

# Shuar visions of peace: *tsankurnaerar pujustin* (to live in peace)

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Shuar Kakaram de Buena Esperanza<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: The ancestral territory of Nunpaim

Note: Natem David Marshiant looks out over his ancestral territories, known as Nunpaim, in what is now known as the Ecuadorian Amazon. Photo taken by the first author and shared with permission.

Deconstructing the coloniality of peace through the eyes of the Shuar community unveils the power relations often inherent in both theories of and spaces for peace. Western-centric definitions determine who can experience peace and who cannot; defining it narrowly as an absence of violence masks invisible or 'slow violence' through systematic oppression and degradation of all forms of life, both human and the more-than-human.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the collective name to represent the intellectual contributions and leadership from the advisory committee in the community of Buena Esperanza, Morona Santiago, Ecuador (Names have temporarily been removed to protect community and participant safety).

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## Introduction

This entry is built on five and a half years of community-led research conducted with Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Findings from discussions with Shuar participants revealed their understanding of peace, which enabled a vision of decolonial peace to emerge. This concept holds the potential for pluralistic thinking to foster peace in the pluriverse. These discussions challenged the status quo wherein a ‘post-colonial’ peaceful state has been imposed at the expense of Indigenous rights, health, land and culture. This was demonstrated through reference to increasing conflicts in Ecuador between the state and Indigenous communities over extractive projects in their ancestral territories. The so-called ‘peace’ maintained by the state is not only harmful within the Amazonian region, because of degradation to the more-than-human, ecological and cultural realms, but it also perpetuates violence within Indigenous communities.

*Our air, thank God, is not polluted like other countries in the world. Let's plant more trees, let's sow intelligence, let's seek to reach people. I ask all around the world – Europe, Japan, China, India, and other countries– that we all be one family because we all drink the same water and breathe the same air. Everyone must be together because we don't have much time left to live. As a shaman and a witch doctor, I ask you to please give us the peace we crave here in the jungle... We must fight for our rights. We must be happy and peaceful while we live.*

*(Participant 6, Shaman and Elder).*



Figure 2: Cooking ayampaco in Buena Esperanza. Ayampaco is a traditional Shuar meal of fish with herbs from the garden, cooked in bijao leaves over a fire. Photo taken by the first author and shared with permission.

## A decolonial lens for peace

A discourse focused on conflict, violence and destruction often dominates academic narratives, placing little emphasis on other value-based ideas such as peace and empathy (Bregazzi & Jackson, 2016). Through discussions within Shuar communities, we can learn how peace can be conceptualised and acknowledge the importance of broadening our understanding of the term 'violence' to fully understand the extent of harm. Ideological imperialism has historically marginalised the epistemological systems of colonised communities and nations, leading to epistemicide, 'the killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluation of a knowledge system' (Redvers et al., 2024, p. 1). This process not only causes systemic violence against Indigenous peoples like the Shuar, but also results in slower, less visible violence, which Nixon describes as 'slow violence': 'violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Decolonialism aims to dismantle the Western racial hierarchy that has positioned and normalised Indigenous Peoples from Abya Yala as inferior and subject to violence, including the ongoing 'slow violence' in the present day (Curiel, 2021). This oppressive worldview also regards 'nature', or the more-than-human world, as something to be exploited for capitalist profit.

Decolonial thought has emerged from Latin America, drawing on the study of coloniality and power (Quijano, 2000), the discipline of geography, Indigenous scholars in the Global North, and postcolonial studies. Aníbal Quijano first related the two concepts of coloniality and power to highlight the imperialist system, which is regulated globally through colonial structures that uphold the imposition of political, racial and social order on non-European lineages, especially within the context of Latin America (2000). His theory highlighted two key aspects that were foundational to decolonial thinking across Abya Yala. First, it outlined how Eurocentric ways of thinking dominated scientific and academic discourse while working to subjugate alternative ways of thinking that were not understood by its metrics. Second, it fostered the hierarchical notion of European superiority (Grosfoguel et al., 2020; Quijano, 2000). Utilising a decolonial lens sparks resistance to the global colonial world order and hegemonic knowledge systems (Bhabra, 2014). Engaging with a decolonial lens to examine peace enables pluralistic thinking and the recognition of diverse cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies (Simpson, 2011), which in turn allows for a diversity of ways of being that vary across regions, within communities, and across temporalities.

