

Indigenous Gold Mining in the Kenkuim Shuar Community: A Decolonial and Postcapitalist Approach to Sustainability

Minería indígena de oro en la Comunidad Shuar de Kenkuim: una aproximación decolonial y poscapitalista a la sostenibilidad

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Abstract

This article analyzes the experiences of the small Shuar community of Kenkuim (Congüime) in the Ecuadorian Amazon that since 2016 carries out gold mining through the communitarian company Exploken Minera. The case is unique in South America, not only for being the only example of indigenous mining granted formal state concession, but also for its green profile, without the usage of chemicals or heavy metals. Within a setting of expanding extractivism conditioned by global capitalism and a theoretical framework of a decolonial and postcapitalist approach to sustainability, this ethnographic study deals with the expressions of resistance and adaptation of the Kenkuim community and how socio-cultural, ecological, and economic values are articulated by Shuar actors in relation to the new indigenous mining project. The results indicate that this mining experiment constitutes a meaningful alternative to destructive extractivism in line with decolonial and postcapitalist reasoning.

Keywords: Congüime, decoloniality, postcapitalism, resistance-adaptation, Shuar community, sustainable indigenous mining.

Resumen

En este artículo, se analizan las experiencias de la pequeña comunidad shuar de Kenkuim (Congüime) en la Amazonía ecuatoriana que, desde 2016, lleva a cabo la extracción de oro mediante la empresa comunitaria Exploken Minera. El caso es excepcional en Sudamérica, no solo por ser la única minería indígena con una concesión estatal formal, sino también por su perfil verde, sin el uso de productos químicos o metales pesados. Dentro del contexto de un creciente extractivismo condicionado por el capitalismo global y un marco teórico de una aproximación decolonial y poscapitalista a la sostenibilidad, en este estudio etnográfico se tratan las estrategias de resistencia y adaptación de la comunidad Kenkuim y cómo los valores socioculturales, ecológicos y económicos son articulados por los actores shuar respecto al nuevo proyecto minero indígena. Los resultados indican que este experimento constituye una alternativa significativa frente al extractivismo destructivo y como un proyecto coherente con las lógicas decoloniales y poscapitalistas.

Palabras clave: comunidad Shuar, Congüime, decolonialidad, minería indígena sostenible, resistencia-adaptación.

1 Introduction¹

The Shuar dislike pollution, and things done with chemicals... We don't use chemicals or mercury. Previously, that was used here, during the [era of] illegal mining (Diego Arizaga, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

Since I am not indigenous myself, I have neither the right nor the authority to decide what indigenous peoples themselves should do to protect their interests and advance their struggle for affirmation and re-emergence, to re-exist and liberate themselves from centuries of settler colonialism. What is relevant is an understanding of the trust of diverse projects around the world that are not initiated by the state, corporations, banks or by Nobel prize nominations but by the people themselves (Mignolo 2017, p. 44).

In the Shuar language, the concept *kuri nunka* signifies land loaded with gold. *Kenkuim* is the Shuar denomination of the Guadúa bamboo cane, which gave name to the locality known as Congüime. *Kenkuim kuri nunka* is the association founded by the Shuar community of Congüime² in 2011, to apply for the rights to explore, extract and commercialize gold in their territory. Five years later, this small indigenous community in the Southern Ecuadorian Amazon was granted a state concession for gold extraction in an area of 410 hectares (Ministerio del Ambiente 2016, p. 12). A communitarian indigenous mining company was established —the Exploken Minera, S. A.—, in benefit of communitarian social justice. The clear majority of the Exploken labor force are local Shuar workers, with a relatively equal composition of women and men. A new type of gold mining was launched, without the usage of mercury or hazardous chemicals, thus minimizing the ecological impact. Although this communitarian mining project is a small-scale alternative to traditional mining, and the first and sole example of an indigenous mining company in South America, it is surrounded by large-scale transnational enterprises, such as the Fruta del Norte, project of Lundin Gold in Yantzaza and the Mirador project of the Chinese company Ecuacorriente in El Pangui.

The Kenkuim Shuar case should be placed within the political-constitutional framing of Ecuador. Since 2008, the country has the most progressive Constitution in the world regarding the rights of nature and one of the most advanced in recognizing the rights of ethnically defined peoples. With the Constitution, Ecuador also declares itself as a plurinational State, *i.e.*, an acknowledgement of indigenous claims and their collective identification as specific peoples and nationalities (Lalander 2016, Lalander & Lembke 2020). Likewise, the indigenous ethical-philosophical conceptualization of the *sumak kawsay* («good living»/*buen vivir*), emphasizing the harmonious coexistence among humans and with nature,³ emerged as a national benchmark that was subsequently incorporated in national development plans. Nonetheless, the extraction of natural resources, mainly minerals and

- 1 The authors of the article have previously published a different study in Spanish on the Kenkuim Shuar experiences of gold mining, with another theoretical and analytical approach and, to an important extent, with other material, sources, and findings (Lalander *et al.* 2020).
- 2 Congüime, the name of the locality, is the castilianization of Kenkuim, but both names are used in the community. Generally, the Shuar have preferred to formally speak of their localities as Shuar centers (*centros Shuar*) rather than communities (*comunidades*). Although in Congüime (as elsewhere in the Amazon) the term «community» is used synonymously and more frequently as we also do in this article.
- 3 For the Kichwa-Amazonian peoples, *sumak kawsay* proposes other ways of conceiving the human environment, highlighting that nature should not be seen a force or productive factor, but an inherent part of the social being (Viteri Gualinga 2003, Chuji 2010, Lalander 2016). The Shuar people refer to the conceptualization of *tarimiat pujustin*, that expresses the same values (Raquel Antun Tsamaraint, interview, Facebook, October 3, 2020; Astudillo Banegas 2020). During our ethnographic work in Congüime, while it was evident that the local Shuar actors knew how to practice and apply these ethical and community principles, they generally did not refer explicitly to the philosophical-ontological references of Good-Living/*buen vivir*/*tarimiat pujustin*.

hydrocarbons, has increased in the country, including in indigenous territories and ecologically sensitive national parks (Lalander 2014, 2016; Sacher 2015; Lalander & Merimaa 2018; Fernández-Salvador 2018).⁴ Exploken Minera was born amidst this contradiction, between constitutional rights in principle and extractivist re-intensification in practice.

