



# Weaving the Spiderweb: *Mujeres Amazónicas* and the Design of Anti-Extractive Politics in Ecuador

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**ABSTRACT** *This article examines the strategic politics of an Indigenous network called las Mujeres Amazónicas (the Amazonian Women) that is resisting the expansion of extractive projects in Ecuador's Amazon rainforest. It asks, what are the Mujeres Amazónicas' political strategies to resist extractive occupation and how do they develop and deploy these strategies in their territorial struggle? To answer this question, I analyze how their organizing is characterized by a political design that merges public expressions of resistance – such as mobilizations, protest marches, and other public actions – with communitarian practices that reproduce human and more-than-human life in the Amazon. To illustrate this strategic fusion, the article turns to an image that the Kichwa leader Elvia Dagua wove into an artesanía (handicraft) called la Araña Tejedora (the Weaving Spider). By analyzing Dagua's artesanía and other self-descriptions of the Mujeres Amazónicas, the article shows how practices of communitarian reproduction are used and transformed by the Amazonian Women, thus enabling their political work and sustaining their lives at the same time. The strategic deployment of reproductive practices reveals how Indigenous women's cultural and social identities are neither static nor unchangeable. It also illustrates that the Mujeres Amazónicas' organizing should not be interpreted as a simple example of local politics responding to extractive occupation. By contrast, the article shows how the Mujeres Amazónicas are historical and political subjects with the power to shape the lines of political confrontation vis-à-vis the state and extractive capital, and to build global connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of living.*

**Keywords** Amazon; Indigenous women; extractivism; resistance; environmental movements

## Introduction

On October 12, 2013, Indigenous Peoples' Day, a group of approximately 200 Indigenous women from the Ecuadorian Amazon who call themselves *Mujeres Amazónicas* (Amazonian Women) walked 219 kilometers from the Amazonian

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city of Puyo to the capital city of Quito, Ecuador.<sup>1</sup> This mobilization, called the “March for Life,” was organized by a coalition of female leaders from seven Indigenous nationalities – Achuar, Shuar, Sapara, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa, and Waorani – to present their proposal to declare the rainforest *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) (Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur, 2013a) to the government and the general public. As the proposal states, *Kawsak Sacha* is “a new category of preservation that takes into account Amazonian peoples’ philosophy” and “recognizes the interrelationship between human beings and nature” (Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur, 2013a; see also Coba & Bayón, 2020). The march was also a powerful collective act to challenge the complete exclusion of Indigenous women’s voices and of the communities they represented from the governments’ plans to expand oil projects in their territories.

More specifically, *Mujeres Amazónicas* marched to protest the government’s decision to open the licensing process for the 11th Oil Round and to start oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park without properly consulting their communities.<sup>2</sup> While the 11th Oil Round divided approximately two-thirds of the Amazon into 16 oil blocks (Secretaría de Hidrocarburos, 2013), oil extraction in the biodiverse Yasuní Park negatively impacts Waorani communities and the Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation.

The March for Life launched *Mujeres Amazónicas* as visible political actors in the struggle against oil extraction in Ecuador, drawing the support and attention of many environmental activists and academics from the region. Their collective act of bringing their communities’ voices to the capital, by filling its streets with their chants and children, also forced the state to meet them in Congress and to receive their proposal for the Living Forest. Most importantly, their visible and potent march was an effective strategy to scare international investors away and temporarily halt the 11th Oil Round. Even though oil extraction has already started in the Yasuní National Park, the resistance of *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ and their communities was able to stop the government’s ambitious plan to massively expand oil extraction, historically concentrated in the northern Amazon, to the center-south.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The activists have called themselves *Mujeres Amazónicas* in their declarations and public announcements (see *Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur*, 2013a, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> In August 2012, the Subsecretary of Hydrocarbons conducted an accelerated and dubious process of prior consultation in Indigenous territories living in the southern-central Amazon region, and signed agreements with some leaders of Indigenous organizations and local governments – predominantly men – in exchange for developmental projects in their communities. Indigenous organizations like the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) pointed out that this process of prior consultation was unconstitutional and did not comply with international Indigenous Rights standards (Bravo & Vallejo, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> From the 16 oil blocks, the government only received four offers from private corporations for oil blocks 79, 83, 29, and 28 (Efe Economía, 2013). In November 2019, the Chinese company Andes Petroleum and the government terminated the contract for oil blocks 79 and 89 due to the “radical opposition of the local communities” (Mazabanda & Koenig, 2019). The consortium

The political organizing of Indigenous women in Ecuador is not a recent phenomenon. Indigenous leaders like Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña and collective initiatives like the *Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONMIE) have shaped Ecuador's history (Lavinás Picq, 2018, p. 4) and social movements' politics in the region (Méndez Torres, 2009, pp. 46ff.). Furthermore, Indigenous women's active participation in the nationwide Indigenous uprisings in 1990 and 1992 demonstrates their crucial historical role in Ecuador's Indigenous Movement (see Coba & Bayón, 2020; García-Torres, 2017; Sempértegui, 2022). For these reasons, Indigenous women's effective and strategic politics against the recent expansion of extractive projects is worthy of careful critical attention.

