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# Negotiating New Roles and Relationships in the Jungle: Rain Forest Imaginations and Community-Based Ecotourism in Ecuador

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## Abstract

This article scrutinises the impact of ecotourism in Arútam, Ecuador, on the Shuar's perception of the rain forest, and consequently, on themselves. The Amazon rainforest, which has always been subject to myriad imaginations and desires, gained new momentum in the context of global discourses on environmental protection, biodiversity and conservation. Taking the Shuar's welcome speech to the tourists as point of departure, we examine conceptions of the rain forest as a "place of intercultural encounter," as "home of indigenous peoples," as "lungs of the world," and show how these notions have been appropriated by the Shuar and integrated in their cultural context. Drawing on fieldwork, we argue that these discourses alter the Shuar's relationship with the rain forest and considerably impact their identity and self-conception. Following an intercultural approach (Rappaport 2005), we find that the Shuar transform themselves in this process from postcolonial subjects into knowledgeable custodians of the forest who are able to represent themselves in new ways on the global stage.

**Keywords:** ecotourism, environmental perceptions, Amazonia, Ecuador, Shuar

## Introduction

Perceptions of the environment are modified in cross-cultural encounters between indigenous communities and tourists in Amazonian Ecuador. In the course of encounters with international visitors, the Shuar in Arútam negotiate new meanings of the rainforest and reinterpret their environment. As a consequence of a revised relationship with and new conceptions of the forest, the indigenous self-perception is changing in accord with new attributes that are ascribed to the forest. In turn, the Shuar articulate their relationship with the environment in new ways in order to convey their re-defined role to a local and global audience. In this vein, the touristic-indigenous negotiation of the rainforest implies not only a redefinition of the Amazonian environment, but also a self-conscious reorientation of indigenous self-perception and self-positioning. Their involvement in ecotourism and the interaction with the non-indigenous world has brought the Shuar to challenge common depictions as isolated, remote, and vulnerable individuals (Erazo 2013: XXIV). Rather, the alliance with the West has enabled the Shuar to pursue a status,

which Erazo (2013:3) identified as “indigenous sovereignty” and which is achieved by a process of negotiating and adaption to these outside impacts.

The meanings ascribed to the Amazonian environment reflect multiple roles that both the forest and the indigenous inhabitants play in the globalized Amazonian world. These processes are embedded in wider global conditions and reflect a range of imaginaries of the Amazon on either side – the indigenous Shuar and eco/volunteer tourists, originating mainly from North America and Europe. Drawing on this interplay, we demonstrate how global discourses on the Amazon are reinterpreted by indigenous people, ultimately altering their conception of both themselves and the forest. Our research sits at the intersection of ecotourism in the Americas (Borman 1999; Carrier and MacLeod 2005; Hutchins 2007, 2010; Stronza and Durham 2008; Hunt and Stronza 2011) and tourist related place imaginaries (Sheller and Urry 2004; Salazar 2009, 2010). In this context, it is clear that the Shuar apply new representational strategies as they subvert the roles often ascribed to them even as postcolonial subjects.

The Shuar community in Arútam is located in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Pastaza Province) and comprises six households (around 30 inhabitants), all belonging to one extended family. Since around the year 2000, at least half of the family members are directly involved in local tourist activities, as guides and cooks, webmasters or treasurers. Several hundred travellers, mainly from affluent countries of the Global North, visit Arútam annually. The length of their stay varies from only some days to some weeks or even two or three months. While the majority of the tourists are individual backpackers touring through Ecuador and South America, there are also organized tourist groups, often college students, who visit the Shuar in Arútam. The tourist experience in Arútam can be conceptualised as both a community-based volunteer project and an ecotourism venture promising to be sustainable and beneficial for the environment and the indigenous hosts alike. The visitors are offered guided tours through the jungle, but tourists also assist the Shuar in a range of activities, including farming and gardening, stabilizing paths through the forest, constructing houses, and sometimes even schooling. They also participate in traditional dance performances and help with the production of crafts.

The fact that both the administration and organization of the project are in the hands of only one extended family makes Arútam a particular case within the Amazonian ecotourism branch. The Shuar community works independently from any national or international agency, administers the homepage of the project on its own, and coordinates the reception of the guests directly via email contact. In addition, the family has designated different positions with specific responsibilities that are rotating among the family members, even though the women of the community are underrepresented in these functions. However, some of the negative aspects of ecotourism that Stronza and Gordillo (2008) mention in their study on three Amazonian projects in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador are also present in Arútam. There is no doubt that the ecotourism project causes deep changes in Arútam and has some downsides, such as dependence on one source of income, which has made Arútam vulnerable to and dependent upon the seasonal tourist market. The majority of the family members – also the younger ones – trust in the ceaseless success of the project, which is why other occupations outside the tourist industry are only rarely taken into account (Stronza and Gordilla 2008:451). Other changes are related to modified working conditions as some of the family members regularly travel to the provincial capital in order to deal with email correspondence with new guests or to pick them up. This results in their partial absence from the family household, sometimes for several days. Female family members usually remain in the community, but have to cope with much more work in the *chakra*<sup>1</sup> and in the kitchen, as they are providing food for their own family and for several other persons as well. However, from the Shuar’s perspective, the benefits of the ecotouristic project in Arútam clearly outweigh its negative effects. This perception is strongly related to the changing self-conception of the Shuar triggered by the interaction with the tourists and the Western world. In what follows, we demonstrate that the Shuar’s encounter with international actors and non-indigenous environmental concepts has opened an intercultural space, where foreign ideas are appropriated and utopian projections of horizontal interethnic encounter are negotiated (Rappaport 2005:7).