Adopting a decolonial and postcapitalist understanding of sustainability and considering the overarching context of subaltern struggles against global extractivist capitalism, this study critically explores and problematizes the way in which the gold mining venture of the Kenkuim Shuar community reshaped social interactions, livelihoods, and local perceptions of culture in the constant interplay between Amazonian traditions and Western modernity. Coloniality is understood as the «the invisible and constitutive [darker] side of “modernity”» (Mignolo 2007, p. 451; see also Quijano 2007). Walter Mignolo argues that coloniality is repeatedly reproduced and that, to decolonize our minds and imaginaries, we need to dismantle the quandaries of modernity/coloniality on the one hand and, on the other hand, the economic and political power structures associated with imperialism/colonialism (2007 p. 450). The crucial initial instrument to achieve decoloniality is *delinking*, which refers to a process of disconnection from the colonial matrix of power, that is, from economic, political, cultural, ontological, and epistemological domination and subordination (Mignolo 2007, 2017). The questions that will guide the analysis are:

How are socio-cultural, ecological, and economic values articulated by the actors self-identified as Shuar in relation to the new indigenous mining project?

The study highlights how traditionally marginalized actors aim for local structural transformations by means of resistance and adaptation, that is, how they achieve agency. We should emphasize, though, that what is classified as adaptation and resistance in the final instance lies in the eye of the beholder. Accordingly, we need to problematize how different Shuar villagers perceive their own agency in these processes. Therefore, a second question is:

How do different actors within the local setting perceive and articulate the transformation brought along by the creation of Exploken Minera?

Answering these questions also requires an analysis of how the local actors perceive and interpret the significance and socio-environmental impact of the existence and progress of Exploken Minera. It is important to clarify, however, that the study will not detail the technical and/or ecological characteristics of the company's activities. Rather, the socio-cultural dimensions—which in the indigenous community context integrate also local political, economic, and environmental conditions— will be in the limelight.

Congüime differs remarkably from other cases of indigenous communities affected by extractive projects. Clearly, this small-

4 It is important to emphasize the inherent contradictions in the progressive Constitution, contrasting environmental and ethnic-territorial rights with the rights of the State to exploit and commercialize resources. Regarding the nationalization of vital industries—hydrocarbons and mining—, the Constitution declares that the industrialization and commercialization of natural resources are key priorities for the State and that the revenues derived from extraction should benefit the common good (e.g., articles 275-277, 313-314, 317, and 395-399), as also expressed in secondary legislation and the National Development Plan for Good Living (República del Ecuador 2008; SENPLADES 2009, 2013; Lalander 2014, 2016; Lalander & Merimaa 2018b).

scale project does not really qualify as «extractivism», understood as «[...] the extraction of natural resources, in large volume and intensity, mainly to be exported as raw materials, without or with minimal processing» (Gudynas 2015, p. 13). Rather than large-scale and high-intensive extractivists, the Kenkuim Shuar could be classified as gold washers, although with machinery. Moreover, our case is not overtly conditioned by the colonialist economic dimension of North-South relationships in its day-to-day operations, which so often characterizes extractivist projects. Nonetheless, coloniality is still the discursive and adversary *other* for all projects, aiming at augmenting local indigenous self-determination. In this sense, Exploken Minera is a small socially and ecologically responsible communitarian mining project, which as mentioned could be interpreted as the product of a dual strategy of resistance/adaptation aiming at safeguarding and strengthening local Shuar culture and territory in a world widely conditioned by the logics of global extractivist capitalism.

This dual strategy can be inserted into a postcapitalist logic that, according to Gibson-Graham (2006), envisions the prospect of an anti-capitalist «new political imaginary», created within islands of relatively autonomous «counterpower», in a sea of asymmetrical and perpetual local-global relationships (pp. XIX-XX). Translated into the Kenkuim Shuar setting, such a counterpower would include the preservation, strengthening and adaptation of traditional local values and culture to a surrounding reality largely defined by global capitalism and a neo-extractivist state. Many scholars within the postcapitalist paradigm stress that this new imaginary has a cultural dimension anchored in a critical reference to mainstream debates on sustainable development and sustainability. They emphasize the need to move beyond —or *de-link* from— Western economic parameters where local values of culture, identity, knowledge, and traditions have secondary importance (Yanarella & Levine 1992; Escobar 2006; Mignolo 2007, 2016; Lalander 2014, 2016).

Some words on the methodological approach are required. During the initial work behind this article, we started with a pre-study, based on the idea of theorizing on undiscovered issues to avoid pre-conceptualized definitions and biases. Once we had identified relevant local phenomena, we became better suited to build the theoretical and analytical framework (Swedberg 2016) and prepare the research design. Ethnographic work with the Shuar of Kenkuim constituted the most important methodological component and was based on the awareness that a decolonized theorizing on sustainability must include the voices and values of the local indigenous peoples, that is, of the subjects who live at the frontier of an expanding extractivist capitalism. To acquire a more holistic understanding, we interviewed actors in their capacity as representatives of specific community collectives, such as men/women, members/non-members, and workers/leader-

ship of Exploken, and community leadership/ordinary community members. We conducted *work in the field*; that is, research not only *on* local actors but in collaboration *with* the indigenous community.⁵ In this sense, we hold that ethnographers cannot enter a research site marked by highly asymmetric power struggles and historical injustices as value-free outsiders. The researchers are not disconnected from local cultural-institutional settings, and therefore work in the field cannot be conducted without a significant degree of «(inevitable) subjectivity» (Lembke *et al.* 2020). We carried out informal conversations and open and semi-structured interviews with the actors —individually and in groups—, as well as participatory observations, more informally in 2012 and 2016–2018, and more systematically since early 2019 onwards. In line with our collaborative ambition, all members of the Kenkuim community were invited to a participatory workshop which took place in February 2019.⁶ The article also benefited from critical reading of the academic debate on extractivism and indigenous peoples, and likewise of the coverage of Congüime in the Ecuadorian press and reports of socio-environmental conflict in the locality.

