

# **UCLA**

## **Mester**

### **Title**

Ethical Cosmologies in Amazonia

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4f18z302>

### **Journal**

Mester, 49(1)

### **Author**

Varese, Stefano

### **Publication Date**

2020

### **DOI**

10.5070/M3491051392

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

# Ethical Cosmologies in Amazonia<sup>1</sup>

*Stefano Varese*  
*University of California, Davis*

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL PREMISE

Geological history, or the “Long Duration” perspective proposed years ago by French historian Fernand Braudel, may be the most appropriate epistemological and ethical tools to approach the study and understanding of Amazonia as a whole integrated living system co-created by millennia of interactive co-evolution of all its/her tangible and intangible bio-physical entities.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, rather than using the neologism of anthropocene – with its constraining reference to a late geological era defined by the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the overwhelming expansion of capitalism, I have suggested to choose a term that enlightens the joint role played by humanity and all other entities in landscaping, bio-scaping and thus ethno-scaping the tropical rainforest, the “selva”, as an anthropogenic phenomenon, a dynamic structured production and constantly expanding reproduction of life resulting from millennia of coexistence of all the “relatives” that inhabit the world.

It is with humbleness, then, that I must refer to the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, the large indigenous territory on the banks of the Bobonaza river in Ecuador and cite their words as the most appropriate ethical definition of what Amazonia has been and still is for thousands of lineages of indigenous people living in harmony – in Sumak Kawsay – in this immense territory now threatened by neo-imperialist destruction. The Kichwa people of Sarayaku call their land, their territory, their “environment”, Kawsak Sacha – the Living Forest:

Kawsak Sacha recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations that they have with each other . . . these selves, from the smallest plants to the supreme beings who protect the forest, are

persons – *runa* – who inhabits the waterfalls, lagoons, swamps, mountains, and rivers, and who, in turn, compose the Living Forest as a whole. These persons live together in community (*llakta*) and carry out their lives in a manner that is similar to human beings . . . (Kawsak).

In this article, I am making the argument that addressing issues of cultural and social representations of Peruvian Amazonia by the national community – both political civil society – with a narrow temporal synchronic and spatial materialistic perspective (three or four hundred years of history and the reduction of bio-physical diversity to a few commoditized “resources”) lessens drastically our ability to fully understand and interact intelligently and ethically with this vast portion of Peru’s national territory. I am proposing the qualitative shift to an emic way of thinking and analyzing Amazonia, that is to say adopting the indigenous way of knowing and co-existing with the forest as a living entity peopled by thinking and feeling entities with will, intentionality and teleological energy-synergy. Such an epistemic shift coincides partially with what contemporary anthropologist Viveiros de Castro has defined as “perspectivism”, the Amazonian indigenous conception that the “. . . world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human or non-humans, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view” (469). “These apprehensions are not alternatives point of views of the same world, as old orthodox cultural relativism would have it, but rather results from a carrying over of the same point of view into alternative realities” (Ingold 424).

The analogy that comes to mind has been pointed out by quantum physics theorist F. David Peat who has asserted that indigenous peoples of the Americas’ way of knowing is similar to the “quantum physics picture of the material world as being the outward manifestation of patterns, forms, balances and relations of energy . . . likewise, (indigenous peoples) speak of relationship among the powers and spirits that surround them . . . These relationships carry with them obligations and the necessity of carrying out periodic ceremonies of renewal . . .” (31). The indigenous conception and treatment of the world - in our case the Amazonian forest – as a living and willing web of inter-relationships rather than a fixed set or structure of inanimate categories without intentionality implies that for indigenous people knowledge-science occurs always in a context where “nothing is

abstract since all things happens within a landscape of and by virtue of a web of inter-relationships” (Peat 234). These critical and comparative approaches to ways of knowing has been accompanied by profound revisions of Western modern science even questioning the ability of Indo-European languages and logics to operate in a cosmology where objects can be simultaneously members of two exclusive categories: evil and good, live and dead, material and spiritual, “waves and particles”. This epistemological – at the same time ethical and ontological – revolution has been driven by the fundamental insights of quantum scientists such as Bohr, Heisenberg, Einstein, and others who forced modernity to re-introduce metaphysics into our worldview and accept “ontological uncertainty”, “complementary descriptions” rather than single descriptions that exhaust the phenomenon in question, and “mutually contradictory accounts” (Apffel-Marglin, *Subversive*). But most of all, the quantum revolution has confronted us with the existence of mysteries and the ancient philosophical quandary of how to coexist with them in peace and harmony in what the Sarayaku people call the “Sumak Kawsay”.

