
INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GOOD LIVING

Abstract

This paper analyses the discourse of indigenous women with regard to Good Living (Sumak Kawsay) or Living Well (Suma Qamaña) with the aim of identifying the notion they have of this alternative principle offered by indigenous movements in retaliation to what they consider the global crisis of the capitalist system. The idea is to restore the perspective of leaders who initiate their own proposals, stepping forward as vectors of indigenous cultural values and enriching the Good Living from this approach. Indigenous women's perception of Good Living urges us to question this proposal by taking a look at the aspects on which both men and women coincide, but also based on the input from females from their lopsided position, both within their communities and movements, and concerning their relationship with national societies.

Key words

Indigenous, Women, Discourse, Good Living, Culture.

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Background

Towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Living Well or Suma Qamaña proposal emerged through campaigning by indigenous leaders in Bolivia, as opposed to the "To Live Better" slogan, which was championed by the governments of Hugo Banzer and Tuto Quiroga in their laws and decrees. Idon Chivi, a Bolivian lawyer of Aymara descent, founded the principles of Suma Qamaña in opposition to "Living Better":

They used to sign their bills or supreme decrees with supplements that included the slogan "To Live Better". This concept was questioned, notably within the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (Conamaq) and the principle Suma Qamaña was reclaimed from the political memory of the forefathers..."Living Well" in an egalitarian context as opposed to Living Better from a skewed perspective. Living Well within a context of equal opportunities, against Living Better with an imbalance of opportunities. An equal democratic direction as opposed to a highly discriminatory direction. There were two discursive tendencies (Chivi: 2010:1).

The Suma Qamaña clearly emerged with a major long-term political and ethical component. It clashed with the neoliberal model in place in Bolivia back then which was to be the cause of major mobilisations beginning in 2000 that culminated with President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (2002-2003) fleeing the country. He was replaced by Vice-President Carlos Mesa until 2005, who was also forced to resign as a result of later mobilisations against his government. Eduardo Rodríguez led the transitioning government until the 2005 elections when Evo Morales Ayma, Aymara leader of the Movement for Socialism (MAS), was elected as President.

During Evo Morales' first term, a Constitutional Assembly was convened and the Movement for Socialism drafted a document entitled: "Refound Bolivia. Living Well", in which proposals were put forward for drawing up a new Constitution that incorporated the principles of Living Well and Andean values such as the "ama sua ama lulla ama quella" (don't be a thief, don't be liar, don't be lazy). Evo Morales adopted the slogan Living Well as the rallying cry of his government and in 2008, in the 7th United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held between 21 April and 2 May, he introduced "The Ten Commandments to Save the Planet". The tenth Commandment summarises his proposal: "We want everyone to be able to live well, which does not mean to live better at the expense of others. We must build a communitarian socialism that is in harmony with the mother Earth" (Morales: 2008)

In the context of the dispute between Living Better and Living Well (Suma Qamaña), Fernando Huanacuni (2010), Bolivian Aymara leader, explains the difference between the two concepts:

"We do not want to live better; we do not want to compete with anyone. For us, the premise of Living Well or Good Living means living in harmony and balance - this is the basic concept of life. Capital is most important for capitalism, man for communism; however, for community, for the ordinary indigenous people, life takes priority and this is the context behind Suma Qamaña. Living Well is balance and harmony with specific

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actions in our family, our lives and society as a whole. Living Well means awakening in the context of one's relationship with life, complementing oneself with all forms of existence”.

Ecuador in the 90s and early 2000s witnessed major mobilisations and overthrows of Presidents in which the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) played a key role. Then, following experience in governmental positions during the presidency term of Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005), the indigenous movement lost muscle and entered into a period of reassessing its participation within the State and its relationship with the grass roots.

During the first government of Rafael Correa, who was elected in 2006, a Constitutional Assembly was convened and a new Constitution drafted in which the principles of Sumak Kawsay (Good Living) were incorporated, including the consideration of nature as a subject worthy of rights. The debate on this proposal had already been sparked by the Ecuadorian indigenous movement and the need to reconsider it became more of a priority following its recovery in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions. In the Andean region, therefore, forums and meetings were being held in an attempt to reinforce it with support from male and female leaders from different indigenous organisations. In the Americas Social Forum, held in Guatemala in October 2008, the key theme presented by indigenous peoples and women was Good Living and at this point the reflection was undertaken by participating female leaders. This Forum also served as a platform to present and sign the text signed by Evo Morales on the "Ten Commandments to Save the Planet" into which, as previously stated, the principle of Living Well or Suma Qamaña was incorporated.