After this introductory contextualization, the disposition of the article is as follows: first, some theoretical clarifications are offered, ensued by two historical-contextual sections, the first focusing on the Shuar of Congüime and Amazonian extractivism, and the second on the birth of Exploken Minera; subsequently, an analytical section is presented, divided in three subsections on different angles of the Shuar mining experience, followed by a few pertinent concluding remarks.

2 A decolonial and postcapitalist understanding of sustainability

Reconnecting to our decolonial and postcapitalist approach, there is an increasing awareness among environmental and development scholars that the notion of «sustainable development» generally fails to move beyond a technocratic and growth-centered capitalist framework, thus downplaying the environmental struggles fought in the global periphery (Mignolo 2016). Many scholars perceive this mainstream understanding of sustainable development as *weak sustainability*, which they distinguish from *strong sustainability* (Adams 2009, pp. 144–146; see also Martínez-Alier 2004, Dryzek 2013). Whereas weak sustainability alludes to a trade-off between natural and human-made capital, resulting in a total capital stock that supports the preservation or increase of consumption, strong sustainability holds that a stock of natural capital should be maintained, and that critical natural capital cannot be touched

5 For further reflections on the theoretical and practical differences between *fieldwork* and *work and the field*, see Lalander *et al.* (2020).

6 In the workshop, the members of the research team (the authors of this article) were divided and organized mini-workshops, with at least one representative of Exploken Minera and one researcher in each group. On several occasions —not only in the workshop—, we have shared research progress with the actors to give them the opportunity to correct and criticize us according to their perspectives. Around 100 conversations were held in 2019 and early 2020, and a few dozen between 2016 and 2018. With several of the protagonists, various interviews were held on different occasions in 2019 and 2020, both individual and collective interviews. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and have been stored in the authors' archives. All actors were informed of the objectives of the research and expressed consensus on the recording and publication of the data obtained through interviews.

(Adams 2009, p. 168). Critical natural capital can be defined as an assembly of assets «that are highly valued, and either essential to human health or to the efficient functioning of life-support systems, or irreplaceable or not-substitutable for all practical purposes (*e.g.*, because of antiquity, complexity, specialization, location)» (Chiesura & De Groot 2002, p. 222).

Though supporting the strong sustainability argument, we find it problematic, however, that this position generally classifies all activities with even minimal impact on the ecosystem, or the «critical natural capital», as weak sustainability. This fact risks making strong sustainability (and sustainable development in general) unreachable, that is, into an ideal ill-connected to local contexts, where ecological ambitions are frequently intertwined with necessary and sometimes conflicting cultural and economic aspirations. Consequently, sustainability should be measured by a historical and situational yardstick, that is, by a tool that considers the entire spectrum of interrelated, localized and «incommensurable values», and not solely by the economic dimension of environmental sustainability (Martínez-Alier 2004, p. 14). Local beliefs, values, norms, and practices for ecological, socio-economic, and cultural justice cannot be isolated from each other. So, what is at stake in our study *is not* whether Kenkuim Shuar gold mining is a case of weak or strong sustainability, but rather to depart from that distinction in the broader analysis of the complex, and frequently contentious, liaisons between economic, environmental, and cultural values. In accordance with such a holistic and contextualized perspective, sustainability can thus be considered «strong», even while having a marginally degrading effect on the natural heritage, that is, on irreplaceable natural capital.

Focusing on local cultural norms and values, or identity markers, Martínez-Alier perceives them as different *languages*, used by local agents as counterweights against dominant economic worldviews. It goes without saying that the meetings, struggles and negotiations between culturally distinct groups are generally asymmetric, but Martínez-Alier acknowledges that they may sometimes result in compromises and, albeit seldomly, situations in which non-mainstream languages eventually produce the winning arguments, as when indigenous communities manage to gain state approval for territorial protection, claiming ethno-cultural rights (Martínez-Alier 2004, p. 28). Summing up the argument so far —and acknowledging the typical subordination of non-hegemonic discourses—, we perceive the relative strength of sustainability as an outcome of localized compromises, that is, an amalgamation of rivaling languages, and cultures.

These processes of de-hegemonization of capitalist structures, norms and values lie at the core of both decolonial and postcapitalist thought. Reconnecting to the encounters of local and global languages, these can be viewed as struggle-fields, which may

produce new socio-epistemic spaces, that is, to a «new political imaginary», and local «autonomies of counterpower» (Gibson-Graham 2006, pp. XIX-XX). As more heterogeneous understandings are brought into global-local negotiations, capitalism is no longer indisputably perceived as a singular system, identified instead as the result of local practices and decisions made on political and moral grounds (Mignolo 2016). In short, in postcapitalist theorizing, the subjects constituting local counterpowers are thus engaged in pragmatic negotiations in local «sites of becoming», including local endeavors to retake control of the economy (Gibson-Graham 2006, pp. XXXI-XXXIII).