#### HOW MANY AMAZONS IN PERU?

In Peru *La Selva* or *Montaña* or *La Amazonía* is a vast region of more than half of the country that does not have a single official definition. Since the enactment in 1974 of the Law of Native Communities (Decree Law 20653) during the Military Revolution of Velasco Alvarado, and a series of other legislative measures in the following administrations, the Amazon region has been treated more as a cultural ideological construct than as a precise geo-ecological region with its specific policy requirements. The now defunct INRENA (Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales, Ministerio de Agricultura) identified 77,528,030 hectares, the 60.32% of the national territory as Amazonía Peruana. This extension of national territory is covered by tropical rain forest that begins on the Eastern slopes of the Andes at an altitude of approximately 3,800 meters. The actual forested area – the original ecosystem of the tropical rainforest - of the whole *Selva* has been assessed in few opportunities during various administrations with notable distortions due to political opportunism. Until 1974, 4.5 mm hectares had been deforested, in 1990 the number had grown to 6.9 mm hectares[vii], the current situation of deforestation is practically unknown since the various administration have no interest in revealing

the level of destruction caused by the total lack of regulations and control of private and state-run extractive activities. A simple projection of the data provided by Marc Dourojeanni's study for the year 2000 average of yearly deforestation of 150,000 hectares per year would add another 2,550,000 hectares of deforestation for the current year of 2017. These numbers contradict the official position of the Peruvian government that the level of deforestation of the Amazon is a little more than 9% while studies of the United Nations in the mid '80s were already showing that the entire South America forested area had been denuded of 40% of its original cover and the two major Amazonian countries, Brazil and Peru, were responsible respectively of 20% and almost 10% of the loss (Dourojeanni et al. 44).

This flimsy and possibly manipulated quantitative information about the reality of the Amazon indicates, however, how dangerously deceitful is the neoliberal ideology claiming the emptiness and untouched wealth of this part of Peru that needs to be occupied, "colonized" and developed for the good of the rest of the country. Since the times of President Ramón Castilla in 1848 through the conservative and liberal governments of the country all the way to the first administration of Fernando Belaúnde Terry in the '70s and the following neo-liberal administrations, the political "imaginary" imposed on the country has been that the Amazon, La Selva, is where lays the country future of wealth. This political geography of deception has sustained for more than one hundred and fifty years the fiction of a *Terra Nullius* rich of untapped resources that can be occupied directly as an internal colony or better yet given in concession to foreign enterprises. Former President Fernando Belaúnde Terry in the early '60s expressed this oligarchic colonialist mythology in the title of his first political platform and book: *La Conquista del Perú por los Peruanos* (*The Conquest of Peru by Peruvians*), letting unsolved the questions of who are the Peruvians and who are the conquered.

#### FROM GEOGRAPHY OF DECEPTION TO ECOLOGICAL REALISM

In terms of geo-historical perspectives, the Eastern slopes and foothills of the Andes of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, between an altitude of 1,500 and 3,800 meters on the sea level, constitute a complex mountainous and hydrological system of extreme biological diversity that announces the vast lowland of Amazonia, the largest tropical rain forest of the world. In each country, this boundary of

cloud forest receives a different vernacular name: *montaña* in Peru and Ecuador, *yunga* in Bolivia, *ceja de selva* (“brow of the jungle”) in most of these countries, or simply *selva alta* (high jungle) and *El Oriente*. The geo-cultural area loosely referred to by the term *montaña* extends from the headwaters of the Caquetá, in southern Colombia, to the headwaters of the Mamoré in Southern Bolivia (Taylor 188-256).<sup>3</sup> The extreme humidity of this piedmont region, caused by the ascending warm air of the Amazon crushing against the cold and dry Andean mountain, creates a blanket of fog – the cloud – that is burned by the sun only for a few hours every day. The eastern Andean piedmont is also the ecological frontier of the major Amazonian cultivar: the *yuca* root (*Manihot esculenta*). Beyond the 1,500-2,800 meters of altitude the basic staple of most Amazonian indigenous people does not grow well. Bananas, plantains and others neo-tropical fruit trees are still viable cultivars so is corn (*Zea maiz*), a plant of astounding adaptability and *coca* (*Eritroxylon coca*), one of the earliest plants to be domesticated by the ancient indigenous peoples of the Coastal region of Peru thousands of years ago.