Countering epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Redvers et al., 2024) is one way to resist the colonial oppression of alternative ways of knowing and being that can be classified as ontological violence. Therefore, decolonising what 'peace' looks like speaks not only to the ontological conception of the term in order to counter its ontological oppression, but also calls for epistemic equity and freedom for Indigenous rights, as well as the rights of nature, which Shuar visions for peace understand through their relational epi-ontology<sup>2</sup>. Decolonial thinking analyses the history behind the hegemony of scientific theories for the nature-society order in the Global South (Wisner, 2015; Robbins, 2019; Leff, 2015; Lowe, 2015), 'exposing the ontological violence authorized by Eurocentric epistemologies both in scholarship and everyday life' (Sundberg, 2014, p. 34). If we conceptualise *tsankurnaerar pujustin*, what living in peace means to the Shuar, it connects the peacefulness found in everyday life, and sees it as inherently linked to the natural world. Otherwise, peace is hard to find, and it is also narrowly defined.

Decolonial theory seeks to undo the economic development that still operates within the broader system of exploitation, which upholds the capitalist global hegemony through the coloniality of

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<sup>2</sup> Epi-ontology is a new term that combines epistemology, a theory of knowledge about how you know something, and ontology, a philosophical understanding of how things are the way that they are. Thus, epi-ontology encompasses ways of both knowing and being in the world, creating a short form to describe the two together.

power structures and Western-centred thinking (Curiel, 2021). This often subjugates and alters the lives of Indigenous peoples such as the Shuar, for whom the good life, '*buen vivir*' or *penker pujustin*, is a significant concern. However, engaging in decolonial thinking around peace aims to break away from colonial mentalities that privilege notions of Western civilisation and the need for economic development, along with the violence that often accompanies these. Peace thereby works to combat the legacy of discrimination in social ordering that still permeates all forms of society today, including constructs such as race, gender, culture, labour, geography, science, nature and social reproduction. In her explanation of imperialism, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) underscores how it has functioned within the colonial system to shape Western scientific enquiry:

*Imperialism provided the means through which concepts of what counts as human could be applied systematically as forms of classification, for example, through hierarchies of race and typologies of different societies. In conjunction with imperial power and with 'science', these classification systems came to shape relations between imperial powers and Indigenous societies (pp. 26–27).*

Shuar science<sup>3</sup> inevitably includes discussions of the landscape, which encompasses spiritual beings that make up part of their territory and the living web of relationships in these lands. Shuar communities steward their relations with the more-than-human world through their science; this is a practice of *tsankurnaerar pujustin* (a peaceful life). Shuar spiritual landscapes understand these embodied practices through their cultural activities, such as ceremonies, that bring into being all their kinship relationships (Desbury & Cloke, 2009; Avalos, 2023). The Shuar's relational epistemology of their ancestral landscape, through spiritual geographies, points to determinants of planetary health and human flourishing that are often subject to colonial violence. Decolonialism aims to address the inequities caused by the cognitive imperialism of Indigenous science and the literal imperialism that shapes the lives and territories of Indigenous peoples through colonialism.

The International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 article 1 (1) (b) identifies Indigenous Peoples as 'peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term 'Shuar science' as a decolonial act that reflects the translations we heard in conversations and interviews with members of the community. 'La ciencia Shuar' (Shuar science) or 'sabiduria ancestral' (ancestral wisdom) were the two most common terms used by the community to talk about their system of knowledge. We use the term 'Shuar science' throughout this entry because this was how the notion was translated by community research assistants and understood by the community itself.

their descent from populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present states boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions' (International Labour Organization, 1989, para. 1). Ecuador officially became an independent state in 1830 after three hundred years of colonial rule by Spain. Nations such as Ecuador, which were founded through colonialism, are often focused on seeking capital accumulation through the dispossession of people from their ancestral lands, and have been described by Patrick Wolfe as a structure, not an event (2006). Moraña and colleagues (2008), in their article *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Breakdown of the Difference Upon Nations*, contend that violence was an inherent means of conquest by the Europeans in Latin America, including land destruction, genocide, pillage and exploitation. 'It has been estimated that between 1451 and 1870, some 11,569,000 African slaves were brought to the "new world", and that after the sixteenth century, out of eighty million native peoples in the Americas, there remained ten million' (Lowe, 2015, p. 36). This violence continues, but it is now much more opaque and is often veiled by calls for peace. It continues as dispossession by rupturing the relational values inherent in Indigenous peoples' interaction with the natural world (Gomez-Barris, 2017), and as a lack of ability to achieve *buen vivir* and the ability to live *tsankurnaerar pujustin* – a peaceful life.