Research on ecotourism stresses the economic and social impact on the communities involved and tends to focus on the motives of the tourists, often driven by im-

aginaries of the “noble savage” (Conklin and Graham 1995; Conklin 2010) and the desire for experiencing “authenticity” (Trupp and Trupp 2009). We take these lines of inquiry further and emphasize the impact of these processes on the indigenous hosts’ perceptions of the environment and their re-positioning as custodians of the forest. Following Bunten (2008:392), tourism encounters can be conceived of as discursive spaces – in our case, this refers to the fact that the interaction between the visitors and the locals brings together diverse concepts and imaginaries of the Amazonian rain forest, which are constantly challenged, redefined, and rearticulated. Furthermore, the process of “editing Eden,” as Hutchins and Wilson (2010) describe these discursive negotiations on Amazonia, not only articulate the multiple projections of the international visitors, but also reshape the relationship of the indigenous hosts with their forest. In the case of the Shuar, the visitors’ many projections on the forest in Arútam made them aware of the Amazonian environments’ significance in the international environmental movement and the indigenous cultures’ power in a globalized world. This echoes Cepek’s analysis of the Cofán in Northeast Ecuador and their involvement in environmentalist programmes, initiated by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The Cofán became aware of an increasing environmental attention and of the fact that “their forests matter to Westerners” (Cepek 2011:511). As a consequence, they critically engaged with Western agents advancing their own agenda rather than suffering from governmentality effects of these interventions. This applies to the Shuar as well who have recognized that their engagement with tourists promotes their own interests and objectives which transcend the specific ecotourism project and the interaction with particular individuals visiting Arútam.

The Shuar family members describe the aim of their tourist programme on their website in terms of “community development...through culturally [sic] founded projects and sustainable use of biological resources” (FUNDECOIPA 2005). This mission statement is also expressed in the documentary “Experiencing Arutam” (Schiller and Plata 2009), when one of the Shuar family members welcomes the tourists. When Enrique greets a group of ten students from Florida in Arútam, the first sentences of his welcome speech refer to the jungle. He continues to elaborate on the Shuar’s relationship with the forest and emphasizes what the jungle has to offer to its visitors:

For the Shuar, the jungle is our home. We have been living here for many years. We come from the origin of our grandfathers. We are here. The protected forest Arútam has 2,700 ha of jungle in which there exists [sic] species which live in this nature. Thanks to my father who had the initiative of saving this jungle. And it is that which we are fighting for today. We are happy to have you here, because our great dream is to share the jungle with the people from other countries and that they enjoy their time here with us (Schiller and Plata 2009).<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that Enrique denotes concepts and imaginations that are globally prominent and which, surely, have attracted many visitors to Arútam. Non-governmental organizations, media, and even travel guide books portray the Amazonian rainforest as “ancestral home of 1 million indians” (Survival International n. d.), “the world’s lungs,” containing “80% of terrestrial biodiversity” (The Economist 2010), and a place for visiting “remote tribal communities” (Mann and Ibrahim 2002:22). Taking Enrique’s speech as point of departure, three discursive attributes of the forest in Arútam are examined in the following: first, the forest as a “place of encounter” referring to Enrique’s wish to “share the jungle with people from other countries.” This expression reflects a new concept of the forest as place to meet and interact with foreigners. Second, the forest as “our home” which alludes to the indigenous cosmology and simultaneously serves as a political tool to legitimize land claims. And third, as “protected forest... which there exist species which live in this nature” pointing to the fact that the Amazon and its inhabitants are key in biodiversity and sustainability issues. This is also expressed by Enrique’s older brother, José, who reminds his guests “we here are the lungs of the planet, the Amazon lets the world breathe”<sup>3</sup> (José 2009, personal communication).

From fieldwork, as well as digital sources and documentary film material from Kelly Schiller and Camilo Plata, who took part in the visit of the student group from Eckerd College (FL/USA) in Arútam in 2009, it is evident that these perceptions of the Amazo-

nian forest are generated and reproduced in the context of the community-based tourism project in Arútam. The following discussion considers the historical trajectory over the decade from 2001, when the first author was one of the first tourists to visit Arútam. She continued to visit the community as a social anthropologist on a regular basis, conducting participant observation and semi-structured interviews with both the Shuar and the tourists.

In order to retrace the Shuar's changing relationship with both the forest and the international guests, it is important to understand the ways the Shuar appropriated and developed ecotourism in Arútam. We situate this development in the context of theoretical considerations relevant to tourist spaces, the power of representations and identity politics. This links into the negotiated and thereby "thingified" (Hutchins 2010:4) tropical forest that became not only a commodified object, but primarily a source of a reworked cultural identity. Further, it becomes evident that the encounter with tourists has turned the forest into a resource with multiple, empowering meanings; it provides the Shuar with cultural, political, and financial capital in an interconnected world, demonstrated in the Shuar's confident self-image as key environmental actors seeking to preserve their own values and communal social control over their territories.