This ecological divide between the Andes and Amazonia has constituted historically a barrier and at the same time a gate for the movement of peoples, cultivars and cultural practices of production, circulation and consumption. Since the early archaeological studies of Andean societies in the 1940s scholars such as A. Posnansky, Julio C. Tello, and A. Lipshutz in Bolivia, Peru and Chile and J. Imbelloni in Argentina had carved a niche to study and understand the archaeological remnants of “Ancient” cultures and their relations to other regions of the Americas and across the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. Peruvian Quechua-speaking scholar J. C. Tello put forward the argument that some of ancient pre-Inca societies of the Central and Northern Andean region of Peru showed their clear Amazonian origin. J. C. Tello’s hypothesis would have to wait more than thirty years to be proven by new archaeological studies of the Upper Amazon region of Peru by D. W. Lathrap<sup>4</sup> as well as ethnological studies of indigenous communities living in the upper jungle of Ecuador and Peru (Varese, “Relations”).

Eastward, as the Andes drop to an altitude of approximately 600 meters their formation changes into softer hills and increasingly into plains and wetlands crisscrossed by slow-moving rivers carrying the rich sediments of millennia of human agricultural activity and

geological Andean existence. Here begins the other Amazonia, *La Selva Baja* (*The Lower Jungle*) – the immense extension of tropical rain forest and slow flowing rivers rich in Andean silt that is deposited year after year on the riverbanks or *varzeas* and the flooded forest and lagoons, this case the Andean-Amazonian territory would constitute the 74.4% of the total national territory (Dourojeanni et al. 44-45).

#### ETHICS OF TIME AND PLACE

One of the central principles of the Andean-Amazonian cosmologies is the notion of time/space warp – *pachakuti*. Time is written in space-place; space marks time. Humans, non-humans, and other-than-humans all coexist in a time-space warp where past-present-future are not separate entities but a coexistent phenomenon so that the spirit protector of the animal, the spirit of the tree, the spirit of the water-river (*yaku*) is existing in the primordial original time, the present and the future at the same time. When I cut a tree to make a canoe, I am cutting the tree of the original time, the current tree and the future expression of the tree. That is why I have to ask permission, pay an offering, mourning the loss-death and celebrate the continuity of life. The ritual, even in its simplicity, is what enacts the world by acknowledging the origin, continuity and future of each entity of the forest with whom (not which) I interact. In modern Euro American terminology this indigenous cosmology is defined by the categories of History (times/space warp and “long duration”); epistemology, way of knowing; and ethics: consequences of choices, decisions, treating the web of interrelationships as “all my relatives”.

The long historical presence and continuity of these indigenous ethical and cosmological praxes in the Peruvian Amazon region have been impacted drastically by the Euro American invasion, colonial establishment, modernity and late expansion of unconstrained capitalist market economy and its extremely destructive extractivist version. A few hardcore, deeply rooted principles of the indigenous cosmologies have survived in clandestinity or as ideal practices of past generations and ancestors no longer viable except as symbolic re-enactment in ceremonies, performative activities or oral narratives. In all the indigenous nationalities of Peru’s Amazonia the strength of native ethics tends to re-emerge when the community is threatened by external aggression. At least since the early 17th century, a series of punctual, local, regional or pan-ethnic movements of resistance and

opposition to the aggressive penetration and expansion of the early and late capitalist economy in all its different manifestations have dotted the history of Amazonia.

From opposition to early colonial *encomiendas*, *haciendas* and missions, to the modern slavery of the rubber boom and plantations and the increasingly violent dispossession of territory lead by oil, mining, logging industries, and agribusiness corporations, as well as roads, hydroelectric and waterways infrastructures initiatives with the full cooperation of the liberal state, indigenous/native communities have expressed organized responses to all these acts of blatant colonialism. A future brief history of colonial/neo-imperial aggression will certainly have to pay special attention to the decade of 1980-1990 that witnessed the horrors of a civil war waged against the Indigenous peoples by idiotic ideologues disguised as Maoists on one side and Neo-liberal chicanery on the other, both armed to their teeth by arm dealers and corrupt politicians, both determined to establish their version of hell on earth. The Campa-Ashánika people of the Selva Central lost more than 5,000 women, men and children during this tragic period of their millenarian history. Thousands of other people of the Amazon region were displaced and lost their lands, becoming refugees in their own country. No just peace for the people was ever achieved in central Amazonia that was rather transformed in the blossoming marketplace of drugs, weapons, illegal logging and ecological destruction.