As argued, our critical view on sustainability is anchored in a decolonial understanding, stressing the need for localized groups to *de-link* from discourses and power structures based on Western developmentalism. In line with several scholars and activists working on (and with) indigenous peoples rights-based struggles, we emphasize the need for a decolonization and de-westernization of the development discourse. Specifically, colonial power structures are all-encompassing, affecting cultural, social, and political aspects of daily life (Escobar 2006; Mignolo 2007, 2016; Quijano 2007; Álvarez & Coolsaet 2020). Extractivism, for example, is a dominant expression of coloniality in the Global South, but its consequences cannot be limited to economic and environmental ones. For people living along the agricultural and mining frontiers, extractivism affects everything. The decolonial vision concerns transformations of power, knowledge and «being». It is transformed into struggles from below that may take various forms but always affect life in its totality. Decoloniality can thus be defined as an overarching political project and as such including both emancipation and liberation. In this light, both coloniality and decoloniality are reflections of modernity (Mignolo 2007, p. 450).

Reconnecting with the postcapitalist perspective, the processes of delinking are performed within local *sites of becoming*. If successful, the delinking of these physical and mental spaces may signify liberation from direct colonial/imperialist subjugation. However, while delinking constitutes the crucial initial step to achieve decoloniality, we should emphasize that it is a gradual and perhaps unfinishable project that is always to varying degrees accompanied by subaltern cultural adaptation. Importantly, however, adaptation may also be an element of progressive change and the basis of new forms of existence. In decolonial reasoning, re-existing is thus not the same as nonadaptive resistance. It would indeed be difficult to leave the playground of colonialism and enter a new political imaginary only by resisting. Or as Mignolo puts it: «If you [only] resist, you are trapped in the rules of the game others created» (Mignolo 2017, p. 41).

As scholars, we thus need to refute the binary comprehension of indigenous peoples as trapped in a dilemma of either en-

during or refuting the system (Jackson & Warren 2005, p. 562). Throughout the world, and since the dawn of colonialism, indigenous peoples have preserved much of their culture, while simultaneously having appropriated different aspects of the Western world. This preservation of indigeneity has been based partly on resistance, partly on adaptation, in their constant re-negotiation and reconstruction of identity and livelihood within parameters largely determined by an intruding culture (Jackson & Warren 2005, p. 559; Lalander & Lembke 2020). In the local nexus of identitarian encounters, cultures are not stationed in dichotomous corners (Jackson & Warren 2005, p. 557). Like any other cultural group, indigenous peoples strive for everyday forms of life and a livelihood neither subordinated nor romanticized but rooted in compromise and constant modification (Lalander & Lembke 2018, 2020).

3 The setting

The community of Congüime has approximately 650-700 inhabitants (according to estimates by Exploken and Shuar authorities in 2019), and belongs administratively to the canton Paquisha, in the Zamora Chinchipe province of the southern Ecuadorian Amazon. It is located at the foot of the Condor mountain range —the natural boundary line with Peru— and in a ravine that serves as a collection point for water streaming down into the Nangaritza River. Before the establishment of the first families on the site, it was already recognized as Shuar territory. The first Shuar settlers arrived in Congüime in 1975, spearheaded by the leader Eduardo Juank Miik.⁷ They were soon joined by others, such as the locally influential Samareño family.

Despite having sovereign rights to vast territories, traditional Shuar livelihoods have been deeply affected by the intrusion of extractive companies in the southern Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon. Known historically as a warrior people and reputed as defenders and protectors of the forest, their struggle includes the right to be recognized as Shuar and as an indigenous people whose historical communitarian practices concentrate around agriculture, hunting and fishing. For Shuars like Blanca Ankuash and Fausto Juank, a harmonious —and increasingly threatened— coexistence with nature constitutes the core of their identity:

As Shuar we have various customs, fishing, hunting, the legacy of our parents... My father taught me what to eat, what is edible or not, what plants and fruit trees of the field are fit for human consumption, that is, that those plants are consumed, and a poison is taken out. Previously, the poison was used on the arrows —which we call *sayetas*— to kill the animal or the enemy (Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, interview, Congüime, February 13, 2019).

7 As the founder of Congüime —a name given to this Shuar locality in the 1970s— and as a recognition of his importance, the local school was named after Eduardo Juank Miik.

Our grandparents didn't shop in the city; they got everything from the land. They went hunting and brought the *guanta (paca)* and the armadillo. Now, that's forbidden (Fausto Juank, interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

It is important to bear in mind that Shuar identity and livelihoods are increasingly fluid and mobile, modified as they are by rural-urban migration, climate change, the search for fertile lands and—particularly, following the oil boom from 1972 and the more recent expansion of the Amazonian mining and hydroelectric frontier—, within an ever more populated Amazon basin (Fernández-Salvador 2018; see also Bustamante 1988, Karsten 2000). Consequently, the struggle to sustain Shuar territorial, environmental and cultural existence manifests itself in multiple forms though within the framework of resistance and adaptation.

Although mining extractivism was brought to the forest and the mountain ridges by capitalist forces, artisanal mining, particularly of gold, is an ancient tradition among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon (Sacher 2015, p. 99). According to Alipio Wajari and other Shuar authorities in Congüime, their ancestors «had been doing artisanal mining for hundreds of years» (Exploken Minera 2018). However, the historical Kenkuim community leader Pedro Juank emphasizes that mining has not been an important activity of the Shuar. Many of the first small-scale mining enterprises were performed by legal and illegal miners who entered the vicinity of Congüime in the late 1970s, frequently through agreements with the local population (Pedro Juank, interview, Congüime, July 11, 2019).

The intensification of alluvial gold exploitation in Congüime began in 2004. One of the first companies to establish itself legally in the area was the Ecuadorian based Terrígeno Gold Mine, initiated by Colombian-born Luis Alejandro Miranda. While skilled work positions within Terrígeno were offered to Colombians, corresponding to a 30 %, non-qualified work was designated to Ecuadorians (70 %), including many local Shuar contract-workers, generally laboring under precarious conditions in terms of social security, health, and co-management (Pedro Juank, interview, Congüime, July 11, 2019; *La Hora* 2005; Exploken Minera 2018). However, gold washing did not constitute the essential livelihood of the community. Some continued working in agriculture, hunting, and fishing (Pedro Juank, interview, Congüime, July 11, 2019).

