

## Article

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## RIGHTING IMBALANCE: Striving for Well-Being in the Andes

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**Abstract** | Since the early 2000s, indigenous notions of well-being (Quechua *sumak kawsay*, Aymara *suma qamaña*, Spanish *buen vivir*, *vivir bien*) have entered the political discourse of the Andean nations (Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru), serving as rallying points for networks of indigenous federations, environmentalists, NGOs and intellectuals united in a critique of neoliberal development paradigms. Ecuador and Bolivia have enshrined *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña* in their national constitutions. How does this political discourse correspond to indigenous notions of well-being experienced in the socio-culturally diverse communities of the Andean region? I begin by focusing on inhabitants of Sonqo, a rural Quechua-speaking community in the highlands of southern Peru, where I have carried out research since 1975. I explore notions of well-being through vocabulary drawn from Southern Peruvian Quechua, including *allin kawsay* (well-being), *pacha* (world), *ayllu* (community), *ayni* (reciprocity), *uyway* (nurturance), *hucha* (sin) and *animu* (individuating energy), with particular emphasis on values and ontological orientations that are generally consistent across the Andean ethnographic and ethnohistorical record. Underlying this vocabulary is a mindset that prioritizes relationships over individual agency; this entails connections among a multitude of human as well as other-than-human persons and necessitates collective work in which everything contributes to keeping the collectivity in a precarious balance. Although, at the national level, these notions of well-being often are honored in the breach, by articulating and promoting alternate notions of well-being, *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña* may have cracked open a door to a fundamental reshuffling of priorities.

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## Preamble

What does “well-being” mean to an Andean person? This question begs another that needs to be considered first: Who are we talking about? Can we generalize about “Andean-ness?” The Andean region is as socially and culturally diverse as its landscape is varied. Much cultural differentiation exists even among traditional communities in the far-flung highlands, just as it did among the many polities incorporated into the Inka Empire; moreover, almost half a millennium has passed since the Spanish inva-

sion of 1532 brought Christianity, racism, feudalism and capitalism to the Andes. Over half the population now lives in cities. As I pondered the question, I considered rephrasing the topic as “Inka well-being,” thus avoiding the messy, dynamic present and colonial past. That would, however, preclude drawing on my own ethnographic experience in a contemporary Quechua-speaking community. Thus, for the purposes of this essay – with the caveat that all generalizations are false – I focus upon a rural highland community in southern Peru where I have carried out ethnographic research. I will emphasize values and ontological

orientations that are generally consistent across the ethnographic and ethnohistorical record, keeping in mind the broad and dynamic context of the Andean social/cultural landscape.

### Allin Kawsay: Living Well

The Quechua term that most closely approximates English “well-being” is *allin kawsay*, a phrase I heard often while doing ethnographic research in Sonqo, a small Quechua-speaking community in the southern Andean Highlands northeast of the city of Cuzco. *Allin* means “good or well;” *kawsay*, broadly translated, means “to live.” The phrase *allin kawsay* most often occurred when my interlocutors explained why they sought to communicate with non-human entities like earth beings. For example, when my friend Luis Gutiérrez showed me how to share coca leaves with animate places in the landscape he commented, “*Hina ruwanchis allin kawsayninchispag*” (“We do this for our well-being”).

Since the early 2000s similar phrases have entered the political discourse of Andean nations, *sumak kawsay* in Ecuadorean Kichwa and *suma qamaña* in Bolivian Aymara. Translated as *buen vivir* and *vivir bien* (Spanish, living well), both phrases serve as rallying points for left-of-center networks of indigenous federations, environmentalists, NGOs and various intellectuals united in a critique of neoliberalism. Ecuador and Bolivia which, unlike Peru, have left-of-center governments and strong indigenous federations, have enshrined *sumak kawsay/buen vivir* and *suma qamaña/vivir bien* as central tenets of their national constitutions. The 2008 Ecuadorean constitution frames *sumak kawsay/buen vivir* as a set of rights: “Celebrating nature, the *Pacha Mama*, of which we are part and which is vital to our existence . . . we recognize that the population has a right to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability and a good life, *sumak kawsay*” (Constitución de la República del Ecuador 2008, 7.13; my translation).