## Understanding the coloniality of peace for the Shuar

The Shuar communities in the province of Morona-Santiago comprise a largely rural population, accounting for 66% of the region's residents (Rudel, 2018). Outside of traditional cultural activities such as agriculture, hunting, fishing, artisanal crafting, selling wood and gastronomy, there are limited opportunities for economic activity (Karakras, 2023; Rudel, 2018; ProAmazonia, 2021). The environmental health of their collective 803,000-hectare area of the Amazonian rainforest, which sustains Shuar life and livelihoods, is at risk of environmental contamination and degradation due to extensive mining and deforestation (Enrique Chiriap, personal communication, November 19, 2021; MiningWatch Canada, 2024; Peck et al., 2023).



Figure 3: Map of Ecuador displaying research sites

Note: The map highlights the Shuar communities where the interviews were conducted: Buena Esperanza, Tsiur, Nunpaim, San Luis, Sevilla, Twsui and Taisha, as well as the city of Macas (Google, 2025).



MAPA DE ECUADOR  
Elaborado en base a: Sierra R., Maldonado P y Zamora G (2011). Mapa de Territorios Indígenas del Ecuador de Ecodinámica y Red amazónica de Información Socioambiental Georeferenciada. Quito, Ecuador.

1. Cofán
2. Kichwas of Sucumbios
3. Siona
4. Secoya
5. Kichwas of Orellana
6. Waorani
7. Kichwas of Pastaza
8. Zápara
9. Shiwiar
10. Andoas
11. Achuar
12. Shuar
13. Kichwas of Napo

Figure 4: Map of Shuar territory

Note: This map shows the Indigenous territories in what is now known as the Ecuadorian Amazon. Shuar territories are highlighted in purple under number 12 on the map (Sierra, Maldonado, & Zamora. 2011).

Transnational resource development is increasing in protected forests and within Indigenous territories throughout Ecuador. Of the country's total area, 33% is legally recognized as Indigenous territory, and 24% of this has been concessioned to mining companies (Peck et al., 2023). Shuar communities face the highest rates of mining concessions on their ancestral lands, with 20% of their territory affected by concessions and large-scale mining projects (Peck et al., 2023). Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the distribution of Indigenous territories within what is now Ecuador, highlighting the varying scales of mining across the country.

## Extractivism in Ecuador

There have been increasing conflicts across the country over the past few years related to the extraction of resources. Within Shuar territory, this has been primarily due to state-supported Canadian mining, such as Solaris Resources' Warintza copper, gold and molybdenum mine which is in an advanced exploration phase across Shuar territories in the Cordilleras del Condor and Transkutukú (MiningWatch Canada, 2024). On April 12, 2024 violent conflicts erupted at FICSH (The Interprovincial Centre of the Shuar Federation) over Solaris Resources Inc.'s signed agreement with the FICSH president at the 2024 PDAC international mining conference in Canada. Solaris Resources is a Canadian-owned mining company active in the region. The agreement was considered by many to be without the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of the larger body of elected FISCH officials.

Solaris's mining agreement undermined the ordinance for self-determination, self-governance and collective territorial rights, creating internal conflicts between those who supported the expansion of mining development within the region and those seeking to protect their rights guaranteed by Ecuador's constitution, as well as the Shuar people's governing bodies such as FISCH. For example, Article 57.7 of Ecuador's constitution upholds the collective rights of Indigenous communities (República del Ecuador, 2008). While agreements should be subject to FPIC and are legally binding due to Ecuador's ratification of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the rights of nature and Indigenous peoples are increasingly being ignored in favour of extractive projects (Aguilar, 2025). Most recently, changes to Ecuadorian ministries have been proposed to expedite extractive projects, such as mining, across the country, thereby bypassing the environmental protection and Indigenous rights guaranteed by the Ecuadorian constitution (Radwin, 2025).