Living Well/Good Living from the perspective of indigenous women

Living Well (Suma Qamaña in Aymara) and Good Living (Sumak Kawsay in Quechua) is adopted especially by female indigenous leaders mainly in the Andean region and then in Chile, Paraguay, Guatemala and Mexico, who reflect from their cultural perspective and coincide in aspects with male Andean leaders, reclaiming their age-old origin, yet approaching it from a different angle in line with specific needs.

Whilst the majority of leaders present Living Well or Good Living as an alternative full of merits, albeit in progress, women adopt it from the utopian idea of a better world for all. This proposal has also become the backbone of a discourse that seeks the decolonisation of Latin American societies and States. Following the concept of Living Well/Good Living, female movements are reconsidered to highlight their diversity and the need to decolonise feminism to open the door towards a multitude of experiences and proposals. In the debate on "Polyphony and Interculturality. Good Living from the diversity of female voices" attention was drawn to the need to:

“[...] create a platform for discussion, reflection, of mutual recognition where work is carried out on the issue of respect for cultural diversity at the heart of the Latin American feminist and female movement. This is why we are discussing polyphony, because there should not only be one single feminist movement (hegemonic), but instead many; as many as the identities that emerge amongst women: indigenous, of

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African descent, urban, peasant, white, lesbian, etc. (MercoSur Feminist Articulation: 2010:3)”.

In a Latin American context it can be noted that female indigenous leaders collaborate on different bodies to enforce their rights and voice their demands. Likewise, they form part of indigenous movements and regional organisations, structured separately into coordinators of women at local, national and even continental level or within the organisations themselves. They also participate in forums and discussions with non-indigenous women. However, unlike feminist organisations, which challenge the patriarchal system from a gender perspective, indigenous women fight alongside men demanding the collective rights of indigenous peoples, whilst also claiming their own rights, thus working from a comprehensive approach.

The urgency of Living Well/Good Living has made sure that the different indigenous claims, demands and proposals are incorporated and discussed from their own world view and shared between the different peoples of the sub-continent. It has, however, also ignited the awareness and assembly of indigenous women who voice their demands and step forward as bearers of ancestral values, given that –as they themselves state– they are those who closely liaise with nature and the universe insofar as they beget life. Blanca Chancosa, Ecuadorian Quechua leader points out:

For women, Sumak Kawsay in alliance with Pachamama is extremely important. We, as women in a human sense are life-givers, not simply because we give birth, but also because we raise this new being. We are a part of and within this womb that is Pachamama. What is expected here is to acknowledge life for all, but also through the exercise of rights: equal opportunities and spaces for men and women. (2010:9)

The speech by Blanca Chancosa first draws a connection between the Sumak Kawsay and the Pachamama and then between women and the Pachamama. As both create life, indigenous women are equal to her and in light of this development, their right to be considered on equal terms as men and to access the Good Living is validated.

Enriqueta Huanto Ticona, Bolivian leader of the Aymara indigenous people (2010), in an interview with Juan Nicasro and in response to a question on what indigenous women propose to address climate change, states:

“The women's response comes from their own life experiences, the policy of conservation, of care. The view of respect and complementarity with nature. As women, we are producers, like the Earth. So, we female indigenous leaders are working to defend, like our forefathers, that harmony with the Earth, that respect between nature and human life that the capitalist system broke. Because that view was seen by capitalism as backwardness and underdevelopment. Nature is as valuable as human life. In our Andean world, we say that the stones speak, the wind speaks, the sun speaks, the animals speak. That is the Good Living (or Living Well) principle that we all live with equality and in balance with nature”.

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The interview with Enriqueta first acknowledges the indigenous woman by pointing out that she is responsible for caring, for conserving, for respecting nature in her day-to-day life and just like Blanca Chancoso, she draws a connection between women and the earth or the Pachamama, as both create life. She then validates her ancestral values and contrasts them against the capitalist system that put an end to the principle and which paradoxically regarded indigenous people as backward. This reasoning seeks to reverse the order of discourse by revealing that those who are the vectors of values are the indigenous peoples and women, meanwhile capitalism is that which disturbs the balance between human beings and nature.

In both individual discourses and declarations and statements drafted by indigenous leaders, a metaphorical line of thought can be observed in which the indigenous woman absorbs qualities of nature, whilst the latter in turn is regarded as a subject of collective rights to be respected and cared for. This stance has already been ingrained in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, with influence from the leaders of indigenous movements. With this being said, there is still a lot of work to be done before these values are internalised by national societies and States.