### **The Utopia of the Amazon: Imagining Places and Peoples**

Spaces are both real and fictive as every topos (Gr. τόπος = place) is at the same time a utopia – a product of our ascriptions and projections. Imaginaries of places and peoples cannot be separated and are produced and reproduced through globally circulating (tourist) representations, as well as through local encounters and interactions. This is particularly relevant for tourist places as they are constructed and performed by a range of actors, including tourists and hosts alike (Sheller and Urry 2004; Salazar 2009, 2010). Similarly, places are neither fixed nor objectively given, but rather semiotized, relational, and contextual constructs shaped by socio-cultural processes (Appadurai 1996:178; Mader 2009:43). This means also that tourist spaces are neither social anti-spaces nor outside of a social context. They are rather embedded in and part of the concrete spatial conditions that are produced by social structures (Wöhler et al. 2010:11). Following these lines of argument, spaces are generated by and negotiated between diverse perspectives. This is particularly evident in the case of the Amazon as the rainforest has been subject to myriad imaginations and desires. As El Dorado, the Amazon promised all kinds of fabulous wealth to the colonisers, in a virgin and untamed territory. For many environmental NGOs, the South American tropics guarantee the future of humanity and epitomize one of the most convincing admonishment of the world's green conscience. For many nation states bordering the Amazonian basin, the rainforest has become an essential economic resource, be it as an oil supplier or as a tourist attraction. For tourists, the Amazon is a huge playground for experiencing exotic adventures and gaining self-awareness. Finally, for the indigenous peoples, the intrinsic value of the Amazon serves now as a powerful argument in the context of political and cultural emancipatory projects.

These examples point to the fact that the Amazon is situated in multiple contexts and simultaneously composed by diverse actors. It has finally been turned into a tourism product shaped by the history of Western imagining (Hutchins 2007:91). Imaginations and dreams may fade, but they also can have the power not only to persist but to transform places and peoples. The Shuar represent themselves and the forest in a particular way in order to match tourist expectations and to turn imaginations into reality and experience. This process is the translation of utopia into topos – the imagined place merges with the physical place (Mader 2009:43; see also Cosgrove 2008).

The Shuar's conception of the Amazon is shaped by their cosmology, but also by the various ways the Latin American tropics are seen and represented on national and international stages. Those images, however, are communicated to the Shuar of Arútam mainly by television, education, and foreign visitors and tourists. As a consequence, the Shuar not only listen to and adopt foreign globalized discourses on the South American rainforest, but they appropriate and re-translate them into the contemporary socio-political context. They are able to overcome the obvious touristic hierarchy between the

exoticising Westerners and the exoticised indigenous. In this way, they are actively engaged in generating a particular Amazonian utopia which might serve the Shuar's interests while it is also locally and globally communicable.

Bunten (2008:1) refers to the "cultural-tourism venue" as "a discursive space" and directs our attention to the indigenous peoples' agency because of their social classification as "the visited". In contrast to critical voices that consider ethnic tourism as a neo-colonial strategy folklorizing and commercializing native cultures (Greenwood 1989; Nash 1989; Frow 1991), Bunten's approach encourages us to look at the participatory role of indigenous peoples who are, in fact, co-authoring the foreign imaginations of the self and other. Hutchins (2007:96) argues in a similar vein by referring to the South American tropics: "There is no single center of power that creates and sells, and, in the process changes the Amazon."

The community based ecotourism project has turned the Bosque Protector Arútam into a symbolically charged place emblemizing the various ties that the Shuar have with their non-indigenous guests, their land, and the international community. Consequently, Arútam can be understood as a topos, which urges us to reconsider a one-sided Western "orientalization," respectively "occidentalization," of the Amazon jungle. It is rather a process of negotiation, transformation, and mutual reinterpretation of the "own" and the "foreign," which results in the creation of new meanings, practices, and strategies. Further, it serves as an example to depict the dynamic interplay between visitors and indigenous hosts within community-based ecotourism projects. This requires a closer look at the origin of Arútam's involvement in ecotourism.

### Designing a Community Project: Ecotourism in Arútam

"Ecotourism is a new word in the modern world. We do not know this word. It is a nice logo representing something, like a stamp or a symbol in order to be recognized. But does ecotourism really exist?"<sup>4</sup> the Shuar Sebastian Moya (1998:113) wrote over a decade ago. Today, the Shuar in Arútam are intimately familiar with this word and recognise both the symbolic meaning and social practice of ecotourism. Nevertheless, Sebastian Moya's statement suggests that this has not always been the case.