Mujeres Amazónicas organized during a unique period of Latin American reintegration into the capitalist global energy market. Between 2000 and 2014, the price of commodities like oil was on the rise, incentivizing countries like Ecuador to intensify their extractive economic model (Burchardt & Dietz, 2013). This period of commodities boom also coincided with the rise to power of many left-wing governments in the region (Riofrancos, 2020), like the government of the Citizen's Revolution in Ecuador, which legitimized the advancement of the extractive frontier by allocating some revenues to social spending and developmental programs (Acosta, 2012; Gudynas, 2010; Svampa, 2013). Even though the funding for developmental projects was cut due to the fall of oil prices in 2014, and a neoliberal governmentality of the extractive industry has been reinstated since 2017, the Ecuadorian economy relies heavily on the continuous expansion of oil and mining projects.

The expansion of extractive projects, despite some Latin American governments' promise of social spending and development in affected communities, also generated an explosion of anti-extractive struggles. Many of these protest movements have seen significant participation by women from Indigenous, Black, peasant, and popular organizations (see Svampa & Viale, 2014). This shows that the Mujeres Amazónicas' organizing is not an isolated case of Indigenous women leading the fight against extractive occupation. In fact, their march and subsequent political actions have taken place in the context of the intensification of communitarian struggles resisting capitalism's restructuring and renewed forms of land dispossession in Latin America. In this article, I thus analyze Mujeres Amazónicas' organizing in the context of the necessity to deepen our understanding about this regional phenomenon.

Concretely, this article asks, what are the Mujeres Amazónicas' political strategies to resist extractive occupation and how do they develop and deploy these strategies in their territorial struggle? To answer this question, I analyze

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formed by the state-owned Petroamazonas, ENAP (Chile) and Belorusneft (Belarus) also encountered fierce opposition by Kichwa communities against oil extraction in block 28, halting the start of oil operations in the area (Tapia, 2021). Both Sapara and Kichwa women, members of Mujeres Amazónicas, had a strong leadership position in the communitarian resistance against blocks 79, 83, and 28.

some examples of these leaders' strategic politics, or what I call their *political design*. Their political effectiveness in making their proposals visible and their voices heard reveals that these women's organizing cannot be understood as a mere act of reactive or spontaneous resistance against the developmental state's and extractive companies' interventions in their territories. Rather, I show that Mujeres Amazónicas' political design is characterized by how these Indigenous female leaders strategically connect practices of communitarian reproduction to their public resistance.

Inspired by an image that the Kichwa leader Elvia Dagua wove into one of her *artesanías* (handicrafts),<sup>4</sup> the *Araña Tejedora* (Weaving Spider), I demonstrate how these Indigenous female leaders' design merges public expressions of resistance – such as mobilizations, protest marches, and other public actions – with those communitarian practices that reproduce human and more-than-human life in their communities. My goal is to avoid examining Mujeres Amazónicas' public acts of resistance as an isolated object of inquiry. Drawing from the Maya K'iche' sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul, I illuminate how their politics cannot be separated from those practices that “make life possible” (2018a, p. 43). On the contrary, everyday practices of communitarian reproduction are themselves used, strategized, and transformed by the Amazonian Women, thereby enabling their political work and lives simultaneously.

This analytical focus would not have been possible without the relationship of “co-labor” I have with five political leaders and members from Mujeres Amazónicas: Zoila Castillo, Nancy Santi, Elvia Dagua, Rosa Gualinga, and Salomé Aranda.<sup>5</sup> Most of the ethnographic material I have gathered since 2016 – which includes over 50 recorded conversations and semi-structured interviews with members from the Mujeres Amazónicas and their allies, and extensive field notes from the different trips with my co-laborers – is a product of the activities these Amazonian female leaders and I conducted together. Co-labor, a term I adopt from the anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2015, p. 12), refers to the ethnographic relationship some members from Mujeres Amazónicas and I have built, defined by their and my interests in working with each other.

Co-labor comprised concrete activities such as co-organizing workshops on artesanías and territorial defense that allowed me to visit their communities of origin and learn about their political work, launching crowdfunding campaigns to support their mobilizations in 2018 and 2019, and co-organizing discussion panels during two conferences at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in

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<sup>4</sup> My co-laborers use the word *artesanía* to refer to the different types of artisan works like clay pottery and handicrafts such as bracelets, necklaces, and earrings made out of feathers or natural and synthetic seeds produced by members from Mujeres Amazónicas.