In 2023, Amazon Watch released a report titled 'Unmasking Canada: Rights Violations Across Latin America'. The report found that a total of '37 Canadian projects involve 34 Canadian companies. Of these, 24 projects violate Indigenous Peoples' right to territory and self-determination, and 26 lack FPIC' (Amazon Watch, 2023, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> There are '32 Canadian corporate extractive projects across Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and the Dominican Republic that impact the environment, and 27 are in fragile ecosystems' (Amazon Watch, 2023, p. 1). Twelve of these extractive projects are in the Amazonian region, with most being led *by mining operations, exploration and development* (Amazon Watch, 2023).

In Ecuador neocolonial projects are led by the state with a significant involvement by Canadian mining companies, both across the country and within Shuar territory, contrary to the rights of Indigenous peoples and nature guaranteed by the Ecuadorian constitution, in addition to the legally ratified United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The resistance of the Shuar Peoples and other Indigenous communities to colonial encroachment on their territory in what is now known as Ecuador is labelled as violent, while state acts of violence are not (Jakubchik-Paloheimo & de Buena Esperanza, 2024). Indigenous communities, including Shuar communities, are experiencing violence within their ancestral territories, both physically and ontologically. Former President Guillermo Lasso's comment on 17 July 2022 after the end of nationwide protests by Indigenous leaders across the country – 'We have achieved the supreme value to which we all aspire, peace in our country' – points directly to the problem: peace for whom, and by whose measure?

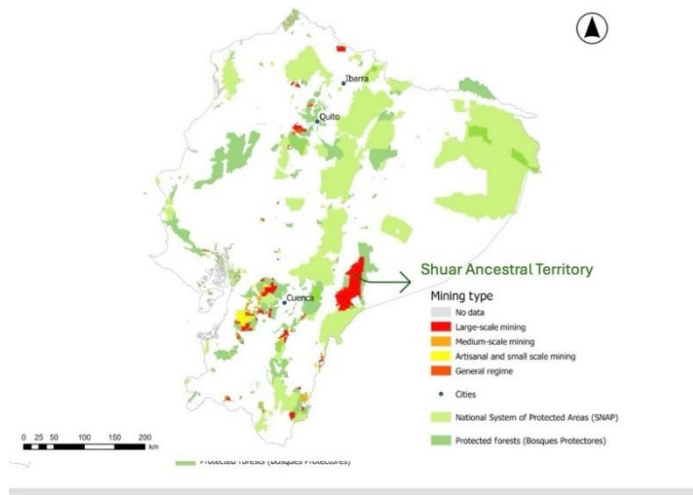


Figure 5: Country profile of mining in Ecuador and the Shuar territory

Note: The map was adapted by Peck et al. (2023) to demonstrate the locations of large-scale mining and mining concessions across Ecuador. We have highlighted the Shuar ancestral territory within this adaptation, and shown where large-scale mining is taking place

Shuar visions for peace differ drastically from those enacted by the state. The neoliberal policies and extractive agendas of Ecuador’s current and former governments can be understood as violence on the country’s most marginalized communities through imposed structural inequality, the destruction of *penker pujustin* and the dismantling of human rights. Westernized concepts of peace are only considered peaceful when they do not resist or work against state colonial projects, such as mining or oil. For example, state-enacted violence is normalized to suppress community resistance and carry out extraction at the expense of Indigenous peoples’ rights, as well as those of the natural world. Colonialism actively oppresses a larger conceptualization of what is necessarily included in Shuar ideas of peace, including being able to live *tsankurnaerar pujustin* (a peaceful life).

## Peace and the good life, ‘*buen vivir*’ (living well)

In 2008 Ecuador became the first country to recognize nature’s rights within its constitution (Eisenstadt & West., 2019). Chapter Two of the 2008 Republic of Ecuador Constitution identified this right as ‘*buen vivir*’. Ecuador has constitutionally recognized the rights of nature under Article 71, which states: “Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes” (República de Ecuador, 2008). This concept was born from the Kichwa cosmological idea of ‘*sumak kawsay*’ and understands that

all nature has life, and that many of its elements are considered gods of their ancestral peoples (Maldonado & Ariruma, 2022). '*Buen vivir*' is nature's right to flourish on its own (Guzman, 2019). This concept originates from the Kichwa people in Ecuador, where the phrase '*sumak kawsay*' translates to "all of Mother Earth living in harmony with nature" (Caria & Dominguez, 2015, p. 20). '*Buen vivir*' is the Spanish interpretation and adoption of the Kichwa term, which shaped the policy of '*buen vivir*' within the Ecuadorian constitution that enshrines the rights of nature.