Arútam also took some detours to ecotourism. In the 1970s, the Interprovincial Federation of Shuar Centres (FICSH) launched a cattle breeding programme in the indigenous communities in order to comply with the directives of the agrarian and the land tenure reform, introduced by the Ecuadorian government (Münzel 1977:381; Salazar 1981:602; Erazo 2011:427). The Shuar family in Arútam decided to collaborate with the farming cooperative and to establish a cattle herd in order to assure that the land they inhabit would not be expropriated. Within some years, they intensified their farming activities by growing naranjilla – a fruit which was considered to generate high prices (Erazo 2013:136f.). However, the increasing use of pesticides caused a serious disease of the family father Ernesto, which coerced the Shuar to give up both the naranjilla production and the cattle herd. For Ernesto, this incident brought him to reconsider the use of his land and to discover ecotourism as an alternative, healthy, ecologically sustainable, and financially profitable business. In the 1980s, Arútam declared its forest "bosque protector" – a nationally recognized certificate – and started its first tourist experience. Initially, the family cooperated with a travel agency named *Tsantsa's Tours*. This small enterprise was founded by Sebastian Moya with support of an international development organization, the *German Society of International Cooperation* (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ). In 1986, Jaime, Enrique's older brother, brought the first tourists to his home village. However, the contact with the Western backpackers proved to be more difficult than expected, as the encounter with a foreign person from an unknown country put the Shuar family in an ambiguous and unusual situation. It was not clear to them how to treat the Western travellers or how to handle their expectations (Jaime 2006, personal communication). After a short while, all Shuar families involved in the project were facing similar problems. While the tourists returned home with amazing experiences, the Shuar were left with irritating feelings as they realized that they and their forest had become subject to some peculiar interest. They felt like "exotic birds" on display (Moya 1998:114).

Nevertheless, the increasing demand motivated the team of *Tsantsa Tours* to expand their tourist business and amplify their programme. The Shuar communities involved in tourism declared a part of their primeval forest as a protected area (“bosque protector”). As a consequence, in 1990, *Tsantsa Tours* was transformed into a travel agency called *Yawa Jee* and renamed the trips “tours of conservation.” The foreign travellers should be conceived of as guests rather than tourists. Serving a culturally interested and ecologically sensitive public, *Yawa Jee* intended to implement a tour concept that allowed the Shuar and the visitors to encounter each other at eye level. The indigenous guides received intercultural training and the tourists participated in daily community life (Moya 1998:114). This altered approach is reflected in the naming of the tours – *Tsantas Tours* (“shrunken head tours”) and *Yawa Jee* (“a house for the children and the animals of the jungle”) – indeed, the first is evocative of an adventurous, exotic and sensational trip, whereas the second seems to promise an informative and culturally competent guided tour.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Arútam had come in contact with a German environmental NGO (*Schutzwald e. V.*) that supports (non-)indigenous communities in Ecuador to identify resources that “guarantee their survival in a sustainable way and enables them to keep the rain forests intact” ([www.schutzwald-ev.de](http://www.schutzwald-ev.de)). It is a twofold logic: saving the primeval forest implies also to save the livelihood of the people who live in it. This German NGO’s agenda summarises the reasons why the family in Arútam finally decided to give up their cattle herd, to declare their territory as “bosque protector,” and to engage in ecotourism; the environmental awareness promised to be economically beneficial. Further, the engagement with ecotourism provides an important source of income to most Shuar family members and offers an alternative to other, more destructive land use options, such as wood industry or mining. *Schutzwald e. V.* sent tourists and volunteers to the family on a regular basis, while gradually withdrawing from Arútam, when the Shuar had successfully established their own organization called FUNDECOIPA (Fundación para Desarrollo Comunitario Indígena de Pastaza) in 2005. Today, FUNDECOIPA manages the ecotourism project without the support of any other NGO, and seeks to draw neighbouring communities into the ecotourism business as well.

Over the years, the Shuar family’s attitudes toward the ecotourism changed and the meaning shifted. Initially, the economic profit was at center stage, the forest has become more and more a symbol of political struggle and cultural revitalisation as well as new spiritual orientation. At first, the family in Arútam put emphasis on a great number of tourists visiting their village and the forest; in the last years, however, the family started to rethink this policy. Only a handful of tourists are accommodated at any one time in Arútam. In the opinion of the family members, the forest will be better protected, while the mutual exchange and learning effect for the tourists are intensified. In addition, the community has strengthened collaboration with a shaman who hosts few interested tourists from Arútam at his home in order to introduce them to the medical and spiritual significance of the forest for the Shuar. At the same time, those family members most involved in the ecotourism (re)discover and accentuate their personal relationship with the forest: the family father and initiator of the project built a hut in the middle of the jungle, where he now spends several days or weeks every month. Similarly, almost all male and female family members highlight their need to retreat and communicate with the forest regularly through hiking, bathing in the waterfalls, and taking ayahuasca (Shuar: *natém*). The hunting activities of the family members have been reduced. On the one hand, the men argue that an abundant fauna will be more attractive for the visitors. On the other hand, they emphasize that extensive hunting would be contradictory to their commitment to preserve the forest and the life in it. Further, two of the sons and long-year coordinators of project have reduced their work with the tourists in order to focus more on their political engagement in the Pastaza province – such as their struggle for the Amazon’s conservation and protection.

### **The Forest as a Place of Encounter: Negotiating Roles and Relationships**

Hutchins (2010:10) argues that the “attraction of the Amazon as a tourist destination is related to its biological diversity, its international image as a major environmental re-

source, and its reputation as home to some of the remaining ‘primitive’ people left on the planet.” Undoubtedly, these imaginations are also most relevant for the visitors in Arútam, but the utopia of the rainforest goes beyond notions of an original, pristine place. The forest frames all tourism related activities and provides the context for meeting and interacting. It is an essential element in Arútam’s community project and the basic precondition for the community’s interaction with the outside world.