Indigenous women rally for respect for nature and respect for their collective. They also demand to be seen, heard and placed on a level playing field with men, assembling and advocating the cause. In 2009, within the framework of the 4th Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, the 1st Indigenous Women's Summit was held in Puno, Peru. Speaking at the event, Blanca Chancosa (2009) stressed that the basic aim "is to make our voices heard, ensure that women are seen and that they can take part in an equitable manner, as well as to balance shared participation between men and women and continue building power".

In March 2010, women from the main Andean and Amazonian organisations promulgated an *Emergency Decree* on International Women's Day, which incorporated the issue of political participation from indigenous women, among other points ruling to: "Enforce the principle of Duality and Complementarity" on an alternative basis –man and woman– in all spaces and levels of political and social participation, leading to the balance and harmony between men and women. In doing so, we will consolidate the unity of our peoples, into one single thought, one single force and one single heart".

It is clear that indigenous women are on the road to recovering the Andean principles of duality and complementarity to achieve equality between the sexes (chachi-warmi), which has been a principle upheld by the indigenous leaders as part of the concept of Good Living.

On the occasion of International Women's Day in 2002, the Women's Coordinator, belonging to the Andean Coordinator of Indigenous Organisations (CAOI), released a message entitled "8 of March: we as indigenous women continue to fight", in which they declared that "...for a long time we have been subjected to discrimination and racism. But this has come to an end. We as indigenous women have taken a stand and are making sure our voices are heard". In the message, the leaders draw attention to the

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long struggle they have endured and the recognition that they have been permanently subjected to discrimination and racism, but that now they have decided to take a "stand" and put an end to it. This gives the perception that they have chosen to come out of the inferior world, from the shadows and invisibility to make sure they are heard. These images transport us to a potential and disrupting moment during the lengthy period of struggle and discrimination when there was a change, a transformation, a turnaround, a Pachakuti.

In the Manifesto of the 1st Continental Summit of Indigenous Women of Abya Yala, the indigenous women clearly state: "we raise our voices in these times when Abya Yala's womb is once more with childbirth pains, ready to give birth to the new Pachakutik for a better life on our planet. (2009).

However, they do not only fight for their demands nor seek confrontation with men, as they believe that: "[...] the Good Living of women is not only built by us women, because in that case there is no harmony and balance; the Good Living of women also needs men, movements, communities, peoples and nationalities that are committed to the harmonisation of existence." (World Social Forum: 2008:10).

Although they stand up to machismo and violence against women because in their judgement it infringes upon the principles of Good Living, they acknowledge that in order to defeat it one must challenge the "hegemonic colonial system", but it must be done as a collective effort: "We as men and women will break free from the chains that shackle us to machismo and violence in order to achieve the Good Living" (National Organisation of Indigenous and Amazonian Women of Peru: 2010:5).

The discourse of indigenous leaders outlines the fight for equality and the pursuit towards complementarity between men and women as a goal to attain in order to build the Good Living, and not as a complete or harmonious proposal, and the need to stamp out violence towards women in order to achieve it is prominent throughout their statements and documents. Through their own cultural values they reach out to their peers with a proposal whereby to the extent there is congruence in the age-old principles, it is viable to challenge the dominant system in a more united fashion, meanwhile wiping machismo from their communities. Unlike the feminist movement that assigns blame to the patriarchy for the inequality and discrimination of women, female indigenous leaders condemn the colonial system that was established through occupation. They believe that following imposition, indigenous peoples suffer the consequences of colonisation in all spheres of life.

The documents and statements also reveal a series of demands that seek to guarantee indigenous women and their peoples the Good Living or Living Well. These include the right to health and education from an intercultural perspective, as they call for respect and recognition of their cultures and their forms of knowledge, as well as the role indigenous women play in their communities: "We are doctors through our own Cosmo vision, we provide psychological support to our family, to the community, through

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natural medicine...we are those who raise our sons and daughters from birth and thus we are aware of the need to change learning" (World Social Forum: 2008:11).

In the Emergency Decree on International Women's Day 2010, which was drafted by women from Andean and Amazonian indigenous organisations of Peru, in addressing the issue of ancestral knowledge and indigenous health, the first point states: "Let ancestral knowledge and traditional medicine of the indigenous peoples be acknowledged to fully exercise the universal right to health, guaranteeing food sovereignty for the Good Living of our peoples".

