

Sumak Kawsay: A Decolonial Perspective on Nonviolent Resistance* Feb. 2025

NONVIOLENCE, SUMAK KAWSAY, DECOLONIALITY, RECLAMATION, SOUTHERN EPISTEMOLOGIES, INTERCULTURALITY



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Photo by Marco Vinicio Sisa Agualongo.

Nonviolent actions that advocate for new rights and challenge dominant discourses and practices of progress and development disrupt the colonialities of power, knowledge and being. These forms of resistance, particularly in the defence of nature's rights and community sovereignty, remain largely unacknowledged within civil resistance studies. This paper explores how buen vivir, or Sumak Kawsay, contributes to nonviolent resistance in Ecuador by identifying areas of convergence, divergence and complementarity between these two concepts and their practical implications. It underscores the decolonial perspective of Sumak Kawsay in reclaiming being, knowledge and power, arguing that its integration into nonviolent resistance studies could foster a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to Indigenous struggles.

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Abstract

The colonialities of power, knowledge and being are continually challenged through various resistance mechanisms that go beyond the promotion of new rights – such as the rights of nature – or the confrontation of dominant notions of progress and development. The strategies, campaigns and action plans employed incorporate both philosophical and experiential perspectives. Nevertheless, civil resistance studies have largely overlooked this complex process of struggle. This entry examines the relationship between *buen vivir*, or *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa), and nonviolent resistance in Ecuador, highlighting their points of convergence, complementarity and divergence. To this end, the entry presents *Sumak Kawsay* as a decolonial framework that reclaims being, knowledge and power. It then addresses the limitations of the concept of nonviolent resistance, and finally explores the possibilities for dialogue between these two perspectives. The methodological considerations of this study, grounded in a decolonial approach, acknowledge the evolving nature of these constructions. They emphasise the need for sensitivity towards diverse perspectives, engaging with and deepening our understanding of resistance based on lived experiences and practices.

Introduction

Buen vivir, or *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa), encompasses various conceptualisations in Ecuador, ranging from a political proposal to an Andean and Amazonian Indigenous worldview. Beyond its polysemy, *Sumak Kawsay* serves as a platform for debates on alternative development from a post-developmental perspective, or as an alternative to development itself (Unceta Satrustegui, 2014a, 2014b; Larrea & Greene, 2017). Additionally, it proposes a plural economic model that prioritises harmonious coexistence between individuals, communities and nature.

From a decolonial perspective, these dynamics emerge as a response to neoliberal and epistemic domination, which is normalised through language (Mignolo, 2003) and manifested both in discourses that naturalise racial differentiation (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and in the lived experiences of local actors who continue to be dehumanised and marginalised in the Global South (Mújica & Fabelo, 2019)

Indigenous communities have often led nonviolent resistance campaigns against colonialism, oppression and exploitation, but there are few studies on nonviolent resistance that analyse

Indigenous struggles through a decolonial lens (Sefa Dei, 2019). These few investigations often fail to address how colonial-racial structures perpetuate the exclusion and dehumanisation of colonised peoples, and neither do they challenge the mechanisms of domination embedded within established democratic systems. Not all Indigenous perspectives on civil resistance are necessarily decolonial, since not all Indigenous groups share this vision; in some cases, only certain elements are adopted. Each perspective differs depending on the specific cultural context in which these struggles unfold.

This entry offers a theoretical contribution by examining how the Indigenous perspective of Sumak Kawsay can help nonviolent resistance studies to adopt a more decolonial approach. This shift allows for a deeper understanding of structural challenges, including mechanisms of domination faced by Indigenous peoples, as well as the strategies they continue to develop in their struggles. The text is structured into four sections. The first explains why the concept of Sumak Kawsay contributes to understanding nonviolent resistance from a decolonial standpoint, while the second addresses the limitations of Western definitions of nonviolent resistance. The third analyses the points of convergence, complementarity and divergence between both concepts, and in the final section the article argues that both approaches can contribute to decolonising epistemic and power structures that perpetuate violence while simultaneously representing alternative modes of struggle.

1. The Decoloniality of Sumak Kawsay

Sumak Kawsay is embedded in three epistemic communities: a philosophy based on ancestral knowledge and practices; a post-developmental version of degrowth; and a political project. While the decolonial approach is present in the first two, its interpretation as a political project does not accommodate decolonial aspects (Cuestas-Caza, 2019).