The Bosque Protector constitutes a discursive space where global discourses are localized, communicated, negotiated, and bodily experienced. However, the forest as place of intercultural encounter has not only raised the question how to deal with the forest, but also how to deal with the visitors. Zeppel (2006:1) states that indigenous ecotourism is about “how Indigenous groups are conserving natural areas and educating visitors.” She refers to both the conservation and to the kind of relationship that develops between the indigenous hosts and their foreign guests. This relationship is also a key aspect in Arútam where the visitors’ integration into the daily routine of the community activities is a main reason for the success of the ecotourism project. It furthers a partnership rather than an asymmetric relationship, in which the Shuar are seen primarily as exotic objects. Because the Shuar’s knowledge of the forest is seen as essential for a successful environmental protection of the Amazon, the Shuar are transformed into advisors and teachers contributing significantly to the safeguarding of the Amazonian forest. This perception contributes to a positive learning experience for the visitors, as it is expressed in this quote from Leonora, a student from Eckerd College, USA, who visited Arútam in 2009:

It’s one of the greatest learning experiences ..., because you can learn a lot about the work you’re doing, you learn a lot about the people you’re serving and their motives, you learn a lot about the people you’re serving with, and most importantly, you learn a lot about yourself (Schiller and Plata 2009).

The volunteers assist the Shuar family members for several hours each day in a range of tasks, such as gardening, reforestation, cutting trails through the forest, or the construction of a house. Thus, the visitors participate actively in the *minga*, the Kichwa term for traditional communal work, in Arútam. Simultaneously, the Shuar ascribe social roles to the tourists and integrate them in their daily life. The tourists’ experience goes beyond a mere sightseeing program in the rainforest. Rather, they become part of the communal life. Rodrigo explains this as follows:

I think it is great, because we, the family alone, the ones who are here, we can’t do everything” (...) “Here, in the family, we are plenty, but some have jobs, and some study, they go to their school or their universities, and others are teachers. ... And we can’t do the big works, for example, a house. With the help of some volunteers ... we unite and do much more (Schiller and Plata 2009).

In the course of these activities, the distinction between the host and guest community becomes increasingly blurred. Tourism activities have been integrated into the Shuar’s routine and form today an integral part of their culture. In Arútam, the interaction between the Shuar and the visitors has created a “touristic culture” (Thiem 2001:27) in which the Shuar provide board and lodging but also communicate knowledge about the environment and display their relationship with the forest as environmental custodians, while the international guests offer voluntary services and gain a learning experience. The collaboration between the Shuar and the external visitors seeks to be an intercultural encounter, in which both sides aim to achieve a horizontal dialogue and, thus, to create a new, more symmetrical relationship (Rappaport 2005:7,130). This form of exchange has the potential to reshape asymmetric power relations to some extent and may help to establish a new way of interacting between marginalized indigenous peoples and affluent tourists from the global North. It challenges the hegemonic developmental model of “indigenous learners” and “Western teachers.” The international tourist volunteers get to know the Shuar as guides through and experts of the jungle; they see them as knowledgeable instructors of a “right” environmental behaviour and as powerful guardians of the forest – and thereby confirm the Shuar in their self-

conception as the forest's custodians. It also allows the Shuar to participate in global debates on environmental issues. A further effect is an intensified, respectively revitalized transmission of traditional ecological knowledge to the younger generation in Arútam. For this purpose, particular workshops for young family members are organized by elder brothers and sisters.

### The Forest as “Our Home”: Political Dimensions

In his welcome speech, Enrique explains the particular relationship the Shuar have with the forest and describes it as their “home”: “For the Shuar, the jungle is our home. We have been living here for many years. We come from the origin of our grandfathers. We are here,” he asserts. The young man claims the Amazonian rainforest as “their” space by referring to the Shuar’s original inhabitancy. The identification of the Amazonian forest as “home” entails both a political message and a cosmological reference. When Enrique states that the forest is their “home,” he employs a concept that is widespread in the non-indigenous world when referring to indigenous peoples. They are often seen as still living in their homeland, as the original or First Peoples, living in close contact with nature (Zeppel 2006:3). The perceived equation of indigenous peoples and “nature” certainly attracts many tourists to the Amazonian rainforest and has become an integral part of many indigenous people’s self-perception and identification – as is also the case in Enrique’s quote. It also hints to the appropriation of non-indigenous concepts such as “land” and “property” which are politically charged and contested, especially since the Shuar have been confronted with the property regimes of the Ecuadorian state. However, Enrique’s word choice also points to the strong sense of place and to the importance for the Shuar “to live in the same place as their ancestors,” a claim much like the one Erazo (2013:16) identified among Kichwa living in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

