, particularly in the Pacific region, displaced —or, as Arboleda Quiñonez calls it, exiled— from their territories as a result of the armed conflict, the national and transnational politics and practices of extractivism —including that of lumber, mining, and African Palm—, narco–trafficking, and the complicity among all three.

It is from this perspective of the struggle for existence that Afro communities speak of collective well–being, a life–vision that is similar in a way to indigenous perspectives of “living well,” points to the principles of complementarity, relationality, and unity in diversity, and to self–determination, solidarity, and the fundamental connection between society and nature. In this sense, both life–visions should not be understood as simply “ethnic” or “cultural”; they are philosophies and conceptions of life constructed from a particularity and place, but conceived with relation to the broader universe. It is in this way that they can be considered, on the one hand, as “epistemic attitudes” (Noboa) valuable for all of us struggling to think with and through other logics and to transgress the Western frame. But in a broader sense, and on the other hand, they can be thought of as pedagogies that disrupt and invert the colonial matrices of power that cross knowledge, being and nature. They are pedagogical strategies and postures that challenge and

¹⁴ *Abuelo* or Grandfather Zenon, maternal grandfather of Juan García, is an important figure in Afro Ecuadorian oral tradition. He is recalled frequently in the process to rebuild and maintain alive the teachings of the ancestors.

counteract Western / westernized “paradogmas” and that signal, open, and enable decolonial paths.

III. Politics Advanced, Coloniality Revisited?

What happens when ancestral life–visions are positioned as central principles of State politics and public policies? Can these philosophies, rationalities, and logics—otherwise guide the remaking or re–founding of society and State, particularly when the authority, organization and practice of politics and State remain bound to Western frames and capitalist interests?

In this sense, are these life–visions becoming little more than discursive strategies that give the appearance of change, while at the same time promoting interests that further fragment, coopt, and defy ancestral collectivities, knowledges, territories, and sensibilities, in the name —still— of modernization, progress, and development? And how are we to understand all this in the current context of Bolivia and Ecuador today? For reasons of space, I will highlight just some of the many emergent contradictions and tensions.

First let’s look at Ecuador, where *buen vivir* is the organizing principle —or at least the discursive strategy— of the government and national politics, including in terms of development. Development today is defined as interchangeable with *buen vivir*. However, such equation made evident in Ecuador’s National Plan of Development or Buen Vivir (and also in a not totally dissimilar way in Bolivia), takes less meaning from ancestral life–visions, and more from the alternative visions of development emerging in the Western world: “integral sustainable human development” with its focus on individual liberty and autonomy, understood as individual agency, will power, and determination, and on social inclusion and coexistence as complimentary criteria that permit the linking with the social.¹⁵ Of course it cannot be a mere coincidence that these criteria and that this perspective of development are the base of policies pushed forth in Latin America today by the UNDP (United Nations

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of this problematic, see Walsh (2010).

Development Programme)¹⁶ and by the European Union Cooperation, including EUROsociAL (an alliance within the European Union), the International Development Bank, and CEPAL (Economic Commission of Latin America), with the support of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Indeed some warn that the real agenda of these institutions and policies is a re-colonization of lands/territories and their natural resources (Delgado).¹⁷

But the other concern with relation to development as *buen vivir* is the centrality of State. It is the State that signifies in technocratic, economic, and humanistic terms what is development and *buen vivir*. In this sense, *buen vivir* as development is the State. The possibility of “thinking with” other cosmovisions and collective relational modes of life not centered in the individual is noticeably absent. As such we might critically ask if this new binary *buen vivir*–development enables a de-envelopment of the developmentalisms present and past and a disentanglement of the colonial matrix of power. Or, rather, does it suggest a new more complicated envelopment of institutional arrangements and colonial entanglements?

As further illustration, let’s look at one more example. This is the contradiction between the naming of nature as the subject of rights in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution (the first country in the world to do so) and 21st century neextractivism. In the constitution:

Nature or *Pacha Mama*, where life is realized and reproduced, has the right to the integral respect of its existence, and the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes (Art. 71).¹⁸ Nature has the right to its restoration or reparation (Art. 72).