<sup>5</sup> With my co-laborers' consent, I use their real and complete names in this article. All of these leaders are official representatives of their Indigenous organizations and public figures. They regularly appear in public and international forums, in newspapers, on social media, and, at times, on television.

2018 and 2020. Nevertheless, it was primarily an ethnographic relation of political allyship. In fact, it is this ethnographic and political relationship that allowed my co-laborers and I to engage in a continuous negotiation about my contribution to their territorial struggle and their contribution to my research project. While this negotiation was certainly complicated by asymmetrical relations of power between the *Mujeres Amazónicas* and myself – a mestiza researcher born and raised in Quito – with deep roots in Ecuador’s colonial history, it allowed us to be in constant conversation about our laboring together. Most importantly, co-labor made space to build a dialogue with the ways in which *Mujeres Amazónicas* themselves describe their struggle as epistemic and political subjects (Cabnal, 2010), and transformed my analysis about their territorial struggle. Shared moments of intimacy, long and sustained conversations, and my own involvement in their struggle forced me to shift my initial focus on their visible and public struggle to the practices that sustain the Amazonian female leaders’ political work and lives.

I begin the following pages by explaining that *Mujeres Amazónicas* identify themselves as both a collective and historical subject. In this first section, I also develop the concept of political design, offer an overview of the different accounts that have examined *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ political organizing, and describe my own contribution to those accounts. Second, I analyze the *Araña Tejedora* as an example of the *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ political design. Third, I examine two examples of practices of communitarian reproduction, preparing *chicha* (manioc beer) and chanting, which are central in *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ political struggle. By analyzing how these Amazonian female leaders connect these practices to their anti-extractive resistance, I show the concrete ways in which they carefully weave their political design. In the concluding section, I summarize the article’s main intervention and explain how *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ political design is a rooted and global one at the same time. This ability to generate both a situated politics and global connections is what makes *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ political organizing so highly relevant to the global environmental justice movement.

### ***Mujeres Amazónicas*’ Subjectivity and Political Design as a Conceptual Framework**

Since their initial 2013 march, *Mujeres Amazónicas* have continued to organize further protest actions and mobilizations against the government’s extractive agenda. On March 8, 2016, International Women’s Day, *Mujeres Amazónicas* organized their second big march in the city of Puyo with the support of their environmental and ecofeminist allies, the Ecuadorian organization *Acción Ecológica* and the US-based organizations Amazon Watch and the Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN). Exactly two years later, *Mujeres Amazónicas* organized another massive

mobilization in Puyo, following the Minister of Hydrocarbons' announcement reactivating the 11th Oil Round license.

Marching on International Women's Day, a very important date for Latin American feminists, is not intended to imply that Mujeres Amazónicas consider themselves feminists. Many of their most active leaders reject identifying their collective struggle as feminist, given the problematic role that non-governmental organizations with a "gender agenda" have had in their communities. During different exchanges with Zoila Castillo, Rosa Gualinga, Elvia Dagua, Salomé Aranda, and Nancy Santi, they shared with me their criticisms against a colonial and Western type of feminism that silences their voices and victimizes their position as Indigenous women. For example, Elvia Dagua told me that she stopped considering herself a feminist after "participating at a feminist event" where she felt misrepresented and minimized in her own ways of negotiating her leadership with her family, community, and Indigenous organization (Interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo).

This criticism against a colonial and Western feminist agenda has been widely shared and developed by Indigenous and decolonial thinkers, including Lorena Cabnal (2010), Julieta Paredes (2010), and Aura Cumes (2012). These thinkers advocate for a situated feminism that uncovers the historic conditions of women's oppressions in Indigenous communities and acknowledges how communitarian and territorial relations can be a source of political power for Indigenous women. In the case of Mujeres Amazónicas, their rejection of a Western feminist position has not meant that they have not collaborated with feminist organizations more in tune with their political organizing or adopted elements from the feminist agenda (see Sempértegui, 2019). However, their rejection of the feminist label forces us to ask exactly what kind of political subjects are Mujeres Amazónicas?

In their public statements, Mujeres Amazónicas have reaffirmed a collective and historical identity connected to the broader Indigenous Movement and its historical territorial struggle (see Sempértegui, 2022). Even though these leaders' relationships to their Indigenous organizations have not been absent of internal tensions and disputes, Mujeres Amazónicas organized the March for Life with the organizational support of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) (Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur, 2013a). The support of these national and regional organizations also accompanied their 2016 and 2018 marches. Furthermore, it is important to note that many members of Mujeres Amazónicas took part in the Indigenous uprising in 1992 and organized other important political actions throughout the 1990s, challenging interpretations that saw the 2013 March for Life as their first attempt to organize as Indigenous women. In fact, in one of their first public statements after arriving in Quito in 2013, Mujeres Amazónicas called on the government to "respect and recognize women's *lucha histórica* in defense of their people's lives and territories free of oil,

contamination, and exploitation; as well as their political participation and organizational politics” (Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur, 2013b).