#### RESHAPING THE ETHICAL LANDSCAPE OF AMAZONIA

In approximately 200 years – since the nominal Independence of Peru in the early 19th century – the landscape and the ethnoscape of the Upper and Lower Amazon have been drastically modified by the imposition of different incarnations of the capitalist market economy: from the slavery and indentured peonage forced to gather precious hardwoods, animals and rubber tapping of the late 19th and early 20th century, to the exorbitant usury lending to subsistence *ribereños* farmers, to the massive illegal and government-approved expropriation of communal territories for looting, logging, and mineral and oil exploitation, to the plain robbery of private and communal indigenous lands, all types of unbridled capitalist trickery have been tried and have shaped the social and natural landscape through what David Harvey has called the “accumulation by dispossession”. The complex



web of anthropogenic ecosystems that for millennia were co-developed and constantly co-managed and renewed by Native/Indigenous Peoples together with “All-Their-Other-than-Human-Relatives” had been turned into the hunting grounds for the “aimless, senseless chaos of private interests” without any state-government regulations or any ethical restriction.

A closer analysis of the socio-economic and environmental history of the last two centuries of Peru’s Amazon region shows a classic example of K. Marx’s illustration of primitive accumulation<sup>5</sup> with all its range of processes: commodification and privatization of land; forceful expulsion of Native/Indigenous people and Andean and Coastal colonist farmers *chacareros* and Amazonian *ribereños*; conversion of different forms of collective, communal, and “tribal” property rights into exclusive private property rights; suppression of the notion and rights of the commons (lands, forests, water, surface minerals, animals); commodification of labor and the suppression of alternative indigenous forms of production, circulation, consumption; internal-colonial processes of appropriation of natural “resources”; monetization of exchange and elimination of the principles of reciprocity; commoditization of land; normalization of usury and lastly a credit system that traps the impoverished borrowers into a cycle of permanent dispossession.

Looking back at the last 60 years of Peru’s Amazonian ecological history it seems clear that of all the victims of this violence exercised on the Amazon region by the capital in collusion with the state, the Indigenous People – the Native Communities – have been able to endure the aggression and through their political and cultural struggle have brought to the center of national and international attention the ethical and environmental principles that should shape the relation of the rest of the country with the Amazon. The most enlightened participants of the Pan-Amazonian-Andean indigenous movement have been proposing what some scholars are calling a *biocentric perspective* on the rights of nature and peoples (Gudynas 262-275) and I prefer to call a *cosmocentric perspective* in order to emphasize the deep spiritual and ethical dimension of this ontological revolution (Varese 61-82). The Amazonian Indigenous Peoples concept of “socio-nature”, and even the ontological shift to the notion of *kawsak sacha-living jungle* proposed recently by the *Sarayakuruna* intellectuals José and Patricia Gualinga, was already contained in the philosophical and ethical

platform of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku along the Bobonaza river of Ecuador announced more than fifteen years ago as the indigenous response to the “state-enabled immoral ecologies on economic activities – frontier-colonial agribusiness, oil exploitation, large-scale mining and commercial logging . . . extracted from the (indigenous lands) without (permission and without) reciprocally giving back (anything as just compensation)” (Ebdon).<sup>6</sup>

Today, in the midst of the apocalyptic scenario of global warming that threatens the survival of humanity and hundreds of thousands of species, the moral treatment of Amazonia and the reverence that all its tangible and intangible beings deserve becomes the fundamental challenge of our times, not only for the peoples living in Amazonian countries, but for all the humanity of good will and ethical common sense. The Amazonian Indigenous Peoples –as all the other thousands of Native Peoples of the Americas – are telling us the *Original Instructions*, the *First Teachings*, the stories that make the world an expression of place-based spiritual responsibility and cosmic cognitive pluralism. This is the sentient that minimizes materialist science and its devastating commoditization of reality while shifting our focus toward a post-materialist science-knowledge where mind and consciousness become the center of life (Schwartz et al.).