[La naturaleza o Pacha Mama, donde se reproduce y realiza la vida, tiene derecho a que se respete integralmente su existencia y el

¹⁶ It is not to forget the millions of dollars that the UNDP invested in Bolivia in 2007–2008 producing texts, television programs, and a documentary film all with the motive of trying to influence the Constituent Assembly and sway the public away from the idea of a Plurinational State and distancing from the global market economy (see Walsh 2009).

¹⁷ The fact that the United Nations earmarked in 2009 148 million dollars for the realization of *buen vivir* in Ecuador (Galarza), leads us to further question whether what we are witnessing today is its strategic use and cooptation.

¹⁸ Translation: Widener Environmental Law Center. The Blog: [<http://blogs.law.widener.edu/envirolawblog/2011/07/12/ecuadorian-court-recognizes-constitutional-right-to-nature/>].

mantenimiento y regeneración de sus ciclos vitales, estructura, funciones y procesos evolutivos (Art. 71). La naturaleza tiene derecho a la restauración (Art. 72)].

Despite this advance, and less than three months after the new Constitution was approved, a Mining Law was passed that systematically favors mining companies by:

- Giving them National Treatment;
- Allowing the expropriation of land without the consent of its owners;
- Guaranteeing rights and access to mining companies over collective and ancestral rights;
- Calling for participation and consultation only after concessions have been granted;
- Criminalizing those that disrupt mining activities;
- Giving the freedom to prospect without community permission.

In a press release, Canada's Kinross Gold Corporation welcomed the new law as "a solid foundation and framework for the growth of a responsible mining industry" (Kenny), an industry overwhelmingly located in Afro territories. As Juan García proclaims:

This government has only worked to strengthen miners, palm cultivators, loggers, and to accelerate the destruction and contamination of Afro ancestral territories [...] With this we have lost social and cultural control of our rivers, our *fincas*, our forest, our lives [...] (García and Walsh).

Not unrelated is the fact that more than 27,000 hectares of ancestral land in the north of Esmeraldas have been sold or concessioned in recent years to African palm cultivators, 15,000 of these in the ancestral territory of the Cayapas–Santiago Commune. During the present government and despite the collective rights of Afroecuadorians and the "rights of nature," the National Bank of Public Works (Banco Nacional de Fomento) has financed credit to palming companies for 16,655 hectares, more than double the land financed previously. That is to say, with the present government credit palm cultivation has increased more than any other time in history, both in the amount of money and the amount of ancestral land "given" or leased to national and transnational palm companies (Roa).

Also contradictory is the proposed Water Law, which would give open access to mining and other extractivist interests. In the massive

protests in 2009 and 2010 led by the indigenous movement against both this and the Mining Law, the criminalization of protest began, within which the indigenous movement and its leaders were named by government as the “new eye of evil.” As President Correa has stated, “The danger to the ‘Citizen Revolution’ [Revolución Ciudadana] is the infantile left, the infantile pro-indigenous movement and the infantile ecological movement” (“Informe del Presidente.” August 10, 2010). Since late 2009, 189 indigenous leaders have been accused of terrorism and sabotage against the State, an accusation never before used in Ecuador, even in dictatorial regimes. The detention of leaders is ongoing.

For Alberto Acosta, former Minister of Energy and Mines and ex-president of the 2007–08 Constituent Assembly, the contradiction is clear: “The fighters for NATURE and LIFE are persecuted as terrorists so that the transnationals can loot natural resources... Repressive practices inherited from old politics, oriented to disqualify and punish social movements... The hand of 21st Century neoextractivism does not pause before anything” (Acosta 2011).

The case of Bolivia is also one of tensions and contradictions. The most recent manifestation: the march in defense of Mother Earth and against the building of a highway that would link the regions of Cochabamba and Beni, going through the middle of the Indigenous Territory and National Park Isiboro Sécore (TIPNIS). TIPNIS is one of the largest areas of biodiversity in the country with over 700 species of fauna and 400 species of flora (Kenner). It also reported to have oil and significant hydrocarbon reserves. The TIPNIS march is the longest in Bolivia’s history, covering over 600 kilometers, beginning in August in the lowlands of Trinidad and arriving in La Paz on October 19, 2011, with a reception of over a million supporters. Among the sixteen demands are, besides the solution of the TIPNIS conflict, the *saneamiento* —the making healthy— of lands, the paralization of oil exploration in another park in the Chaco tarijeño, and respect for *la consulta*, the consultation by government and outside entities, required by national and international law.