Departing from this collective and historical self-identification, I analyze Mujeres Amazónicas’ political design. I adopt the concept of political design to refer to a model of political organizing that is intentionally, purposely and strategically woven together. At the same time, following Arturo Escobar’s redefinition and use of the concept of design, I understand political design not as abstract planning. Rather it involves diverse forms of making that contribute to people’s different struggles (Escobar, 2018, p. 76). These forms of making are “self-organized and other-organized,” meaning that practices that constitute a political design are never isolated from past forms of political organizing and never independent from collective forms of reproducing life that “enable the self-organizing dynamic to take off and do its thing” (Escobar, 2018, p. xv).

This latter quality of political design connects to Gladys Tzul Tzul’s (2018a) analysis of “communal entanglements.” According to Tzul Tzul, communal entanglements have historically organized and structured everyday life in Indigenous communities (2018a, pp. 26ff.). They are exemplified, for instance, in practices of self-government like *minkas*, an ancestral practice of collective work that facilitates communal life and constitutes territorial relations of belonging, and by other activities that require collective action like organizing food for community celebrations (Tzul Tzul, 2018a, p. 24). These activities are not separated from Indigenous politics, according to the author. On the contrary, it is the same vitality and ability that characterize the organization of everyday communal life that are intentionally and strategically translated into political rebellions (Tzul Tzul, 2018a), letting those rebellions take their course.

Inspired by Escobar and Tzul Tzul, my use of the concept of political design is intended to show how Mujeres Amazónicas intentionally connect everyday practices of communitarian reproduction to their public resistance. By examining the Araña Tejedora, I argue that the merging of public resistance and communitarian reproduction is not a mere product of Indigenous women’s static cultural identity. Instead, it is a product of how Mujeres Amazónicas purposely design their strategic politics, and revelatory of where they locate their collective power as Indigenous women – namely, in the communal entanglements that “make life possible” (Tzul Tzul, 2018b, p. 404).

My analysis thus goes beyond a reaffirmation of the important role that practices of communitarian reproduction play in Mujeres Amazónicas’ politics. I intend to concretely show *how* these Indigenous female leaders use, strategize, and transform these practices in their political organizing. It is in fact these strategic politics that center the reproduction of life that Mujeres Amazónicas have deliberately deployed to challenge a “conservative essentialism,” a stereotype that naturalizes Indigenous women’s identities as bearers of life and serves to marginalize their political voices in public depictions about their actions (Muratorio, 2000, p. 240). Furthermore, an in-

depth analysis of their strategic politics can reveal how Indigenous women like *Mujeres Amazónicas* build political authority within their communities, organizations, and the anti-extractive struggle as a whole.

My analysis is intended to contribute to the important work that scholar-activists like Miriam García-Torres (2017), Ivette Vallejo and García-Torres (2017), Lisset Coba (2019), Andrea Bravo and Vallejo (2019), Vallejo and Corinne Duhalde Ruiz (2019), Cristina Cielo and Nancy Carrión (2019), and Coba and Manuel Bayón (2020), and collectives like the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* (CMCTF, 2014, 2018) and the *Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador* (CGCE, 2019), have elaborated on and in collaboration with *Mujeres Amazónicas*. These analyses have been crucial not only for examining Amazonian female leaders' political organizing, but also for broadcasting their voices and political proposals. I thus consider this article in connection to and in dialogue with the work from these scholar-activists and collectives.

While many of these analyses have drawn from feminist political ecology to examine the broader structural motivations for *Mujeres Amazónicas* to politically organize against extractivism – such as the transformation of Indigenous women's work of care, the intensification of patriarchal relations in Indigenous communities, and the loss of legitimacy of historical male leaders due to their co-optation by the extractive state (see Bravo & Vallejo, 2019; CGCE, 2019; Cielo & Carrión, 2019; CMCTF, 2014, 2018; Vallejo & Duhalde, 2019) – other analyses have focused on the political proposals and languages of valorization of human and more-than-human life that *Mujeres Amazónicas* offer (Coba, 2019; Coba & Bayón, 2020; García-Torres, 2017; Vallejo & García-Torres, 2017). This article is mostly connected to the second set of analyses, which do not ignore the structural dimensions for *Mujeres Amazónicas*' organizing, but take a closer look at the specific ways in which these Indigenous female leaders produce their politics. By examining three practices present in the *Mujeres Amazónicas*' organizing that have not been analyzed in depth by the aforementioned articles – weaving artesanías, producing chicha, and chanting – I offer an analysis of how these leaders strategize their practices of communitarian reproduction and design their politics.