The Ecuadorian government started the colonisation of the temporarily cultivated and not fenced *tierras baldías*<sup>7</sup> in the Oriente region with the “support” of settlers from the Andean highlands in the 1960s. The Ecuadorian Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization (Instituto Ecuatoriano de Reforma Agraria y Colonización, IERAC) passed a law that required an “effective” cultivation, if individuals wanted to legally purchase the land they inhabited. Such an “effective” farming technique contradicted fundamentally the slash-and-burn cultivation of the Shuar. As a result, the land which had not been in possession of an individual person was transferred to the national estate. As horticulturalists, the Shuar know the concept of territorial property in the sense that specific gardens were “owned” as long as they were being cultivated. However, land or natural resources were not owned individually or communally. Harner speaks about an “absence of definitions or claims of territoriality” among the Shuar (Harner 1984:179, 77). Because of the Shuar’s slash-and-burn practice and the missing concept of individual property, the Ecuadorian state dispossessed the Shuar and distributed the territory amongst the Mestizos from the Andes. As a consequence of these colonial practices, the Shuar organized themselves in so-called *centros*, bringing together several extended families – which formerly had often been at war with each other. In 1964, the Shuar founded the Federación Interprovincial de Centros Shuar (FICSH) with the support of Salesian missionaries (Rubenstein 2005:37). The main aim of the FICSH was the acquisition of collective land titles. By introducing a new property regime and market-oriented labor, the indigenous leaders of the FICSH implemented the modernist aspirations of the Ecuadorian state into the Shuar communities. Simultaneously, they strengthened the indigenous organization and preserved indigenous control over the land as well as the forest (Erazo 2011:438). In comparison with other indigenous groups in the Amazon, they accomplished their objectives relatively quickly and successfully (Salazar 1981; Scheuzger 2007).

The model of property, however, is an occidental one already discussed by ancient philosophers<sup>8</sup> and had come to the Americas as part of the colonial design (Ramos 2010:254). It is closely linked to the concepts of territory and nationhood, based on a rather romanticized imagination of a homogeneous community which shares a common cultural ethos, one vernacular tongue and a particular territory (Krotz 2011:445). The Amazonian worldview, in contrast, has been described as “communalism” (Pálsson 1996:72), in which all entities of the cosmos – humans, animals, plants, spirits – form a

reciprocal community and create a social network (Descola 1994). Humans do not necessarily have a privileged status and cannot “possess” or dominate other beings. Amazonian worldviews define nature as a social cosmos (in German: *Mit-Welt*) (Grünberg 1994:159; Kohn 2013), in which all entities share the same spirit and soul (Viveiros de Castro 1998) – rather than a detached cosmos (*Um-Welt*) that has to be tamed. For the Shuar, nature and forest possess their own transcendental agency from which they are dependent and with which they interact and negotiate constantly (Münzel 1977:59; Harner 1984:70; Pellizzaro 1990; Descola 1996:423; Meiser 2013:263). Nevertheless, the Shuar apply the notion of “territory” to articulate their claims regarding the Amazon forest pointing to the fact that their “home” relates to a defined space that has been the Shuar’s settling area for many generations. This is widespread today in the Ecuadorian Amazon and ethno-cultural original “homelands” have become crucial for the self-conception of indigenous identity. Thus, nativist and essentialist land claims are widely used by indigenous political movements (Kuper 2003; Ramos 2003).

However, the description of the Bosque Protector as “our home” is more than a political statement. Enrique refers to the forest as “living space” and as an integral part of the Shuar’s cosmology. The forest means more than a “territory” in terms of material property as it ensures the Shuar’s physical, cultural, and spiritual existence. Alejandro Tankamash, a board member of the FICSH, expressed this with the term “market place” – something which is giving and which therefore demands respect (Tankamash 2009, personal communication). With this notion, Tankamash describes a form of reciprocity and mutual responsibility between humans and nature. The Amazon is considered the all-embracing basis of the Shuar’s existence and well-being. Together, the forest and its inhabitants make an inseparable, mutually dependent unity which makes the forest itself a social and culture space and thus part of their culture (Mader 1994:140). The forest also constitutes a space of spiritual re-linking where individuals meet transcendent powers, such as ancestors, spirits, mythological heroes, and arutam, the Shuar’s most important cosmological entity (Rathgeber 2004:61). It is not by accident that the Shuar community named its Bosque Protector “Arútam” and identified it as a place where the spirits are active. The Shuar, as most other Amazonian indigenous peoples, see their cultural identity inextricably linked with the forest. The claim to be the legitimate and original owners of the forest goes beyond struggles over “territory” and needs to be situated in this cultural framework (Hutchins and Wilson 2010:XX). Encounters with tourists foster these conceptions of the Amazonian forest and indigenous peoples, as the visitors want to see the “First Peoples” living in their original homelands. Enrique matches this perception by presenting the forest as “our home.”

### **The Forest as the “Lungs of the Planet”: Global Dimensions**

When Enrique defines the forest as an ecological space in his welcome speech, he also refers to the role of his family who lives in and with this space – their “home” has to be defended and saved from external destruction. This struggle is even globally significant. The Shuar family defines the ecotourism project as a sustainable, “clean” source of income and as a commitment to increase environmental awareness. The ecotourism project helps the Shuar to protect their 2,700 ha of forest from deforestation while also making a contribution to the earthly ecosystem. The Bosque Protector is a place where human ecological dependency on the Amazon rainforest becomes manifest. “We are the lungs of the planet, the Amazon lets the world breathe,” Enrique’s older brother, José, reminds his guests (José 2009, personal communication). When José defines the Amazon as “lungs of the planet”, he also expresses a particular responsibility for the ecological survival of the planet. As owners and custodians of the “lungs of the planet,” the Shuar possess a competency that makes them irreplaceable and unique in defending the Amazon. In this regard, the Shuar turn into actors of global relevance. Alejandro Tankamash, the FICSH director states “... the little we have on this planet earth is the Amazonian basin...pure oxygen, pure water for the whole world!” (Tankamash 2009, personal communication).