*Suma qamaña*, along with other Aymara, Quechua and Guaraní phrases, provides a moral framework for the 2009 Bolivian constitution:

The State assumes and promotes as ethical-moral principles of the plural society: *ama qhilla*, *ama llulla*, *ama suwa* (do not be lazy, do not lie, do not steal), *suma qamaña* (living well), *ñandereko*

(harmonious life), *teko kawi* (good life), *ivi maraei* (earth without evil) and *qhapaj ñan* (noble road or life).” (Constitución Política del Estado (Bolivia) 2009, 3; my translation)

Not surprisingly, academics are beginning to respond to these remarkable constitutional developments with a growing literature, most of which addresses the implications for international development policies (*i.a.* Acosta and Martínez (eds) 2009; Albó 2009; Alderman 2018; Canessa 2012, 244-280; De la Cadena 2015, 273-286; Gudynas 2011, 2016; Postero 2007, 2013; Ramírez (ed) 2010; Walsh 2010; Wutich, Beresford and Carvajal 2017; Yampara 2011). In fact, this literature is growing so steadily that by the time this paper comes to print the bibliography is likely to be out of date. Although I will return briefly to the *sumak kawsay/suma qamaña* question, my main purpose in this essay is to discuss notions of well-being that I encountered during my ethnographic research.

### A Changing Community

In 1975 I undertook field research in a Quechua-speaking community called Sonqo, located on the high (approximately 3600 meters), steep, almost treeless slopes of a small valley northeast of the city of Cuzco in southern Peru. Sonqo was, and still is, an *ayllu* – which I will provisionally define as an indigenous community holding land in common and united by ties of mutual aid. I have returned nine times over the years (most recently in 2011). The community’s population has held steady at about 300 individuals, its eighty-five households devoted mainly to potato farming and the herding of sheep and camelids. Religion is Catholic with a strong Native American element; the community has never had a resident priest. Adolescents often spend a few years working as domestics in the city of Cuzco. Some settle there permanently, providing important nodes in a rural-urban network of socio-economic relationships. While potato farming remains the staple activity, the community has undergone many changes since I first set foot there: a road connects Sonqo and Cuzco; pastoralism has steeply declined; a community-wide system of sectorial fallowing has collapsed; and some families have converted to Maranatha evangelical Protestantism. The “ethnographic present” of this essay reflects my most intense periods of fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s, before the decade of turmoil caused by the *Sendero Luminoso* guerilla movement (roughly 1985-

95). Sonqo did not directly experience the violence and resulting outward migration that affected the central highlands, but the community suffered nevertheless from Peru's economic and social collapse. The rise of Maranatha conversion after 1995 was partly a response to the demoralization wrought by those years (cf. Allen 2002, 203-247). It seems inevitable that Protestant conversion will effect a change in notions of well-being -- a fascinating subject for further study.

Since 1996, Peru's National Institute of Statistics and Information has published a *Mapa de la Pobreza* (Poverty Map) that charts the distribution of wealth across Peru's territory (Sanchez Aguilar 2015; also see Mayer 2002, Chapter 10). Every iteration of this document locates Sonqo in a zone of *extrema pobreza* (extreme poverty), a condition that certainly affects Sonqueños' notions of well-being or the good life, *allin karwasay*. Life is precarious. Luis and Rufina, in whose household I lived, had lost six of their twelve children at various ages; their situation was not unusual. As in any farming community, crop failure was a constant concern. During the 1990s, llama and alpaca herds were decimated by liver flukes. And particularly demoralizing, Sonqueños' laboriously harvested potatoes continue to command low prices in the Cuzco marketplace. "Our labor is worth nothing," was a frequent refrain when I visited Sonqo in 2000 (Allen 2002, 218). This may explain why, in Sonqo, I never heard the term *sumaq karwasay* (orthography reflects the pronunciation in Southern Peruvian Quechua).

*Sumaq* (excellent, gorgeous, delicious) is a superlative; it might refer to a scrumptious meal or a very beautiful person, but to speak of a wonderful or excellent life would be a bit over the top. *Allin karwasay*, the good life (in the sense of whole and healthy), is a more realistic aspiration. One wishes to have adequate subsistence, good health and to live with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect (Bolin 1998). Respect, an important aspect of the good life, is often hard to come by. Rural *ayllus* in the Andean highlands have experienced centuries of social and political oppression, particularly through the neo-feudal hacienda system that persisted into the 1970s. Interestingly, I cannot supply a direct Quechua equivalent for "respect," although the Spanish loan word *respeto* is used frequently. Rather, Quechua speakers build respect into verbal constructions through use of *ku*, *na* and *naku*, suffixes expressing reflexivity, obligation and mutuality. De la Cadena re-

records the words of Mariano Turpo, an important peasant organizer from the Cuzco region of southern Peru: Mariano said, *Why can't there be a good life? (Manachu sumaq karwasaylla kanman?)* I did not know what he meant so I asked him to explain. He responded . . . *to live without hatreds, to work happily; the animals would have food, the bad words would not exist. Even if we do not read, they would respect us, the police would respect us, they would listen to us, we would respect them – same with judges, with the president, with the lawyers.* (De la Cadena 2015, 285)