### **Weaving the Struggle, Weaving the Spider Web**

After a week-long trip with Elvia Dagua in the Amazonian region of Cordillera del Condor in 2017, she invited me to stay at her house in the community of Madre Tierra. At that time, Dagua was the elected Spokeswoman for Women and Family Issues at the Amazonian regional organization CONFENIAE. This was not the first time that she held a political position in an Indigenous organization. Dagua started her political work in the 1990s, when she was just 17-years-old. At this young age, she and other Amazonian women from the

San Jacinto commune founded the women's organization *Amaru Warmi*, which means "Boa Woman" in Kichwa. After this, she became Spokeswoman for Women and Family Issues for the Organization of Indigenous Peoples from Pastaza (OPIP) and for the national Indigenous organization CONAIE.

Besides being an Indigenous leader, Dagua is also an experienced *maestra de artesanías*, a handicraft master. She has taught her techniques and designs to her daughters and to other Indigenous women at different workshops. She has also been able to economically support her children by selling clay pottery, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings.

One evening during my stay, Dagua organized a small gathering with her daughters and another anthropologist working with her, and showed us some of her artesanías. In one of our conversations she commented on one bracelet that she sold that evening, which she called the Araña Tejedora, the Weaving Spider. This tells the story of a spider that works diligently and constantly to build her web. Most important about the Araña Tejedora for Dagua, however, is that it also tells the story of Mujeres Amazónicas:

[The Araña Tejedora] does not rest during the day or at night. We [Mujeres Amazónicas] are like her, working women... It is a spider that weaves 24 hours of the day. (Interview, August 27, 2017, Madre Tierra)

At that moment, I was not able to fully understand how the story of the Araña Tejedora relates to Mujeres Amazónicas, but Dagua's description stayed with me. After spending more time with her and other Indigenous female leaders, the Araña Tejedora became a lens through which to better comprehend Mujeres Amazónicas' political design against extractivism.

Understood in this way, the Araña Tejedora offers a material and intellectual account of how Mujeres Amazónicas' political organizing works. At the material level, the practice of weaving and selling artesanías is an important example of how the Amazonian female leaders' labor supports their families and facilitates their territorial struggle at the same time. Besides Dagua, Amazonian leaders like Rosa Gualinga, Nancy Santi, and Zoila Castillo have found in the production of artesanías a source of income to provide for their families while they are away from their communities, to cover the transportation costs related to their protest actions, or to gain economic independence from their partners who have easier access to remunerated jobs but do not support their political work. Castillo even described her artesanías as "the sustenance of our organization, the sustenance of our struggle." She added:

This sustains me during the day, as you could see. I'm at events, workshops, meetings, visits, but at night, I get to work, I weave my artesanías until 11 at night, 12 at night. Sometimes my husband gets angry, 'Why don't you sleep?!' he says. And I reply: 'Are you giving me enough to eat, to walk with my organization, where I have been elected?' Sometimes, during the marches, I sell my artesanías. That's how I sustain my life, how I feed my children... We are the Mujeres Amazónicas

who fight for our forest, against extractivism, against mining. So, we are sustaining with that. (Statement at the International Congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, *Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar* in Quito)

As Castillo’s words reveal, the story of the Araña Tejedora tells her own story as well. In addition to weaving her artesanías in the evenings at her home, it is common to see Castillo and other members from Mujeres Amazónicas crafting and selling their artesanías during their political mobilizations. They often weave on the bus on their way from the Amazon to Quito or while marching during their protest actions. When they arrive at their protest locations, they wear their necklaces, earrings, and bracelets as a way to exhibit their artesanías to their comrades and allies.

Castillo’s statement demonstrates how the Araña Tejedora works as an *artesanía intelectual* (intellectual handicraft), a concept I adopt and adapt from the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui to show how artesanías are intellectual artifacts that communicate lived experience and offer a situated analysis of the political (2015).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the story woven together in this artesanía serves as a lens which allows better comprehension of the Mujeres Amazónicas’ political design against extractivism. In fact, the Araña Tejedora captures in imagistic form how Mujeres Amazónicas, as a political subject, design and weave their strategic politics like a web that interlinks public expressions of resistance to those practices that make life possible. As previously mentioned, this goes along with Gladys Tzul Tzul’s analysis of communitarian entanglements, according to which Mujeres Amazónicas’ political design is not separated from those practices that have facilitated life in Indigenous communities and that are strategically used and transformed by these leaders into political practices for defending their territories against extractivism.