The decolonial foundations of Sumak Kawsay are centred around a number of common elements. The first is a questioning of Western centralism and universality (Estermann, 2015). The second involves harmonious coexistence between individuals, communities, and nature, based on a system of local and communal relationships (Walsh, 2009; Acosta, 2013; Altmann, 2013, 2017). The third refers to its communal nature, which is grounded in values such as reciprocity, solidarity, harmony, relationality and complementarity (Walsh, 2009; Medina, 2011;

Estermann, 2012; Cuestas-Caza, 2019). In this text, Sumak Kawsay is presented as an Andean worldview that proposes an alternative development paradigm and acts as a political process oriented towards resistance and historical reparation.

From a decolonial perspective, liberation from the colonialities of being, knowledge and power is a fundamental objective. This entails breaking away from persistent colonial practices characterised by the domination, discrimination and exploitation of Indigenous peoples (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). In this context, the contributions of Sumak Kawsay to the reclamation of being, knowledge and power will be examined.

1.1 Reclamation of Being

Sumak Kawsay recognises Indigenous peoples as social actors with rights and the capacity to claim them. This perspective influences identity, the possibility of social mobility, and access to the political sphere. In Ecuador many elements contribute to the reclamation of being, including Indigenous organisational structures such as the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indigenous Peoples (FEINE), the National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous and Black Organisations (FENOCIN) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), among others. Along with their forms of struggle (marches, demonstrations, strikes and so on) and milestones such as pluri-culturalism and pluri-nationalism, defined as the interaction between nations or peoples with diverse cultures, based on mutual respect within a single state (Cruz Rodríguez, 2012; Madrid Tamayo, 2019). These elements recognise Indigenous peoples as political actors, and empower them to engage in collective and community-based action.

1.2 Reclamation of Knowledge

Sumak Kawsay reclaims knowledge by integrating Andean values such as harmony, reciprocity, complementarity, solidarity and balance as enduring forms of wisdom transmitted across generations (Walsh, 2009; Farah & Vasapollo, 2011; Altmann, 2017). These values permeate everyday practices, including minga (communal labour), Indigenous conflict resolution methods, and the application of agricultural, medicinal and architectural techniques. Examples include consensus-based decision-making, family-community organisations, moral and spiritual leaders as authorities, rituals for accessing natural resources, self-sufficiency, bartering, the

rejection of accumulation as a value, and various offerings and rituals (Astudillo Banegas, 2020). The preservation and promotion of ancestral knowledge, despite the pressures of modernity, position Sumak Kawsay as an alternative paradigm that reinforces Indigenous identity by challenging what Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes as ontological negation.

The academic field recognises Sumak Kawsay as a relational ontology in which people and nature are interdependent (Escobar, 2012; Rodríguez Palop, 2014; De Munter, 2016; Zarallo, 2020). This holistic perspective regards nature as a living entity with equal standing, contrasting sharply with the anthropocentric worldview of modernity in which humans dominate and exploit other beings. In this sense, Sumak Kawsay fosters debates on economic issues (as an alternative to capitalism), environmental and legal frameworks (nature as a subject of rights), and development, among others (Walsh, 2009; Acosta, 2013; Barahona & Añezco, 2020).

1.3 Reclamation of Power

The reclamation of power primarily entails recognition, participation and self-determination. Ecuador's 1998 Constitution recognised Indigenous peoples as political actors with collective rights, while the 2008 Constitution incorporated the worldview of Sumak Kawsay as a state-led development proposal and a framework for public policy (Acosta, 2013; Manosalvas, 2014).

However, some scholars emphasise the political objectives embedded within Sumak Kawsay (Simbaña, 2012; Cuestas-Caza, 2019). Sumak Kawsay challenges neoliberal development paradigms and encompasses economic, political, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. This counter-hegemonic perspective exposes the structural colonial violence that persists in society through mechanisms such as exclusion and racism (Walsh, 2009; Piñeiro & Polo, 2021). Nevertheless, its implementation has encountered contradictions, particularly regarding extractivism, unlimited growth, and exploitation.

Thus, Sumak Kawsay emerges as an alternative way of life, integrating community-based social, economic, political and cultural practices. It is founded upon three key principles: Allin Munay (to desire and feel well), Allin Yachay (to think and know well), and Allin Ruway (to act and do well) (Cuestas-Caza, 2019; Lajo, 2008). These principles holistically reclaim being, knowledge and power.

2. Limitations of the Concept of Nonviolent Resistance

Like many other fields, civil resistance studies is dominated by Western researchers whose definitions and objectives shape the scope of the discipline. Defining a term is an exercise of power that establishes boundaries, a process that has historically been colonial for many cultures. Western scholars prioritise the definition of “strategic nonviolent action” (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Beer, 2021; Chenoweth & Cunningham, 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2011; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2012; Schock, 2005; Hallward & Norman, 2015), also referred to as civil resistance or nonviolent conflict, due to its more pragmatic approach. However, this perspective ultimately reflects colonialities of being and knowledge, as it excludes alternative epistemologies that do not conform to this imposed “universal” vision.