De la Cadena does not include the original Quechua, so I do not know the exact words Turpo used, but the statement is striking for its emphasis on work, nurture and respect. One wishes, not for leisure and luxury, but to "work happily." Contentment in one's work results from harmonious relations with one's fellows and from the knowledge that labor is productive and worthwhile. Interestingly Turpo specifies, not that *he* should have plenty of food, but that the *animals* – creatures in his care – should have enough to eat. Probably "animals" translates Quechua *uywa* (see below). As a social activist Turpo contextualizes the good life within Peruvian society, poignantly evoking an ideal environment of mutual respect among different social strata, particularly between Mestizo authorities and "Indios" like himself.

## Everything Lives

Comprehending a people's concept of well-being entails at least a brief excursion into their ontological assumptions about existence. In what follows I explore key terms in Southern Peruvian Quechua that shed light on understandings of what life is, and what it means to live well. They include: *karwasay* (to live), *ayllu* (community), *ayni* (reciprocity), *uyway* (nurturance), *animu* (individuating energy), *sami* (general enlivening energy), *hucha* (sin), *allichay* (put things to rights), *yapa* (addition). We must bear in mind that these are approximate translations across radically different linguistic and cultural frames of reference (Southern Peruvian Quechua and English). Inevitably we are confronted with what Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro terms *equivocation*: "To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there . . . It is to communicate by differences" (2004, 7). In other words, our understanding progresses as, through many conversations, ethnographers

and their interlocutors recognize and explore their differences. My discussion of Quechua terminology attempts to condense and summarize what I learned through this “peculiar kind of dialogue and a peculiar zone of emergence, at once constitutive of and constituted by radical cultural difference” (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995, 15; also see Allen forthcoming).

Equivocation immediately comes to the fore when we consider the verb *karwsay*. In its most obvious sense, *karwsay* refers to the state being alive rather than dead, as in the question, *Mamayki karwsanraqchu?* (“Is your mother still alive?”). Yet as conversation proceeds one learns that even the bones of the dead retain certain kinds of agency and are sometimes referred to as being alive. Although degrees of liveliness and agency vary, nothing is absolutely inanimate. Every feature in the landscape has a personhood that must be respected, as do domestic animals and artifacts like hand-woven textiles. This awareness permeates one’s activities, reminiscent of Graham Harvey’s description of animism: “the world is full of persons only some of whom are human, and ... life is always lived in relationship with others” (Harvey 2006, xi). Thus one does not so much act *upon* things as interact *with* them. In nominal form, *karwsay* refers to the whole material context in which one subsists (as in English “earning a living”). When I took Luis to visit the Inka Museum in Cuzco, he described the exhibits as containing *Inka karwsay*, “Inka living.” Significantly, he emerged from this first museum visit disturbed and depressed, as though he had been visiting a prison.

This orientation is neither mystical nor “pre-logical;” it simply prioritizes relationships over individual agencies. To use a phrase coined by Native American writer Scott Momaday, humans and other-than-human beings exist in a relationship of *reciprocal appropriation*: “man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience” (1976, 80; also see Baso 1996, 64). Reciprocal appropriation is an on-going relational process among all beings including those of different ontological status, like humans and mountains. Even the most mundane quotidian activity entails inter-relating with a sentient and responsive environment. De la Cadena eschews the term “interaction” and employs the term “intra-action” to describe these processes of mutual appropriation: “Rather than being instilled in the individual subject, the substance of runakuna [humans] and other-than-humans that

make an *ayllu* is the co-emergence of each *with* the others” (2015, 102; she borrows the term from physicist Karen Barad 2007). Thus the self emerges not so much as a unitary being as a node in a web of active relationships.