The right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability, and the rights of nature, are legally embedded in the Ecuadorian constitution (República del Ecuador, 2008). Environmental conservation, the protection of ecosystems, biodiversity and the integrity of the country's genetic assets, the prevention of ecological damage, and the recovery of degraded natural spaces are declared matters of public interest (República del Ecuador, 2008, Article 14). Shuar participants noted an inherent connection between the concept of '*buen vivir*' and its association with ideas of peace. The quote below illustrates how notions for peace were a necessary part of being able to live 'a good life' or '*sumak kawsay*':

*For me, peace is tranquillity. It's breathing fresh air and knowing that the world has so much to offer, and that we are at peace. We build peace. We make peace with our conscience. Peace is freedom. Protection, having a good life, and, above all, having a lot of hope in our lives. Peace is care. Peace is care and protection. You can be happy. Peace is happiness and joy. And everything that means a good life. I think peace plays a very important role in the good life (Participant 23).*

Harmony is included within the definition of '*buen vivir*', but this 'good life' is often not necessarily thought about when we consider peace or conflict, and especially when we consider the possibilities for who and what (for example, the more-than-human world) we could be in conflict with or cause violence to. Our research findings suggest possibilities for negotiating a more comprehensive peace if we consider this.

*Penker pujustin.*

The Shuar life plan defines *penker pujustin* in the following way: "Overall good living within our communities means a path of harmony. It is a model of human life where we maintain unity and share the fruit of our labour. It is a place where we all participate, contribute, and benefit. 'Good living' (*penker pujustin*) is living together in unity. It has a healthy environment, crystal clear waters, and conserves the forest for future generations." (ProAmazonia, 2021, p. 24).

*Tsankurnaerar pujustin* (living in peace):

*Tsankurnaerar pujustin* encompasses maintaining good relations between the human and more-than-human worlds. Living in peace includes being able to live in harmony with nature, respecting cultural traditions and educating future generations. It emphasizes the importance of health and education in securing employment to achieve a 'good life'. This is often not possible without a healthy Mother Earth. For Shuar community members, living in peace includes maintaining peaceful relationships with the natural world, which provides a clean environment and respects the importance of place, including sacred waterfalls and medicinal Shuar gardens, not only for practicing cultural activities but also for stewarding these relationships.

## *Penker pujustin*

In our research, participants commonly understood '*buen vivir*' and translated it to *penker pujustin* in the Shuar language. The coloniality of peace that exists in neocolonial contexts, where environmental and 'colonial' violence are ontologically accepted as the status quo, contrasts with the idea of '*buen vivir*' and the Shuar concept of *penker pujustin*, outlining how Shuar visions for peace differ drastically from those enacted by the colonial state. Shuar members have a common conception surrounding the rights of nature; one participant remarked:

*Penker pujustin already means 'buen vivir'... The rights of nature... it means we must not pollute. We must respect our sacred plants. We must look for friendly ways that we can rescue our forests. Not only focus on extractive projects as the state does, but we can also look for other ways to find resources to help our families. For example, tourism. Tourism allows us to reach all parts of the world that know the territories, eh, to have our rivers, our clean waterfalls, where we can enjoy pure air, where we can receive good energies, and that in reality the body is a life of harmony connected from the human being to nature (Participant 1).*

What is interesting about this concept of peace is that not only is it connected to the idea of harmony with Mother Earth and the rights of nature; it also points to how that is intrinsically tied to ideas of peace and what it means to live in peace, thereby highlighting a more pluralistic understanding of terms for peace from a Shuar perspective, and the ways in which colonial logic has often muddied the term. For instance, Western-centred science currently ignores the potential benefits of engaging with the spiritual world as a critical part of our planetary home, including how we conceptualize peace and peacebuilding. Calls to decolonize peace and conflict studies are a growing area of concern throughout the discipline (Azarmandi, 2023; FitzGerald, 2023; Walker, 2004), and we believe that understanding how peace connects to the rights of

nature will mean that spirituality, humans and their interconnection with the more-than-human world<sup>4</sup> can begin to be considered.