In the next sections, I analyze two concrete examples of Mujeres Amazónicas’ political design. I focus on the practices of preparing chicha and chanting. By analyzing how both practices are used, strategized, and transformed by Mujeres Amazónicas, I illustrate how these Indigenous female leaders make human and more-than-human life possible in the Amazon, increase their communities’ support in their leadership, and take over platforms of visibility for advancing their anti-extractive agenda.

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<sup>6</sup> In her book, *Sociología de la Imagen. Miradas Ch’ixi desde la Historia Andina* (2015), Rivera Cusicanqui deploys the term “artesanía intelectual” to refer to a form of knowledge production that connects intellectual practice to the political and creative vocation (p. 233). While Rivera Cusicanqui does not use this term to refer to concrete artesanías in her book, I adopt and transform this term to refer to artesanías as objects that also connect creative crafting to intellectual and political practice.

### Serving *Chicha* and Building Communitarian Support

*Chicha* is a mildly fermented manioc beer, which constitutes the most important element of Amazonian communities' nutrition. The ones who are mostly in charge of preparing and serving *chicha* are Indigenous women, who learn to prepare this beverage at a very young age by cultivating manioc. Significantly, this plant is considered Indigenous women's "little children," a moniker that alludes to the special bond between the manioc, the cultivator on whom its life depends, and the female goddess of *Nunkuli*.<sup>7</sup>

After Indigenous women cultivate the manioc, they cook it, chew it, and spit it into a big bowl, where it ferments with their saliva. When the *chicha* is mildly fermented, the woman who prepared the beverage serves it to her family, visitors, or members of her community during celebrations. This intimate and important practice involves human and more-than-human dynamics of care between the manioc plant, the woman who cared for and cultivated it, and the people who consume the *chicha*. It also shows that in the process of preparing *chicha* there are practices of care with the forest as a living entity, exemplifying that *Mujeres Amazónicas' Kawsak Sacha Declaration* is not an abstraction but a proposal rooted in material practices and ways of conceiving of the world.

There is another important political element in the preparation of *chicha*. My co-labor with the Kichwa leader Nancy Santi taught me that this practice of communitarian reproduction plays a crucial role in her own anti-extractive organizing. Santi is the first female elected president of her Kichwa *pueblo*, which comprises six Indigenous communities located on the Curaray River basin. During my stay in 2018, Santi convoked a communitarian assembly to write a Declaration of Resistance against the government's renewed attempt to license two large oil blocks that completely covered her Kichwa territory. While Santi presided over the four-day communitarian assembly, she continued to prepare and serve *chicha* to her community. I asked her why she kept preparing *chicha* like other women, even though her responsibility as president of her entire *pueblo* was already very demanding. Santi told me that she has to show how she is able to "politically represent my community at the same time that I perform the same duties as any other Indigenous woman from my *pueblo*" (Fieldnotes, November 3, 2018).

This statement can easily be interpreted as an example of the immense amount of work required from Indigenous women to carry the same political responsibilities as their male counterparts. During our conversations, Santi and other leaders frequently complained about the excessive expectations that their families and *compañeros* from their Indigenous organizations have of them as

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<sup>7</sup> According to anthropological interpretations of Kichwa and Achuar practices (Descola, 1989; Guzmán-Gallegos, 1997), the manioc plants are related to the female being called *Nunghui* or *Nunkuli* (in Amazonian Kichwa). *Nunkuli*, the goddess of the soil, is also source of cultivation knowledge. Taking care of the manioc plant is thus an act of acknowledging the presence of *Nunkuli* and of establishing a positive relationship with her.

political representatives. However, without negating the challenges that Indigenous female leaders face, we should not interpret Santi's decision to keep preparing and serving chicha during her communitarian assembly as a simple surrender to these expectations.

In contrast, as Santi also explained, these kinds of practices are what gives her "communitarian support and legitimation" as a leader in contrast to former male leaders who actually signed agreements with oil companies (Interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo). By preparing and serving chicha during a communitarian assembly, Santi was not necessarily fulfilling her "duty" as an Indigenous woman, but showing her community that, as an elected leader, she works "for her pueblo" and experiences "the same responsibilities, necessities, and worries" as her people (Interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo). In other words, Santi strategized this practice of communitarian reproduction at a very crucial moment for her community when the state and oil industries were threatening her territory. By re-establishing a political pedagogy that links communitarian legitimation to Indigenous leaders' capacity to be close to the people who have elected them, Santi was strengthening her communities' trust in her anti-extractive position.