These attitudes imply an ontological orientation that differs considerably from scientific naturalism, particularly in its assumptions about the nature of the material world. Obviously this is a complex issue that deserves more extended exploration than I can offer here. A brief look at the word *pacha*, however, illuminates some of the basic issues. In its broadest sense, *pacha* means “world” in both Quechua and Aymara; sometimes the word is translated into English as *space-time* to convey its reference to both a moment in time and a location in space. Because most of us have at least a passing familiarity with the concept of space-time in modern physics, it provides an accessible translation of the concept -- a translation that fails, nevertheless, to capture the complexity of *pacha*. Obviously the world, this spatio-temporal entity, exists materially; *pacha* is profoundly concrete. Other aspects of the Andean concept – for example, fluidity of scale – are yet more elusive (cf. F. Salomon, 1991, 14). Depending on the context, *pacha* is the whole cosmos or an instantaneous, located event. Every place is a microcosm, contained by and containing other microcosms; every moment is nested within other moments. Thus one’s perspective can expand and contract indefinitely. Finally -- and I think this is the aspect of *pacha* that is hardest for us “westerners” to grasp – there is the presence of consciousness. *Pacha*, while objectively material, is a state of consciousness, an inter-subjective convergence of the sensible entities, human and non-human, that compose it. The world (at whatever scale) is a confluence of matter, activity *and moral relationship* – a material, lived-in moment.

With *pacha* in mind, we can return to some of the more specific ideas about life and well-being in Sonqo and similar rural communities. One of these is *animu* (derived from Spanish *ánima*), a term widely discussed in the Andeanist literature (La Riva 2004, 78; Ricard 2007, 85; also see Arnold and Yapita 1998; Gose 1994, 115-125; Robin 2008). *Animu* infuses an object with its individual being, and might be understood as a localization of *sami*, which is a general enlivening force (Allen 2002, 33-36). One’s *animu* is sometimes likened to a halo surrounding the body, the shadow attached to the body, or a small in-dwelling

double. Unlike the Christian notion of the soul, the *animu* has no eternal existence independent of the body. *Animu* and *kirpu* (body, from Spanish *cuerpo*) are distinct but mutually constitutive; neither can survive for long without the other. Xavier Ricard likens *animu* to entelechy and glosses the word as “essence in action” (*esencia en acto*; Ricard 2007, 83). He goes on to suggest that the Spanish term replaced *kamaq*, a Quechua word that appears in early Colonial sources denoting “a concept of specific essence and force, ‘to charge with being, to infuse with species power’” (Salomon 1991, 16).

How do these general notions of existence translate into daily life in the *ayllu*? (Literature on the social organization of Andean *ayllu* is vast; see, *i.a.*, Bastien 1985; Bolton & Mayer 1977; Castelli, Paredes and Pease 1981; Isbell 1985; Platt 1981; Skar 1981.) Earlier in this paper I glossed *ayllu* as an indigenous community holding land in common and united by ties of mutual aid. This is adequate for legal purposes (and Sonqueños are acutely aware of their legal right to the land), but it does not describe the bonds that knit an *ayllu* together. The land holds the people just as much as the people hold the land. An *ayllu* is composed not only of people, but also of places (earth beings), crops, domestic animals, houses, and tools (etc.). Paraphrasing De la Cadena again (2015, 102), *ayllu* is a process of intra-action in which humans and other-than-humans co-emerge with each other as a web of multiply reciprocal relationships. As manifestations of *pacha*, *ayllus* have a nested quality; small scale *ayllus* nest within larger ones (Allen 2002, 85–88). An *ayllu*'s internal organization has a strongly hierarchical character determined by a pyramid-like system of civic and religious offices and by obligations among categories of consanguineal and affinal kinsmen. Because offices are temporary and everyone has multifarious kin relations (and thus both owes and is owed services and respect), hierarchy is offset by an egalitarian tendency. The relations of respect and obligation that (ideally) keep the system functioning include relations between humans and other-than-humans, most significantly with *tirakuna* (earth beings), powerful places in the landscape. Although life is said to originate with God the Father (*Diyus Tayta*; a distant entity), the flow of life (*sami*) that animates the *ayllu* is controlled by *tirakuna*.

Sonqueños describe their local earth beings as *uywaqniykukuna* (those who nurture us, who make us

grow up). These powerful places instill and maintain *animu* for everything within the spheres of their authority. In return for their care, the *tirakuna* expect to be fed with libations of alcohol and the aromas of coca leaves and cooked food. Agriculturalists address the nourishing earth as *Pachamama* (Mother Pacha) and in gratitude nourish her just as they do the *tirakuna*. If left to go hungry, these entities withdraw their life-giving force and, if seriously neglected, consume human life-force, causing serious illness. Thus Luis commented, as he instructed me how to share coca leaves, “We do this for our well-being.”