### *'Tsankurnaerar pujustin'* (a peaceful life) must include *penker pujustin* (the Shuar concept for *'buen vivir'*)

The Shuar definition of peace includes much more than the mere absence of violence, and it necessarily includes the 'good life (*'buen vivir'*) or *penker pujustin*, as the concept is known as in the Shuar language. When they think of being in harmony with all things, the Shuar think holistically about the quality of life and living in peace. For the Shuar, living in peace means having access to ancestral territories, including sacred waterfalls and medicinal gardens:

*Peace is living what I live now. Peace is having everything. Eh? A partner, a family, eh? Well-being, food, fresh air, nature, everything. Where I feel calm, where I feel peace, where I'm not exploited, I'm not marginalised, I'm not enslaved, nothing like that. I live by my work, my effort, my will. Since Father Arutam gave us this destiny to live on Mother Earth, then for me it is, eh, peace. That would be living in peace (Participant 12, Elder).*

The Shuar vision of peace involves living in harmony with nature, respecting cultural traditions and educating future generations. It highlights the importance of health, education and employment in the ability to live a 'good life', which is not possible without a healthy Mother Earth.

This idea of peace also encompasses maintaining good relations between the human and more-than-human worlds. It promotes health (both personal and spiritual) as well as planetary and environmental health, providing opportunities to engage in cultural activities, preserving Shuar science, and especially their language, through sacred relationships in their ancestral territories.

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of the more-than-human usefully acknowledges what different Indigenous communities worldwide have practiced in a distinct way for millennia (Abram, 2024). As an inter-disciplinary concept encompassing geography, philosophy, legal studies, environmental studies, the social sciences and humanities, those who engage with this concept are lobbying for the rights of nature by pointing to the intelligence of the natural or 'more-than-human' world (Kohn, 2024). More-than-human geographies aim to understand, investigate and consider the web of relationships to which humans are intrinsically connected (Atchison & Phillips, 2020).



Figure 6: Shuar notions of peace: what is peace, and how is it encountered in daily life?

Note: Figure from Jakobchik-Paloheimo and de Buena Esperanza (2024); used with permission.

It includes access to sacred spaces, such as waterfalls that are considered places of worship by the Shuar, traditional gardens (*ajas*) or chakras, and access to their ancestral territories. The Shuar definition of peace challenges the realm of relationships that can be considered in any conflict. Good relationships need to foster a sense of community, not only with the human world but also with the more-than-human world, which includes plants, animals and spiritual beings (see Figure 6 above).

The health of these relationships is seen as interconnected, with one's well-being intertwined in the larger view of planetary health, which encompasses a healthy environment and spiritual welfare. The surrounding landscape needs to include clean air, water and soil for there to be fruitful hunting grounds. This environmental health allows for the ability to engage in cultural practices that support a peaceful and 'good life'. Cultural activities are often also life-sustaining activities, such as agricultural traditions and hunting. These practices encompass land-based learning, exercise, food sovereignty, and educational opportunities through the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, which often occurs during cultural activities. For example, a mother and her children might sing songs known as *anents* while gardening in their *ajas* to the Mother Earth god *Nunkui* in order to increase agricultural production. These songs are sacred and can be learned through a vision or dream, and are passed along from generation to generation during this activity.

In the quote below, one woman discusses engaging in this embodiment of knowledge and interconnection with the more-than-human, providing a reminder of how peace is connected to territory. The Indigenous decolonial resistance praxis known as 'cuerpo territorio' (Cabnal, 2010; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) can help researchers to further explore the pluriverse and disrupt the ontological coercion of 'peace' used by colonial state actors.

*Very dedicated, very concentrated on everything... It is not singing for the sake of singing. Mmm... If I dedicate an anent to my husband, I must concentrate hard so that my feeling reaches him, and he feels it. It is a matter of attracting him so that my feelings reach him, and he feels what I am giving and dedicating to him... And, whether it is at the waterfall, in the hunt, or because of God, that is how Arutam (the Shuar's most powerful god) transmits it (Participant 6, Elder and Singer).*



Figure 7: Praying to Arutam (the Shuar god who lives in waterfalls)

Note: Taken in the Shuar territory of Twsui. The Guayusa woman prays to the Shuar God Arutam at a sacred waterfall in her ancestral territory. Photo taken by the first author and shared with permission.

Kin relationships among the Shuar are practiced at sacred sites, such as via cultivation techniques in their gardens or while hiking to and praying at a sacred waterfall (see Figure 7). The interconnection between all these factors as shown in Figure 6 above points to how one can live *penker pujustin* (a good life) and *tsankurnaerar pujustin* (a peaceful life).