Sixty years ago, Theilhard de Chardin, the heterodox Catholic mystic paleontologist, reminded us that “consciousness is not a byproduct of evolution; it is the purpose of evolution . . . as human, who occupy the pinnacle of the tree of life, we have a sacred obligation to participate responsibly in evolution . . . (and thus) the age of nations is past . . . (and) the task before us now, if we would not perish, is to build the earth” (Pruett 315-319). Today, I am reminded by the Kichwa people of Sarayaku in Ecuador of similar ethical considerations when they assert that “. . . the tropical rain forest of their Amazonian territory the “Kawsak Sacha is a living sentient being, with consciousness, constituted by all the entities of the jungle, from the smallest ones to the largest and the supreme ones. The Kawsak Sacha comprehends all the beings of the animal, vegetal, mineral, spiritual and cosmic world that are in constant communication among themselves and with us - the humans - offering to each other and to us the needed elements to renew our life, our thoughts, our spirits in a permanent flow of life energy that keeps the Native People in harmony with the Universe”.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. This article is based on a manuscript submitted to the book project of Adrián Lerner (Yale University) and Javier Puente, PUCP-Lima (Edts) *Shaping Natural Regions: Capitalism, Environment, and the Geography of Post-Colonial Peru*.

2. Fernand Braudel's bibliography is immense but I am referring to *A History of Civilization*, because this single book summarizes fairly well Braudel's revolutionary ideas about historiography.

3. Taylor's *Bibliographic Essay* at the end of the chapter is possibly one of the most complete lists of ethnohistorical references on the *montaña* available today.

4. See Lathrap's *The Upper Amazon: Ancient Peoples and Place* (1970) and also *The Hunting Economies of the Tropical Forest of South America: an Attempt at Historical Perspective* (1968).

5. See the summary of Marx and Marxists analysis of the concept and process of accumulation in Tom Bottomore's (Ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, in Davis Harvey's, *The New Imperialism*, and especially in Karl Polanyi's, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times*.

6. Free paraphrased quote from an unpublished manuscript by Chris Ebdon, Doctoral Candidate at Yale University, Newhaven, CT.

7. Pueblo originario kichwa de Sarayaaku, Declaración. Kawsak-Sacha: *Selva Viviente, Ser Vivo y Consciente, Sujeto de Derewchos*. Junio 2018.

## Works Cited

- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Bottomore, Tom, ed. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Braudel, Fernand. *A History of Civilization*. Translated by Richard Mayne. Penguin Books, 1995.
- Dourojeanni, Marc, Alberto Barandiarán y Diego Dourojeanni. *Amazonía Peruana en 2021*. Segunda edición. Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental, 2010, pp. 44-45.
- Gudynas, Eduardo. "Deep Ecologies in the Highland and Rainforests – Finding Naess in the Neotropics". *CLAES* (Arne Naess Chair in Global Justice and the Environment), University of Oslo, 2016, pp. 262-275.
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

- Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge, 2000.
- Kawsak Sacha - The Living Forest: An Indigenous Proposal for Confronting Climate Change. Presented by the Amazon Kichwa People of Srayaku. COP 21, Paris, Nov. 30 – Dec. 11, 2015.
- Lathrap, Donald W. 1968, “The Hunting Economies of the Tropical Forest of South America: an Attempt at Historical Perspective”. *Man the Hunter*, edited by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore. Aldine Publishing, 1968.
- . *The Upper Amazon: Ancient Peoples and Place*. Thames and Hudson, 1970.
- Peat, David. *Blackfoot Physics: A Journey into the Native American Universe*. WeiserBooks, 2002.
- Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times*. Beacon Press, 1964.
- Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaaku. *Declaración Kawsak Sacha- Selva Viviente, Ser Vivo y Consciente, Sujeto de Derechos*. Puyo y Sarayaku, Junio 2018.
- Pruett, Dave. *Reason and Wonder: A Copernican Revolution in Science and Spirit*. Alba Enterprises LLC, 2015, pp. 315-319.
- Schwartz, Gary, Mario Beauregard, and Lisa Miller, orgs. “Manifiesto for a Post-Materialist Science”. *International Summit on Post-Materialist Science: Summary Report*, Feb. 7-9, 2014. <https://opensciences.org/files/pdfs/Manifiesto-for-a-Post-Materialist-Science.pdf>.
- Taylor, Anne Christine. “The Western Margins of Amazonia from the Early Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century”. *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, edited by Salomon Frank and Stuart B Schwartz, Volume III, South America, part 2. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Varese, Stefano. “La Ética Cosmocéntrica de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía: Elementos para una Crítica de la Civilización”. *Selva Vida: De la Destrucción de la Amazonía al Paradigma de la Regeneración*, coordinado por Stefano Varese, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin y Róger Rumrill. IWGIA-UNAM-Casa de las Américas, 2013, pp. 61-82.
- . *Relations between the Andes and the Upper Amazon*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History, 2016. <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-62>.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspective”. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), 4, 1988, pp. 469-488.