To sum this up, preparing and serving chicha while performing political responsibilities reveals where leaders like Santi locate their power: namely in communitarian entanglements that increase their community's support and legitimation. This self-positioning close to their community bases is also something other members from Mujeres Amazónicas have used to increase their community's trust in their anti-extractive positions. Many of the most prominent faces of Mujeres Amazónicas share a history of ascending to higher political posts within their Indigenous organizations by gaining the trust of their communities and by sustaining an anti-extractive position over time. This is not only the case for Nancy Santi, but also for other Indigenous leaders like Rosa Gualinga, Josefina Tunki, and Alicia Cahuilla who recently became the first female presidents or vice-presidents of their entire pueblos.

### **Chanting in La Plaza de la Independencia**

During my ethnographic study, I stayed and travelled with the Shiwiar Indigenous leader Rosa Gualinga. She is the first elected vice-president of her entire Shiwiar nation, which comprises 10 Indigenous communities. Gualinga is also widely respected and admired for her ability to chant, a practice she has cultivated to build political authority in her community.<sup>8</sup> In the Amazon, this practice should not be confused with merely intoning a melody. As Gualinga

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis on how Amazonian women build political authority by mastering the practice of interpreting dreams, see Lisset Coba (2019).

told me, the act of chanting, or *anent* in Shiwiar,<sup>9</sup> is considered a secret power that some members from Indigenous communities inherit from their parents or grandparents, and that they master by performing certain sacrifices like fasting (Interview, August 9, 2018, Puyo). The power of the *anent* resides in how, when done right, the chant works like a magic spell or an enchantment on human and more-than-human entities and can influence the course of events.

Gualinga and other Shuar leaders like María Taant and Dominga Antún have often publicly reproduced their chants during their political mobilizations against extractivism. This was the case when Mujeres Amazónicas organized their third mobilization in 2018. In March of that year, a delegation of Amazonian women travelled to Quito to meet Ecuador’s president at that time Lenin Moreno. Moreno did not receive them right away, and the Amazonian female leaders organized a five-day *plantón* (a picket) in front of the Presidential Palace (Agencia Tegantai, 2018). During this *plantón*, Rosa Gualinga publicly sang her chants in the Plaza de la Independencia as a way to pressure the government and to “change the course of things” (Interview, August 9, 2018, Puyo).

Finally, Moreno met with the delegation from Mujeres Amazónicas in the Presidential Palace on March 23, 2018, and received their mandate, *Mandato de las Mujeres Amazónicas Defensoras de la Selva de las Bases frente al Extractivismo* (Grassroot Mandate of the Amazonian Women Defenders of the Rainforest Against Extractivism). During this meeting, which lasted for about two hours, Rosa Gualinga and other leaders kept sharing their chants in front of governmental representatives and Ecuadorians connected via Facebook Live.<sup>10</sup> They also called for an end to extractive concessions, denounced the death threats and attacks that Amazonian female leaders had received due to their anti-extractive activism, and denounced Moreno’s claim that affected communities were properly consulted on current and future oil and mining projects.

This moment illustrates how a secret practice that is normally reserved for the intimacy of the forest was “brought” by Mujeres Amazónicas to their public meetings and mobilizations. For Gualinga, it is clear that singing in the forest, surrounded by its powerful beings, has a different effect than singing in public spaces like the Plaza de la Independencia, surrounded by the chaos of the city (Interview, August 9, 2018, Puyo). Nevertheless, the recurrent appearance of Mujeres Amazónicas’ chants during their public interventions indicates how Indigenous female leaders strategize and transform this secret and intimate practice into a political one with the purpose of “changing the course of

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<sup>9</sup> Phillip Descola describes in his ethnographic work with the Achuar – closely related to the Shiwiar and Shuar peoples – that the word *anent* comes from the same root as *inintai*, the heart, the organ where thought, memory, and emotions reside (1989, p. 273). The *anent* are “discourses of the heart” adapted to different circumstances in Achuar’s public and domestic life, like cultivating crops, hunting, or settling a dispute with relatives.

<sup>10</sup> The meeting with President Moreno was live-streamed by the Facebook account *Comunicación Sapara*. The video is no longer available.

things.” With this act, they also take over public platforms of visibility to make their demands heard, thus advancing their political agenda.

### **Mujeres Amazónicas’ Politics: A Rooted and Global Design**

The defense of our territory, of our *Pachamama*, is not only for us, but for the whole world. Only Mujeres Amazónicas are the solution so that oil exploitation [sic] remains under the ground... We, Indigenous women, are defending the whole world from climate change. This is the only solution. (Nancy Santi, public intervention, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

The Amazon that exists is thanks to the struggle and blood of Indigenous peoples. Because if it were up to the governments and companies, they would have already destroyed the entire Amazon. For us the pandemic is a direct result of all this depredation... If they destroy the Amazon, the life of humankind is destroyed as well. The Amazon’s eco-systemic balance maintains the balance in the Arctic, in the Sahara, in Congo. This connection cannot be dissociated. (Patricia Gualinga, statement during the Webinar “*COVID y la guerra contra la Amazonía*,” June 3, 2020)

Throughout this article, I have analyzed Mujeres Amazónicas’ political strategies and showed how they develop and deploy these strategies by using practices of communitarian reproduction in their territorial struggle. Their strategic deployment of these practices reveals how public mobilizations do not happen suddenly, or in a void, but are actually facilitated by practices that sustain Mujeres Amazónicas’ lives and their capacity to act as leaders. Most importantly, the strategic merging of public expressions of resistance with those practices that make communitarian life possible evince that Mujeres Amazónicas’ political actions are part of a carefully woven political design against extractivism.