Already after a few years, it was clear that Terrígeno Gold had failed to comply with required environmental standards (Contraloría General del Estado 2012), an ecologically destructive performance that it shared with the illegal mining enterprises, thereby losing its mining license in Congüime. The closure of Terrígeno gave room for a short revival of illegal mining during which uncontrolled pollution of natural resources increased, generating environmental liabilities (Ministerio del Ambiente 2016). During this

time of illegal mining, Shuar families rented their land to the miners. Also, on an individual level, many Shuar men joined the workforce as day laborers. By searching for gold in the ravines, they could extract one gram per day (which corresponded to about \$40 daily, El Comercio 2010).

The departure of Terrígeno Gold was a direct effect of the radical political transformation at national level. Before 2007, prior to Rafael Correa's government, mining had not been a strategic economic sector (Lalander & Merimaa 2018). However, the political turn to the left was accompanied by the onset of a new «progressive» extractivist era. Under the slogan of «responsible mining», the ambition was to energize national economy by incorporating those strategic sectors that were «conceived as those that [...] have decisive economic, social, political, or environmental influence, and which should be oriented to the full development of rights and social interest, specifying non-renewable natural resources among them» (Ministerio de Minería 2016, p. 1). To reduce chaos in the mining sector, in April 2008, the Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly issued the Mining Mandate, which would later give way to the new Mining Law. In addition, fulfilling this mandate, on December 31, 2009, the national mining company Empresa Nacional Minera (ENAMI) was created for regulating extractive activities and providing financial support of social and environmental management of small-scale and artisanal mining (Sacher 2015).

For decades, the state had been absent in many mining areas, except for the presence of military personnel, who frequently operated there for individual interests and benefits. In this context, an important milestone took place in 2010, when the State decided to clean up the territory of Congüime and other mining sites. The final dislodgement of illegal miners carried out by military and police forces affected Congüime in two fundamental ways. First, evidently, it settled the stage for removing the illegal miners and their heavy machinery, which had caused around 55 % of environmental damage in the territory (Lalander *et al.* 2020, Ministerio del Ambiente 2016); a situation that not only affected the natural resources, but also the quality of life of the Shuar community. Second, it promoted a redistribution of economic gains towards the State. The mining concession of the territory was given to the National Mining Company (ENAMI). In charge of managing the mining concessions in the area, ENAMI was expected to restore ecosystems and compensate the Congüime community for the environmental and social consequences from prior mining activities. A new chapter was about to be written, that would turn the local Shuar people from victims of coloniality to agents of sustainable gold mining.

4 The Kenkuim Shuar Mining venture

Ever since they were born, the people of this community have been miners. I therefore supported this community. With emphasis I said: «Here we will have a company for the first time in history in Ecuador and in the world, a Shuar people with a small [mining] company» (Alipio Wajari, interview, Congüime, February 12, 2019).

The Kenkuim Kuri Nunka Association, with 63 Shuar partners, was formed in 2011 for achieving the concession legally, according to the criteria established in Ecuadorian legislation (Exploken Minera 2018; see also *La Hora* 2012; *El Telégrafo* 2012, 2014; *El Universo* 2012). Already in 2012, negotiations were held between the State and the Shuar community to create the first indigenous mining company. The Shuar association suggested a strategy to decontaminate the river and the land of Congüime:

First, we will remedy the vital liquid, that is water, which is mixed with mercury, diesel, and other products... We are from here. We'll live here all our lives; our children and our grandchildren too, so we must treat the earth the best we can (Alipio Wajari, quoted in *El Universo* 2012).

These activities echoed at national level. On July 12, 2012, President Correa projected that Kenkuim Kuri Nunka indigenous mining would «turn Congüime into a model community [...] [and] that the Congüime mining will be an example of development» (*La Hora* 2012). Before being granted the concession, however, the local Shuar association had to be legally established as a company. On May 24, 2014, all necessary bureaucratic proceedings were settled, and the Exploken Minera S. A. company was formally established (Exploken Minera 2018), with 63 members representing all Kenkuim families. Soon afterwards, in 2016, as a remedy to environmental degradation and social injustices in the area, Exploken Minera was granted the concession for gold extraction in Congüime, under the auspices of the national mining company ENAMI and its environmental guidelines (Minería en línea 2016).

Moreover, the complicated relationship between Exploken and ENAMI contributed to the withdrawal of several community partners from Exploken. From the 63 original members —representing almost the entire community—, only 26 remained (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, February 11, 2019). According to Tania Tandama, one of the steadfast partners, the 37 partners who retired did so voluntarily, albeit concerned that their more critical posture towards mining had not been adequately considered (interview, Congüime, February 11, 2019).

A central objective of Exploken Minera is to improve the environmental and cultural conditions of the local population and provide socio-economic well-being for the entire Congüime population.

As for socio-ecological sustainability, in its statutes Exploken Minera declares that its mission:

[...] is oriented to the technical and rational exploitation of mining resources with a high sense of social and environmental responsibility [...] [and with the vision of] being a leading communitarian mining company recognized for its excellence and positioned nationally among the country's leading small mining companies (Exploken Minera 2018).

Considering that neither the community nor the Exploken Minera had the funds or machinery to start mining operations, a system was established in 2016 with partner companies⁸ —referred to as investors and/or operators—, who invest in Exploken in exchange for a share of the profits. However, Exploken maintains control of recruitment and operation in terms of social and ecological responsibility. According to the law, 80 % of employees must be from Congüime. By mid-2019, four partner companies were actively operating on the Exploken fronts in Congüime, a substantial reduction of operators, according to clarifications from Exploken's secretary Maryuri Wampash (interview, Congüime, July 18, 2019; see also Exploken Minera 2018).