The assumption of a strong and sometimes mystified bond between indigenous peoples and “nature” is widespread and part of a globalized environmental discourse

that is captured by notions such as “ecological native” (Ulloa 2005) or “indio verde” (Dumoulin 2005:36; Rossbach de Olmos 2004). This is particularly evident in the case of the Amazon, as the environment is intrinsically tied to the cosmology and philosophy of various indigenous groups. In fact, some indigenous cultures and “traditions” are imagined as guarantors for a sustainable use of the environment. In the global ecological imaginary, they are seen as “natural,” and, for this, their cultural difference is proof (Conklin and Graham 1995:697). These views find their expression in a range of contexts far beyond the Shuar community. The political activist Gabriel Muyuy Jacanamejoy, an Inga from South-West Colombia, appropriates these discourses and places particular emphasis on the relationship between indigeneity and environmentalism:

To speak of environment in the context of indigenous communities means to highlight the conceptual significance of the land. Land is the primary basis for subsistence and health; it is the living space with gods, ghosts, sun, water and air. Therefore, indigenous peoples have been the best and most numerous defenders of the environment (Rossbach de Olmos 2004:93).<sup>10</sup>

Similar views are expressed by a range of non-indigenous actors. Conservation scientists, for instance, are assuring that indigenous territories will be decisive for the future of the Amazonian ecosystem (Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005:722). Kuper (2003:390) even diagnoses a “strong ecological thread in the indigenous-peoples rhetoric” and refers to a speech of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in which the former UN secretary general argues that many indigenous people live in greater harmony with nature than the inhabitants of industrial societies. Finally, the recent Ecuadorian Constitution from 2008 – similar to the Bolivian Constitution from 2009 – establishes the Kichwa paradigm of *sumak kawsay* (Spanish: buen vivir; “good life”) as a new national framework. The indigenous term is often translated as “good living,” but is described more precisely as “to live in a harmonious relationship between humans (individually and collectively) and nature” (Acosta 2009:220). Both Ecuador and Bolivia have implemented a kind of “socioecological lifestyle” with normative consequences for their political and economic strategies by referring to Andean cosmology. Moreover, in the Ecuadorian constitution, nature has become a legal entity and is guaranteed – at least theoretically – with equal rights as humans. And, regardless of the constitutional codification, the desire for living in harmony with nature is one of the most marketable descriptions and popular incentives for the implementation of ecotourism projects (Conklin and Graham 1995; Conklin 2010; Trupp and Trupp 2009).

One of the US-volunteers in Arútam asserts that during her stay she was especially impressed by the “simple yet incredibly and genuinely happy Shuar lifestyle” and also acknowledges the “physical labor that goes into sustaining a life in harmony with nature.” Another volunteer adds “This organic style of living was apparent in the Shuars’ appearance, from their healthy weight to the shine of their hair and the glow of their skin” (Lafayette College 2011). For both students, it is obvious that the unity between indigenous people and their environment is a prerequisite for becoming part of this utopia, in which individuals work hard and are satisfied at the same time. This is even phenotypically manifest. The Shuar are regarded as experts in the field of “living in harmony with nature” and as the best guarantors that this utopia can become true. It is the nexus between a normative “good” lifestyle and environmental conservation that transferred indigenous peoples from “candidates for ... ‘development’” to the “forefront of modernity” (Carneiro da Cunha and de Almeida 2000: 315). Following this line of argument, the Shuar are intentionally “modern,” and aim to be considered as serious and necessary counterparts in national or international environmental programs (see Cepek 2012:109f. for the case of the Cofán).

Enrique’s brother identifies his own political agenda as “nature” (Spanish: *naturaleza*) and adds that the Amazon “is a world of colours, of thousand years old cultures, of biodiversity, of its rivers, waterfalls, lakes, where the original communities are fighting to preserve the nature in a multicultural ambiance, for the harmony of the peoples.” The statement on Jose’s Facebook site – which serves primarily as information platform for tourists – is more than a mere marketing tool or political opportunism. Rather, this statement shows the ways the Shuar appropriate environmental discourses and take re-

sponsibility for a global desire: to turn an indigenous and yet modern utopia into a reality. The Shuar's community-based tourism project in the Bosque Protector is a prime destination for individuals who wish to experience the reality of this utopia and it is also a product of the indigenous participation in the global environmental discourse.