Outlining *penker pujustin* points to how colonialism has introduced a new kind of omnipresent conflict to living in peace that was not there before colonialism. The conditions for conflict when they occur with the state stem from the living conditions that the state has imposed on the Shuar people through policies that were non-existent during times of *penker pujustin*.



Figure 8: A meeting with the Shuar Kakaram de Buena Esperanza to discuss *tsankurnaerar pujustin*.

*In penker pujustin, we feel for the poor people from here. Because we are not poor in the air of nature, we are rich, millionaires. But now to live a penker pujustin life ... we need economy and more economy to conserve nature itself* (Participant 21, Elder).

## ***“Tsantsas’ as symbols of peace***

Western definitions of violence and conflict are steeped in colonial mentalities that need to be re-examined. Johan Galtung’s definition of peace is the ‘absence of violence’ (Galtung, 1990, p. 167). Violence therefore encompasses the direct, indirect, literal, structural, avoidable or unavoidable (Galtung, 1990). Typical definitions of peace and surrounding violence tend to overlook an analysis of the reasons why the violence is occurring in the first place. This can often favour the oppressor over the oppressed. Furthermore, the West has usually positioned the global North as peaceful and the global South as violent.

Racial hierarchies have often muddied or projected their bias, casting a large shadow on possibilities for deeper analysis and understanding, especially within conflict or surrounding violence. For example, the ceremony of head shrinking is a notorious practice originating from communities in the region. *Tsantsa* is the Shuar cultural practice of killing their enemies and trapping their souls during times of war to prevent their adversaries from taking revenge on their families. The practice of creating *tsantsas* (shrunk heads) involves decapitating the head of your enemy and boiling it in a mixture of plant medicines for hours, and then sewing the mouth shut to prevent the person’s soul from escaping to seek revenge on you or your family. Whether or not this has been scientifically substantiated, an interesting aspect of the *tsantsa* is that the hair on it would continue to grow long after the ceremony was completed. This contributed to the notion that the soul was indeed trapped inside.

*Tsantsas* were believed to transfer powers to the individuals who possessed them, and they would be worn in battle to demonstrate one’s aptitude as a warrior. The knowledge of how to prepare a *tsantsa* is a highly valued practice in Shuar culture, and for the Shuar community members we spoke to, it is a symbol of peace, rather than war. The creation of a *tsantsa* was believed to put an end to fighting. The *tsantsa* ceremony was celebrated in village ceremonies lasting several days, honouring the end of war and the cultural practice.

While this apparently violent notion may be difficult to consider when contemplating the idea of a peaceful life, the practice elicits a curious juxtaposition of the term 'peace'. Our short description of the practice of *tsantsa* aims to show how misunderstood it is, and recognise that this lack of understanding was felt by the community participants we spoke to, along with its significance for their notions of peace within and for the larger Shuar community. While no participants suggested that *tsantsas* were the best way of moving forward, nevertheless there was pride in the practice, and frustration about its misinterpretation. This is an example of the hierarchy of knowledge production that this entry hopes to disrupt.

## A new paradigm for peace: *Tsankurnaerar pujustin* (living in peace)

Geographies of peace for the Shuar people include the rights of nature ('*buen vivir*'), or the Shuar concept of *penker pujustin*: all nature living in harmony with all living beings. *Tsankurnaerar pujustin* (living in peace) suggests that we approach the idea of peace through a decolonial lens, enabling us to better conceptualise further possibilities within the pluriverse of peace. Decolonial knowledge production from



Figure 9: View of the Upano River and the Cordillera de Transkutukú and Condor in ancestral Shuar territory.

*Abya Yala* can disrupt the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge production in the Global North. The continued practice of 'ancestral wisdom' or 'Shuar science' in these places is a form of resistance, and it holds critical lessons about communicating with and listening to the more-than-human world. Ceremonial praxis, such as singing sacred *anents*, exemplifies customs that make up a larger world of Shuar science. These practices transfer wisdom that helps teach the Shuar how to steward the natural world and take care of their own well-being. Geographies of peace and the ability for *tsankurnaerar pujustin* (living in peace) counters the slow violence that communities are experiencing economically, ecologically and personally through the disruption of '*buen vivir*'.

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