Regarding the insertion of Exploken in the local power structures, we should clarify that in the Shuar culture the community's top spokesperson is the *síndico* («trustee»), a rotative and honorary position. The *síndico* represents the community before the state authorities and is elected by its members through a community assembly which is chaired by a president. The role of the *síndico* is to raise awareness of existing needs in the community, and to resolve internal conflicts. Regarding administration of mining royalties, the *síndico* may approve or criticize activities of Exploken, and is important when deciding how to distribute the community share, that is, in the form of communitarian projects or through allocation of money among the families. Although Exploken is a partner of the Ecuadorian State through the concession, the community is the owner of the company, thus functioning as a watchdog *vis-à-vis* the mining operations.

5 Analysis

In what follows, the impact of Exploken on local community life is analyzed in three thematic sub-sections, regarding socio-environmental sustainability, local community tensions, and a decolonial and postcapitalist understanding of the Kenkuim project.

5.1. Shuar mining in Kenkuim: sustainability in practice

8 All these operators are from the nearby town of Yantzaza in the Zamora Chinchipe province (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, February 20, 2020).

We have a good relationship with the community. We've handled it well in that sense. In fact, we also contribute to the community, something that other companies do not do directly. We are executing this contribution through projects (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

Our decolonial and postcapitalist approach to sustainability incorporates redistributive socio-economic concerns as well as the ecological and cultural values expressed by people inhabiting the periphery of global capitalism. Gold is, evidently, a non-renewable natural resource, so any large-scale exploitation cannot be considered sustainable. Acknowledging that caveat and considering the small-scale dimension of Exploken, the broader conviction among Kenkuim actors is that community mining can and should be socio-environmentally responsible, as expressed by Alipio Wajari, co-founder and general manager of Exploken:

On the environmental side, well, since we started, we've moved forward with this mining project the way we think mining should be. Because we don't use mercury, we don't use any chemicals. However, we still suffer from the contamination of the illegals, who used kilos of mercury (Alipio Wajari, interview, Congüime, February 12, 2019).

Similar statements are reiterated among Shuar community members not directly connected to Exploken, such as Ramón Puatza and Alberto Orellana:

Mining in Congüime is executed by the community. In the Shuar community of Congüime, we work legally and with materials that do not pollute. We don't pollute (interview/workshop, Congüime, February 21, 2019).

However, there is still an awareness that mining activities risk having temporary ecological impacts:

We're aware that if we move the land, we disrupt [nature]. However, we're aware that we do have to reforest and take care of the plants, because that's important [...]. We know which plants and trees are natural to the ecosystem (Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, interview, Congüime, February 13, 2019).

But there are those who are more critical of local mining from an ecological perspective. Some critics even claim that Exploken secretly (at night) uses mercury to process and separate the gold from the ore. However, these accusations are generally categorically dismissed by Exploken's directive and no evidence has been presented. Moreover, although Exploken has totally rejected the usage of mercury in the extractive process, also seeking to uphold environmental responsibility within the stages beyond its direct control, it has limited possibilities to determine the subsequent phases of gold concentration.⁹

Upholding environmental responsibility also requires cleaning up of the area in the wake of prior mining activities. This process—initiated already before the creation of Exploken—has proved costly, particularly since local efforts by the Shuar communitarian company to decontaminate the terrain and regulate environmental liabilities have often been performed without much external financial assistance (including the constantly ill-funded ENAMI), as clarified by the chief engineer of Exploken:

9 For this phase of gold concentration, Exploken depends on external agents, located in the nearby locality of Chinapintza. In Chinapintza, they do not share the same criteria of socio-ecological responsibility as Exploken (personal communications, Congüime, February-December 2019; see also Sánchez-Vásquez *et al.* 2016). Normally, besides mercury and chemicals, other methods for gold concentration in Chinapintza include shaking tables, centrifuges, and magnetic metal detection techniques. Evidently, these latter methods are not completely without environmental consequences, though less destructive than mercury and cyanide. Ramiro Enríquez of Exploken emphasizes that the mining in Congüime has seen remarkable ecological improvements, in comparison to all other extractive projects. However, he mentions that it is possible that, during the passage through Chinapintza, mercury might occasionally have been used by the external Chinapintza company (interview, Congüime, February 20, 2020). For a brief presentation of different separation techniques used in small-scale artisanal gold mining, see EPA n.d.

For the issue of liability remediation, not even ENAMI helped us with the audits [...]. Since the first audit, already four years due, it was up to us to do it ourselves [...]. That has been, perhaps, the biggest cost of Exploken Minera regarding environmental concerns (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

The fact that Exploken, regardless of the costs, single-handedly assumed the responsibility of decontamination and reforestation, has not only generated ecological improvements but also a stronger local sense of agency. Besides, the mere establishment of their own socio-ecologically responsible mining company was a huge achievement, compared to the previous situation of external, private, irresponsible, and illegal mining. In many of our conversations, the value of overseeing gold mining is often emphasized:

You are familiar with this mining venture. It's an example, a model, the first and the only one in the world, super-international, and it's exclusively Shuar. We have Shuar men and women that make up a small company that provides sources of work, not just to the local people (Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, interview, Congüime, February 13, 2019).

This sense of agency connects to the importance of culturally defined traditions, ontologies, epistemologies, and organizational systems at community level (e.g., Escobar 2006). The mere fact that the indigenous mining company is communitarian directly connotes the importance of collective Shuar solidarity. This solidarity was thus partly translated into a responsibility for upgrading the terrain by means of depollution and reforestation. In this light, the reinforced responsibility is significant for the Shuar, given the specific ethnic-cultural-symbolic value of territory and territoriality. This territorial connection is particularly important amidst sustainable mining. Again, compared to other extractivist contexts, what was at stake in Congüime *was not* to sacrifice the environment or downplay the socio-cultural function of Pachamama, but to replace a destructive mining model with a socio-ecologically responsible one, thus putting decolonial and postcapitalist sustainability into practice.