When Sonqueños describe their *tirakuna* as *uywaqniykukuna*, they use a term also applied to shepherds, parents and guardians. The root is *uyway*, which means “to nurture, raise, bring up a creature into adulthood.” The noun *uywa* refers not only to herd animals but to any living creature that is tended responsibly and compassionately – children, guinea pigs, even potatoes. A household thrives if the married couple at its heart is successful at *uyway*. *Uywa* are fed, protected, disciplined and made useful. This is a one-way process that ideally evens out over time. The *uywaq* (nurturer) occupies a position of power and responsibility; even as adults, people feel permanently obliged to their *uywaq*. Eventually, however, what goes around comes around: parents age and become dependent; animals give up their wool and eventually their lives to their human shepherds. Different kinds of *uywa* are systematically inter-related in order to maintain a household as a more-or-less self-contained whole. Among pastoralists the relationship with herd animals is especially intense. “We raise them, and they raise us,” is a common sentiment (Bugallo and Tomasi 2012). For example, herd animals defecate in the corral, providing manure for the crops that feed the humans who care for the animals who provide the manure, and so on (Allen 2002, 144; this cycle was broken by the introduction of commercial fertilizers and partially explains the decline of pastoralism in Sonqo). In the process of nurturing and caring for household creatures, a maturing adult constructs a responsible self.

Social life within an *ayllu* circulates through reciprocal appropriations of energy and skill; that is, through relations of mutual aid, the most basic of which is called *ayni*. *Ayni* exchanges provide a kind of dialectical pumping mechanism that incorporates every category of being (Allen 2002, 73). For example, brothers-in-law labor in each other's fields; if Luis helps Serafeo

today, Serafeo owes Luis a day's work in the near future. Officials obligated to sponsor community festivals call on a network of kin and godparents for help, and they expect to repay this labor debt in kind. At any given moment, the scale is necessarily unbalanced, for one party owes the other. Today, either Serafeo owes Luis or Luis owes Serafeo. This see-saw of obligation and counter-obligation is what defines and maintains their relationship. Ideally the relationship balances out, but in practice resentments and misunderstandings easily crop up. The seesaw of labor obligations can feel burdensome; some individuals try to avoid it by relying (usually with scant success) on monetary exchanges, an attitude that sparks resentment among their peers. Migrants to the city sometimes express relief at avoiding the burdens of in-ayllu reciprocity (Allen 2002, 213). Significantly, the semantic field of *ayni* includes negative reciprocity, as when people quarrel and exchange insults. Obviously this negative *ayni* is not conducive to well-being; it has no place in Mariano Turpo's vision of the good life, where one "works happily" without hatreds or angry words in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Because the world's dynamism consists in a pendulum-like state of imbalance, ideally everyone (humans and non-humans) should do their part to keep the pendulum swinging smoothly.

### Disequilibrium and its Rectification

It would be easy to conclude this essay on Andean well-being by appealing to notions of balance and harmony, qualities that Euro-American popular culture tends to associate with the "noble savages" of Native America. Balance and harmony are important values, but we need to put a finer point on this idea. Well-being entails, not a harmonious steady state (for there is no such steady state), but the wherewithal to keep righting the imbalance. Every movement has to be rectified by a counter movement. Because every living moment (*pacha*) is dynamically unbalanced, the people of Sonqo (and, to generalize, elsewhere in the Andes) experience the world's order as inherently fragile and perpetually teetering on the brink of collapse. Platt succinctly sums up this attitude in a discussion of Aymara political thinking: The slight disequilibrium between the poles of a symmetric opposition "represents a fundamental nexus in Aymara thought." Society exists "in a constant flux of reordering; . . . a precondition for continuity in the social order is the constant process of smoothing over the excesses of a hierarchy" (Platt 1987, 98-99).

Urton's study of Quechua numerological ontology includes a similar insight: The "overarching purpose or teleology of Quechua arithmetic operations is realized in a principle of . . . rectification" (Urton 1997, 145). The purpose of mathematics is to (re)establish unity or equilibrium among opposing parties, an operation called *yapa*. Although usually translated as "addition," *yapa* more precisely refers to any strategy for regaining equilibrium (Urton 1997, 147). A similar, though not arithmetic, term is *allichay*, "to repair, to make things right." Failure to adhere to this moral imperative is *hucha*, a word commonly translated as "sin" but that more precisely refers to failure to keep one's relationships in balance. A life spent receiving but not reciprocating favors, and/or spent inflicting damage without giving compensation, leaves an individual *huchayug*, that is, burdened with sin and unable to die peacefully.