### Conclusion: The “Thingified” Forest as Ultimate Resource

The community-based ecotourism project in Arútam is strongly shaped by projections of and desires for a life in harmony with nature that tourists hope to find in the Amazonian rainforest. The Shuar are aware of these imaginations and have integrated them into their cultural contexts, as is obvious in Enrique's perception of the Amazonian forest. The encounter with the tourists produces new understandings of the environment and, consequently, a reconsideration of the Shuar's identity as custodians of the forest on a national and global scale. Prior to the arrival of the first tourist volunteers, the Shuar had not considered their forest as something extraordinary – on the contrary, they had lived with and from the forest in a self-evident way. The engagement with tourism and global environmental discourses produced new ways of self-positioning and notions of being in the world. The Amazon has turned more and more into an intercultural “topos.” Thus, the Shuar seek to shift the encounter with the visiting tourists into a horizontal relation of mutual exchange and to incorporate Western knowledge “according to its own criteria, transforming itself in the process” (Rappaport 2005:133). This reflexive process has created a “thingified” culture as well as a “thingified” forest (Hutchins 2010:4) – something that has to be rated, marketed, and sold – a qualitative significance, which is ascribed to the environment and is now monetarily expressed (Bunten 2008:384; 386). Thus, the forest itself has finally become a negotiated and valued commodity.

Erazo argues that one can observe “a noticeable shift over time toward a more Western way of thinking about environment” (Erazo 2013:135), even though indigenous leaders in the Amazon emphasize their significant role for the realization of conservation and environmental programmes. The engagement with ecotourism has caused similar effects in Arútam: even though most Shuar would still see “nature as a powerful force in their lives” (Erazo 2013:134), it is being tamed as it has now become a means to pursue their own political interests and an entity that has to be protected. Randall Borman, the so called “Gringo Chief” of the Cofán, was one of the first individuals to introduce tourists to the Ecuadorian Amazon. He expressed the visitors' influence on the commodification of the forest:

It [the forest] was always there, always central, always giving. We had always made our living from It. The idea of owning It, protecting It, conserving It, had never occurred to us. Now, suddenly, we recognized that this was absolutely necessary if we were to survive as a people. In our case, the catalyst for this developing awareness was tourism. Tourism caused us to begin to look at the Forest as our ultimate resource (Borman 2008:24).

As a consequence of the tourist encounter, the Shuar also consider the forest and their cultural practices as an “ultimate resource” not only in the economic term that Borman formulated, but also in terms of a new identity and self-esteem. The Western concepts of owning, protecting, and conserving the forests are appropriated by the Shuar and translated as the claim to own the forest, the claim to be its defenders, and the claim to arrange the stage for an intercultural encounter. Consequently, the encounter between the Shuar and international tourists entwines indigenous with non-indigenous concepts on the Amazon, but also furthers postcolonial agencies, which have turned the indigenous peoples into active protagonists on a global stage. While the tropical rainforest has long been perceived as wilderness and something *fascinosum et tremendum* (Cronon 1996:9), an uncontrolled space to be subdued, domesticated, and cultivated, and a home to savages, the Amazonian forest has become a “hybrid third space” (Bhabha 1990) – a space in which hegemonic Western discourses of indigenous peoples existing far from “culture” but close to “nature” are undermined, reinterpreted, and appropriated by the Shuar. José refers to this process in his own words: “Now we are fighting with new

weapons. We have learned from the Westerners to beat the Westerners with their Western weapons” (José 2009, personal communication). In Arútam, ecotourism and the re-interpretation of idealized “Western” imaginations of the rainforest have become such weapons.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the interaction with the tourists, the Shuar use often Kichwa words to name some central terms of daily activities such as *chakera* for “garden,” “field” or *minga* for “community work”.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation of all Spanish comments was realized by the film producers.

<sup>3</sup> “Somos los pulmones de la planeta; la Amazonía deja respirar al mundo.”

<sup>4</sup> Translated from German into English by A.M.

<sup>5</sup> The *tsantsa* is a shrunken human head. The Shuar decollated hostile warriors and prepared the head so that it shrivelled up, though the facial features remained identifiable. To date, the *tsantsa* is the most famous identity marker of the Shuar. For interpretations of the *tsantsa* ritual, see Karsten 1935, Harner 1984, Descola 1993, Taylor 1993, and Rubenstein 2009.

<sup>6</sup> *Yawa Jee* means literally “the house of the dog.” The travel agency translates the phrase in the figurative sense as “a house for the children and the animals of the jungle.” It emblemizes the idea that the forest is a living space shared in equal measure by humans, animals and plants (Moya 1998:115).

<sup>7</sup> The term *tierras baldías* refers to apparently vacant and unused land.

<sup>8</sup> Cicero, for example, argues in *De Officiis* [I, 21-22] that individual tenurial emerges in situations of conquest and occupation or by social contracts [law, pact, agreement, fortune] (Chiusi 2005). A similar perspective is offered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who laments that fencing the land has founded modern society which henceforth has been determined by wars, misery, and social inequality. In the view of the French philosopher individual property dissolves the original “natural state” of humankind when the earth’s soil had belonged to all its inhabitants (Rehm 2005). Rousseau elaborates his idealized concept of the “noble savage” having in mind the indigenous people of South America (Hall 2008:6,54); for him, they represent the human being during the period of original community and harmony.

<sup>9</sup> “... lo poco, que tenemos aqui en planeta tierra, es la cuenca amazónica. ... El oxígeno puro, el agua pura, para el mundo entero!”

<sup>10</sup> Translated from German into English by A.M.

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### **Documentary film**

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