The issue of building a road that will go through the TIPNIS is complex, for three reasons in particular: (1) its support by *colonos* and *campesinos*, including the coca growers of Chapare for the access it would give them to the La Paz market, (2) its connection with an aggressive national plan of exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons (730,000 hectares were identified in 2010 for exploration) and (3) its foreign interests: the project is funded by Brazil, as part of a larger package that will enable this country to consolidate its hegemony in the

region, through megaprojects, extractivism, and other capital-based initiatives (Miriam García).

The government has argued that the highway will lead to development for the indigenous communities in TIPNIS, and for the regions of Beni and Cochabamba (Kenner). President Morales along with other officials have repeatedly stated that whether the indigenous people want it or not, the road will be built. Their response to the march: that it is financed by NGOs and is nothing more than “media terrorism,” the manipulation of the Right, and of outside forces—including from the US and the CIA— to create the conditions necessary for the return to neoliberalism and a conservative government. The argument then was that police brutality and repression were thus justified, although it is still not clear who gave the order.

With several hundred wounded, the death of a child, failed dialogues during the march, and the resignation of the ministers of defense (Cecilia Chacón) and government (Sacha Llorenti), one has to wonder about the health and direction of the government project. Alfredo Rada (former minister of government from January 2007 to January 2010) stated recently that the government “assumed that the *grupo de compañeros* that was marching to prevent the building of a highway through the TIPNIS, was looking for the overthrow of the government. I believe that was a mistaken point to begin with.”¹⁹

On October 24, 2011, President Evo Morales signed off on the law that will prohibit the building of the highway, thus acceding to the march’s central demand. While this signing suggests a possible return of Morales—alone in his declarations—to the historical project laid out in the Constitution, the direction of the government as a whole, and Morales within it, is still uncertain.

In essence what TIPNIS reveals is the still present, still colonial struggle between life–visions and the underlying theme and meaning of development. The struggle between, on the one side, the extractivist model that sees the exploitation and export of natural resources as income, progress, and development and, on the other, perspectives grounded in the harmonious relation of humans and nature—of living well—that seek alternative and equitable ways to generate and

¹⁹ Interview with Alfredo Rada in ERBOL, Oct. 12, 2011.

distribute wealth.²⁰ As a newspaper editorial in Quito recently stated (Luna), so similar are both nations and histories and, we might add, so similar are the tensions and contradictions between life—visions and State politics.

In closing, what the present scenario in Bolivia and Ecuador makes increasingly clear is that the hope for and the making of a new society, able and willing to confront colonial legacies and patterns of power, and to think “from” and “with” other life—visions and logics, including *buen vivir* or collective well-being, are not in governments or politically elected officials, nor probably in the State itself, but instead in the communities, movements, and peoples. In this sense, the words of Abuelo Zenon, the voice of Afro—Ecuadorian collective memory, seem particularly fitting:

We cannot forget that our right to live in these territories is born in the historic reparation of the damage/harm that meant the dispersion of our African blood through America, dispersion that through the will of other we had to live these hundreds of years before the configuring of the States which now order/regulate us.

What we are today as people is what we never wanted to be, because what we are today does not depend solely on our will or desire to be. Today we are what the laws of the State direct and dictate that we will be (Abuelo Zenon cited in García 2010, 66, 67).

[No podemos olvidar que nuestro derecho a vivir en estos territorios, nace de la reparación histórica del daño que significó la dispersión de nuestra sangre Africana por América. Dispersión que por la voluntad de los otros tuvimos que vivir estos cientos de años antes de la configuración de los Estados que ahora nos ordenan.

Lo que ahora somos como pueblo es lo que nunca quisimos ser, porque lo que ahora somos no depende solamente de nuestra voluntad. Ahora somos lo que las leyes de los Estados nos ordenan y nos mandan que seamos].

As such, it seems ever more relevant to ask if what we are witnessing in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador today is not a coloniality revisited.

²⁰ For an excellent analysis of the problematic and the particular role of Vice President Álvaro García Linera see the interview with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCqVJNnfcw&feature=share>].

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