Chabot and Vinthagen (2015) highlight the colonial nature of civil resistance studies, drawing on contributions to nonviolence from Gandhi, Fanon, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, and the Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa. These perspectives emphasise human dignity and local autonomy. Similarly, Sumak Kawsay represents a form of resistance against the colonisation of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous communities in Ecuador.

The limitations of how nonviolent resistance is defined are also reflected in the objectives it seeks to achieve. Western academic discourse and political practice assume democracy, human rights and liberty as universal goals. However, these concepts stem from Western historical and social realities, which do not always align with the objectives of all societies. This raises questions about the supposed universality of the ideals of the Western liberal democratic state.

The Sumak Kawsay proposal, like other cultural perspectives, challenges many assumptions of Western thought and exposes the limitations of attempting to equate all cultures in the pursuit of a single objective. Furthermore, Sumak Kawsay advances new proposals, such as the principle of Indigenous self-determination. If the objectives and proposals of particular perspectives differ, the methods employed in one cannot be applied directly (1:1) or without adaptation to the other.

3. Dialogue Between Sumak Kawsay and Nonviolent Resistance

Key concepts of Sumak Kawsay, such as self-determination, Indigenous justice, community democracy, circular and solidarity-based economies, and the establishment of a plurinational and intercultural state, broaden the scope of what is understood and pursued through nonviolent resistance in three main aspects.

First, because both Sumak Kawsay and nonviolent resistance are philosophical principles, they propose a way of life based on ethical, moral and spiritual nonviolence. López (2012) emphasises that the philosophy of nonviolence “does not forget sentient beings, it is not only human beings but also about animals and Nature” (p. 17). This more inclusive and holistic version of nonviolence places all living beings on the same level, embracing plurality and aligning with the notion of balance proposed by Sumak Kawsay (Cuestas-Caza, 2019). Both philosophies converge in peaceful (harmonious or nonviolent) ways of life, which concern themselves with relationships among people as well as with nature, and they guide their actions and practices towards consistency with their principles (well-doing/thinking/feeling and peace through peaceful means).

Second, neither Sumak Kawsay nor nonviolent resistance implies passivity. Both emerge as motivations to fight against injustices, rights violations, or for the recognition of new rights. Since the origins of Sumak Kawsay among the Indigenous peoples of Pastaza, an Amazonian province in Ecuador, there have been traces of resistance against state colonisation and modernisation from a market economy perspective. These communities realised that external knowledge did not guarantee *buen vivir*, leading them to propose a “reindigenisation” aimed at reclaiming their ancestral, communal and everyday knowledge (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2021), with the objective of reaffirming their Andean wisdom and resisting patriarchal, colonial and capitalist domination (De Sousa Santos, 2022). Sumak Kawsay acts as both motivation and guidance for confronting the structural violence that derives from colonialism and is perpetuated by modernity. Examples of such confrontations include various protests advocating for bilingual education, fair prices for agricultural products, resistance against water privatisation, and opposition to precarious working conditions, among others (Leyes Ortega,

2023). Similarly, nonviolent resistance encompasses social struggles and opposition to injustices, such as the demand for an Indigenous university that recognises Indigenous knowledge and traditions while teaching Indigenous languages, thereby achieving structural changes in knowledge systems (CONAIE, 2020).

Third, Sumak Kawsay and nonviolent resistance both have a practical orientation. Both require planning, the development of tools, and specific mechanisms for implementing nonviolent actions. Thus, both frameworks put forward alternative, inclusive and plural proposals that question, confront, reconfigure, and ideally dismantle colonial forms of violence.

Conclusions

This text highlights the current limitations of civil resistance studies, which primarily rely on the definition of strategic nonviolent action. This framework fails to confront the structural violence associated with modernity and does not acknowledge diverse practices and plural modes of resistance, such as those derived from Sumak Kawsay. This entry aims to open a theoretical dialogue between strategic nonviolent action and Sumak Kawsay within civil resistance studies.

Sumak Kawsay strengthens Indigenous identity and self-determination while also making visible and legitimising the plurality of knowledges and epistemologies. By positioning itself within relational ontologies, it offers a significant contribution to enriching nonviolent resistance studies through a decolonial lens.

The mutual enrichment of both perspectives would foster intercultural dialogue and the creation of interactive spaces where knowledges, epistemologies, actors and cultures can engage on an equal and inclusive basis. Ultimately, the complementarity between these two concepts would strengthen the mechanisms and foundations of various Indigenous struggles, which are carried out both in everyday life and at a structural level against the colonialities of being, power and knowledge.

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