5.2. Local tensions in Kenkuim

When discussing the strong collectivism within Shuar communities, it is important to reconnect to the theoretical discussion on decolonial and post-capitalist «sites of becoming». In forming alternative local imaginaries, solidarity and complete consensus may not be starting points. In Congüime, opinions went apart already when initiating the plans for community mining. Particularly divisive was whether engaging in mining activities could be defended from ethical, cultural, and environmental viewpoints, beyond the obvious arguments on material gains. Community members in favor emphasized that the initiative would not jeopardize local culture (since artisanal), mining was already historically integrated into their lives and practiced across the Shuar territory. Following their logic, in generating a significant boost for the local economy, mining would rather strengthen

local collectivism and culture, partly by providing an incentive for the youth to remain in the village (Fausto Juank, interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019). This partly hinges on the fact that Exploken has offered employment where no other viable options previously existed, also considering that former illegal and private mining had further deteriorated local conditions for hunting, fishing, and agriculture.

More skeptical community members felt an aversion for entering the realm of commercial mining, associated as it was with «extractivism», that is, the principal target for collective indigenous resistance in the Amazon and the Andes. Moreover, regarding the local labor market, some community individuals emphasized that, for them, personally economic conditions were better with illegal miners —when they could earn up to \$40 a day—, compared to the recent Exploken era and its basic salary terms (personal communications in Congüime, February-July 2019).

Individually expressed concerns about reduced material gains were probably associated with a more general fear among some community members that the local engagement with mining would jeopardize the original Shuar culture by turning the people further and further away from traditional abilities, livelihoods, and knowledges. On this issue, the *síndico* Fausto Juank has taken a middle position. While sympathizing with the relative minority who on cultural grounds continue to live off the countryside, thus distancing themselves from mining, he simultaneously emphasizes that mining has become an economic necessity:

Our ancestors did not do mining; it was brought by the brothers from other places. Our grandparents did not know about gold; mining is not part of the culture, but we do it out of necessity, because of the lack of resources (interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

At this point, it is worth repeating that many of the tensions presently experienced by the Shuar emanate from problems that were present in the community even prior to the formation of Exploken. On this basis, some community members stress the importance of not conflating culture with the new mining activities, emphasizing that a traditional Shuar livelihood is indeed maintained:

Mining has nothing to do with loss of identity. Mining is one thing; deculturalization is another (Herminio Anibal Piruch Atsamp, interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

We don't neglect what the countryside is, that is, cattle, sowing casava and bananas [...]. We get on with it, we who work in mining; I don't stop raising chickens and cattle. No! I have my animals here. I keep the people and the work on my farm. I pay the people working my land with my salary [from Exploken] (Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, interview, Congüime, February 13, 2019).

While the creation of Exploken produced a certain communal division on cultural grounds, the project also contributed to changes in gender relations. It has generated a more gender balanced lo-

cal labor market, in which women have managed to establish themselves in a sector hitherto earmarked for men. This contrasts with many other extractivist settings in which the roles and stereotypes of «man-worker-supplier/woman-housekeeper-caretaker» are fortified (Svampa 2019, p. 78):

It's the only company that is Shuar and made up of women. There are more women than males, also in the workplace. Likewise, I'm the president, also a woman (Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, interview, Congüime, February 13, 2019).

These words of Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, Exploken President between 2016 and 2019, emphasize the strong presence of women in Exploken Minera, both in the board and in the workforce. For Shuar women laboring in mining, this has resulted in a higher degree of self-esteem, a decent salary, and consequently a more independent status in the community and *vis-à-vis* their spouses. Exploken engineer Ramiro Enríquez adds that the number of female workers would have been even higher if the operation partners had shared this vision of gender equality in the workforce:

[The operators] still have that perception of stereotypes that women can't work, when women have actually shown that women are able to do the job, the same job. And, thanks to our management, especially Silvia [Blanca Ankuash], who [...] proposed that women should also work on the front lines. Thanks to this, some single mothers, many of them are still working there (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

On this issue, opinions diverge not only between the Exploken leadership and the operators, but also within the community itself. Whereas some thus pay homage to this development, arguing that it assists in combating gender-based stereotypes and patriarchal structures present also within the very Shuar culture, others reason that it has weakened family unity, even emphasizing that the liberation of Shuar women is to blame for an increase in divorces in Congüime. Such interpretations were frequently heard during the work in the field, though the guilt was not only placed on women. A young male Shuar leader claimed, for example, that people nowadays «marry and divorce; some even seek another woman and form a new home, abandoning their former families» (personal communication, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

Another source of tension relates to that Exploken has taken on responsibilities beyond those of being a commercial mining company and a local employer. Due to the limited presence of the state in Congüime,¹⁰ and owing to the rapid ascendance of Exploken as a central actor in local community life, the company to some degree assumed the role of local government. From this perspective, a particular relationship materialized between the *síndico* (spokesperson/trustee) of the community and the company directorate, in which they jointly take care of the redistribution of mining revenues to the community members.¹¹ The community identifies and presents its priorities and needs in the form of projects, which has resulted, for instance, in

10 For instance, Fausto Juank criticizes the fact that Congüime does not have a parish council (*junta parroquial*), that is, the smallest administrative unit in the administration of the Ecuadorian state (interview, Congüime, February 11, 2020).

11 According to the concession agreement with ENAMI, after covering the running costs of Exploken and distributing the revenues to the partner companies (operators), merely 17 % of the total earnings remain for Exploken, of which 3 % goes to state royalties, 2 % to ENAMI and 2 % to the community, which implies that the profit of Exploken amounts to 10 % of the total (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, February 20, 2020).