Inspired by the artesanía of the Araña Tejedora and Gladys Tzul Tzul’s analysis of *tramas comunales*, I have examined the concrete ways in which these Amazonian female leaders produce their political design. By looking at the role that the practices of preparing chicha and chanting play in Mujeres Amazónicas’ organizing, I have shown how these leaders weave their strategic politics by increasing their communities’ support in their leadership and taking over platforms of visibility for advancing their anti-extractive agenda. With this analysis, I have also illustrated how Amazonian women’s cultural and social identities are neither static nor unchangeable. Rather, practices of communitarian reproduction become political, as they are used, strategized, and transformed in their territorial struggle, demonstrating that Indigenous women are not emblems of cultural authenticity. They are historical and collective subjects with the power to shape the lines of political confrontation vis-à-vis the state and extractive capital.

In the last paragraphs of this article, I would like to explain why *Mujeres Amazónicas*' political design should not be interpreted as an example of local politics. Instead, their politics, while rooted in concrete practices of communitarian reproduction in the Amazon, extend beyond Indigenous peoples' concerns in Ecuador and connect to global environmental justice concerns. As Nancy Santi's words at the beginning of this section indicate, the *Mujeres Amazónicas*' territorial defense is not only for themselves but also "for the whole world." Santi's message also presents *Mujeres Amazónicas*' struggle as part of "the solution" for climate change through their efforts to keep oil reserves under the ground. Additionally, Patricia Gualinga, leader from the Kichwa pueblo of Sarayaku and founding member of *Mujeres Amazónicas*, links the broader Indigenous territorial struggle with the current pandemic and reminds us that if the Amazon rainforest is destroyed, "the life of humankind is destroyed as well" (Luchadoras, 2020).

Beyond this being just a strategy to profile themselves as the true guardians of the forest, these statements give us important clues about the global dimension of *Mujeres Amazónicas*' political design. This design is characterized by their ability to express interdependence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of living and to universalize their demands by linking them to current problems in terms used by the global environmental justice movement, like climate change.

When describing *Mujeres Amazónicas*' capacity to universalize their demands, I am referring to their capacity to build what the anthropologist Anna L. Tsing calls "global connections." In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), Tsing does an ethnography of global connections in the rainforests of Indonesia, with the particular interest of overcoming the academic division between universality, or what she calls "the universal as an aspiration,"<sup>11</sup> and the local formation of culture. She criticizes the fact that scholars, especially anthropologists, have failed to acknowledge how "universals are indeed local knowledge" (2005, p. 7). As an alternative, she defines universals as knowledge that "moves across localities and cultures" helping "to form bridges, roads and channels of circulation" in the process (Tsing, 2005, p. 7). This mobility does not happen outside the practice of power; universals are implicated in both "imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment" (Tsing, 2005, p. 9). Indeed, they are shaped by strange interactions across difference, in which local knowledge percolates into universals' channels of circulation, "charging and changing their travels;" and universals need the shape of historically specific cultural assumptions to work in a practical sense (Tsing, 2005, 8ff.). This, in turn, implies that universal dreams – shared by the powerful and powerless alike – can never fully accomplish their promises of universality. These interactions across difference are what Tsing calls "friction."

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<sup>11</sup> For Tsing, the universal as an aspiration does not only include Western *universal* dreams and schemes. These are only one "particular kind of universality" (2005, p. 1).

In the case of Mujeres Amazónicas, Santi's and Gualinga's statements make clear that they are committed to creating a web of global connections with other environmental struggles that are not necessarily articulated in territorial or communitarian terms. Furthermore, by framing their struggle as interconnected with other struggles around the world and vital for humanity's existence, these Amazonian female leaders remind their interlocutors that they are not outside "the global stream of humanity" even as it often excludes them (Spivak, 1999, in Tsing, 2005, p. 1). This is why their political design should not be interpreted as constituted by local, cultural, or particular demands only. Despite the modern, colonial, and patriarchal ways in which Indigenous women's voices, lives, and territories have been historically rendered invisible for the majority of society, Mujeres Amazónicas' proposals are unquestionably global, and their political design has universal aspirations.

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