International Law (Convention 169 of the ILO and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) grants them the authority to exercise their right to self-determination and demand to be respected as peoples, and includes the Right to life and respect for Mother Earth They also call for the inclusion of the specific rights of indigenous women in these international instruments. The resolutions or agreements from the Manifiesto of the 1st Continental Summit of Indigenous Women include the following: "We urge on international entities the reform of international instruments related to indigenous peoples so as to incorporate the rights of women and submit alternative reports on progress and compliance" (2009:2)

From within their organisations, indigenous women constantly strive to secure a dignified life for them and for their peoples. Within the scope of Good Living, they also speak out for valuing their cultures, demonstrating respect for their rights and highlighting the crucial role that women have played in the communities. The *Agenda para la promoción de la salud sexual y reproductiva de las mujeres indígenas* [Agenda to promote sexual and reproductive health of indigenous women], drawn up by the National Network of Community Advocates of Mexico, states: We recognise... Our ancestors' fight for the presence of our peoples and the dignity and good living of indigenous women that encompasses the practices and customs that do not infringe upon the rights of women" and they suggest, among others, accessing "Comprehensive care modules in sexual and reproductive health services of indigenous women, showing consideration for their world view and their families from an intercultural and gender-based approach." (2011)

The idea of returning, of the past, of memory runs prominently through the documents. In the 1st Continental Summit of Indigenous Women, they believe it is necessary: "to resort back to ways of mutual and harmonious respect in planetary life..." (2009:1) and in the message of the Women's Coordinator of the CAOI (2002) they highlight: "...we strive to re-establish our lifestyle and fight for the whole world to follow suit"

However, according to Blanca Chancosa: "When we talk about Sumak Kawsay, it is not a case of stepping back into the past, because we cannot say that it was perfect, just that if we had and lived the Sumak Kawsay" (2010:7), meanwhile the Mayan females in the 3rd Americas Social Forum highlight that Good Living means: "Recovering values - our peoples have practised values for thousands of years in a balanced and harmonious coexistence, they were practices of our forefathers that are a part of us, so we are

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committed to readopting them, and reliving them in honour of our of the peoples and nature." (2008:11)

This approach reveals the need to recover their cultures and identity through the teachings of forefathers in order to successfully decolonise their peoples and national societies and develop the Good Living. The leaders of the Bartolina Sisa de Bolivia Women's Organisation believe that it is important to: "Reclaim our identity so that man and women, side by side, pass this on to the children...we have to recover our own customs, the culture of our forefathers, only then will we cease to be a colony, only then will we decolonise, only then by retrieving the culture of the past to connect with our ancestors, but we also have to accept change, the new law, new ideas" (Colectivo Cabildeo: 2010:5-6)

However, this release and remembrance does not intend to regress back to being something static, but instead, through the cyclic thinking of indigenous cultures, it is closely connected with the present and will help secure a better future. There is a holistic vision where the ages interact qualitatively within a cosmic idea that connects time and space. Mayan females declare: "Based on our own notion of the world, we believe that **We are a WHOLE living alongside a WHOLE**. This is why our current stance is interlinked with history, reality and the future we are building in unity with like-minded peoples" (III Americas Social Forum: 2008:11)

For Mayan females, this notion encompasses the utopian idea of a new order, of a world in balance, and the Good Living in this sense, as already pointed out by Blanca Chancosa, is a utopia in progress, it is not complete or static, it is moving: "We are educating these peoples on this new dawn, and we invite more brothers and sisters to join each day and engage in this new awakening" (Idem.,)

On the basis of this holistic vision, indigenous women do not intend to develop the Good Living alone, but instead as a collective effort between men and women. We also note reference to the sacred book of the Maya People, el Popol Vuh, to the moment in which the gods formed the world, engaging in reciprocal dialogue for the day to break; however, in this case it is proposed that it breaks again, that the light defeats darkness with the work, continuous struggle and unity between all.

Final thoughts

The utopian idea of Good Living or Living Well is prevalent among indigenous women; it is retrieved from the past to enhance the future and involves securing a dignified life for them, their peoples and all human beings on earth. They offer the best of their cultures and demand equal conditions in all spheres of life from their communities, the States and national societies. They also insist on the right to self-determination as indigenous peoples, enabling both men and women to deepen their cultures, their traditional knowledge and their identities. They advocate for intercultural dialogue in which ancestral knowledge is contemplated and indigenous women are viewed, valued and respected as bearers of knowledge and carers of mother Earth, suffering in equal measure from the ongoing destruction of nature ©

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