### Conclusion: The Fullness of Life?

To generalize, in Andean communities like Sonqo well-being is understood as a collective, not individual, condition, a mindset that prioritizes relationship over discrete individuality. Well-being entails collective work in which everything -- human and other-than-human -- contributes to continually righting the collective balance, and everyone prospers as a consequence. Eduardo Gudynas comes close to grasping this understanding of well-being in his discussion of the Ecuadorean constitution when he explains Quichua *sumak kawsay* as "a fullness of life in a community, together with other persons and Nature" (Gudynas 2011b, 442). This brings us back to Viveiros de Castro's notion of equivocation to describe the communicative disjuncture that occurs when parties try to understand each other using terms that overlap but are not equivalent. I occupy a space of equivocation in this essay as I attempt to convey concepts, like *pacha* and *ayllu*, which are not directly translatable into Western terms. Interestingly, with *sumak kawsay/buen vivir* and *suma qamaña/vivir bien* this space of equivocation has moved into national political discourses.

Gudynas points out that *buen vivir* cannot truly be considered an indigenous position; it draws equally from contemporary Euro-American discourses that critique classical development paradigms and linear conceptions of progress. He adds, "Such radical questioning was possible within several indigenous traditions in South America, which culturally lacked con-

cepts like development or progress. The contribution of indigenous knowledge to *Buen Vivir* therefore continues to be a critical thread” (Gudynas 2011b, 442).

In *sumak kawsay/buen vivir* discourse, *pacha* is elided with *nature* even though the two are incommensurable (yet partially overlapping) concepts from unrelated cultural traditions. In this encounter of culturally different concepts, the dominant legal/political discourse inevitably dominates. *Pacha* appears in the Ecuadorean constitution as *Pacha Mama*, nature personified -- evoking Mother Nature, a folkloric metaphor. Nevertheless, as concepts like *nature* and *community* swallow up the indigenous terms, they undergo a sea change: community expands conceptually to include the participation of nature. To quote Gudynas again, “Buen Vivir promotes the dissolution of the Society/Nature dualism. Nature becomes part of the social world, and political communities could extend in some cases to the non-human” (2011b, 445). Recognizing nature as an entity with rights would seem to do exactly that.

“Rights of nature” are a pervasive theme in a comprehensive website detailing Ecuador’s National Plan for *Buen Vivir*. The Plan’s objectives include “guaranteeing the rights of nature and promoting environmental sustainability, both territorial and global” (<http://www.buenvivir.gob.ec/objetivos-nacionales-para-el-buen-vivir>; my translation). Further along, the Plan defines nature as “the space in which life is realized” and advocates judicial reforms to ensure environmental sustainability. Thus nature is elided with environment and all animistic elements of indigenous thought are conveniently erased (cf. De la Cadena 2015, 275).

It becomes apparent that although indigenous concepts are “a critical thread” within *Buen Vivir*, a modern legal system cannot really accommodate them. Although in this equivocal space we may strive for a genuine “cosmopolitics” (Stengers 2005)—in which politics “rather than requiring sameness, would be underpinned by divergence” (De la Cadena 2015, 286) -- moving to a discourse of environmental sustainability is probably the most practical compromise. The status of “nature” is too ambiguous: if nature is “a space in which life is realized,” then how can it have rights? How can such rights be defined? Who is entitled to defend them (as nature cannot speak for herself)? Not surprisingly, nature’s “rights” are easily disregarded in

favor of short-term economic gain. Gudynas observes (2016, 10) that, even as the leftist governments of Ecuador and Bolivia give lip service to the principles of *buen vivir* and *vivir bien*, they have gone ahead with intensive exploitation of mineral and petroleum resources for foreign export.

Nevertheless, although “rights of nature” seem currently to be honored mainly in breach, this should not obscure the historical significance of their inclusion in a national constitution. By articulating alternate notions of well-being, it seems that *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña* have at least cracked open a door to some fundamental reshuffling of priorities. As anyone from an *ayllu* can tell you, maintaining the fullness of life is a complex and delicate balance subject to setbacks and failures – yet one perseveres.

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