Exploken financing computers, equipment and infrastructure for the local school, at times also beyond the community 2 % share, as stipulated in the concession. Two trends in this regard are highlighted in retrospect: first, a proportional distribution of these royalties to each family and, second, a usage of the revenues for short-, medium-, or long-term projects to invest in the future of the community (personal communications in Congüime, February-July 2019 and February 2020).

In relation to the communal distribution of mining revenues, which some community members perceive as unfair, it is important to emphasize that the Shuar mining activities not only affected relations within the community, but also between locals and externals. In this light, some criticize the fact that a lot of the revenues fall into the pockets of outsiders:

Mining affects a lot; people have come here only for personal gains... The people outside have benefited the most. Another downside is that the job opportunities haven't been for everyone and that the highest-paid jobs were given [by the operators] to people from outside (Fausto Juank, interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

An incident that further escalated the tensions between community members and outside agents occurred one late night in early 2019 when several kilos of pure gold —the result of over a month's production— and \$15,000 in cash largely reserved for salaries were stolen from an unguarded Exploken headquarter, never to be found again. In the wake of this event, suspicions grew in the community that at least one unidentified local Shuar had colluded with an external perpetrator, serving thus as a reminder that individual temptations follow when integrating the world of profit and that the security apparatus had to be improved (personal communications, Congüime, February 2019).

Beneath many of the tensions discussed above lies a preoccupying awareness of the limited deposits of gold and that the mining era in Congüime will end in the foreseeable future, as expressed by Tania Tanduama and Ismael Wampash:

What will happen later when the mining is finished? Where should we go? That's my concern, because it's my livelihood (Tania Tanduama, interview, Congüime, February 11, 2019).

Mining is not stable. Sooner or later it's over. But, as leaders —I'm also a leader of the community; I'm the [vice-] *síndico*—, we will try to rescue our Shuar culture (Ismael Wampash Saraguro, workshop-interview, Congüime, February 21, 2019).

This increasing preoccupation is particularly felt among the youth. According to the *síndico* Fausto Juank, the younger Shuar generation are aware that mining in Congüime is simply temporary. Regarding the previous deterioration of agricultural conditions, some Shuar peasants became miners. Also, some young people stopped studying to work in mining. However, Juank ob-

serves that presently there has been an increase in young Shuar reinitiating their studies, being aware that mining is running out, which suggests that a diversification of the local labor market could occur (Fausto Juank, interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).

Yet, pragmatic strategies have been developed for how to proceed in a post-mining environment. One of them departs from the expectation that the acquisition of local knowhow may tentatively constitute the basis for a dissemination of sustainable mining projects in the Amazon and elsewhere. In such a case, the Exploken group would be an external agent, that is, not belonging to the community, thus implying a necessity to establish a contract between Exploken and the other community. In the words of Blanca Ankuash Quizhpe, protagonist of Exploken from the beginning, the experiences have been mostly positive:

We are already in the closing phase and for me it has been a very nice experience to learn and practice what my father taught me, to share with the people [...] and [showing] that you can live well and be happy, sharing our knowledge, customs and ideas of who we are (interview, February 13, 2019).

5.3. A decolonial and postcapitalist understanding of Kenkuim Shuar mining

Our decolonial approach includes aspects of both delinking and re-existence (Mignolo 2007, 2017). Delinking —or the disconnection from colonialist practices— is never an issue of a complete rupture of the past. It is about re-existing in a world largely determined by outside forces by means of mutually reinforcing strategies of adaptation and resistance. In the case of Exploken and the Kenkuim Shuar, resistance against foreign encroachment has generated an increasing self-esteem rooted in the perception that a small communitarian mining venture may constitute an alternative to the dominating tendency of destructive extractivism and other contemporary expressions of coloniality. Adaptation is not a conflicting process, but rather embedded into the resistance strategy, insofar as it has allowed the Shuar villagers to take charge of economic activities hitherto earmarked for outsiders. Such an interrelated comprehension of resistance and adaptation requires more nuanced and critical views of Amazon indigenous peoples and communities, beyond dichotomizing them as either victims of extractivism or as ecologically noble and delinked natives serving as guardians of forests and ecosystems. Accordingly, to grasp the significance of regained local agency in Congüime, the romantic view on non-adaptable indigenous peoples in resistance needs to be refuted, along with the opposite interpretation of a defenseless population losing its culture in processes of adaptation to a world of global capitalism.

An important aspect in this re-interpretation of agency-victimhood and resistance-adaptation concerns the intersection of culture and economy. The Exploken initiative was born as a struggle for socio-environmental justice, that is, for a collective economic reinforcement of the Kenkuim community. In this light, it is important to emphasize that the increasing sense of local agency and self-esteem was further accentuated when revenues from the local mining enterprise enabled—in postcapitalist terms—a retaking of the economy at community level:

This is born by [questions of] the economy and for obtaining resources to support our families. The initiative arose from right here, from the community, for the community to do mining (Diego Arizaga, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

People were already familiar with mining. So, it was easy to continue [...]. People obviously embraced it because there has been a lot of income for the community. The good thing is that the money stays right here, because [the people involved in mining] are all from here (Ramiro Enríquez, interview, Congüime, February 11, 2019).

Two additional aspects—more linked to adaptation than resistance—also added to a greater sense of agency, namely the local acquisition of technical and entrepreneurial know-how and the transgression from illegality into the realm of legality:

Well, for the Shuar culture..., it's good to do mining legally... [The Shuar] are very proud to do something nice that we're doing and learning. That's where we'll continue to learn more now so we can continue to do mining (Diego Arizaga, interview, Congüime, July 10, 2019).

As argued above, local mining brought along a positive individual and collective transformation anchored in environmental responsibility, increasing control of income generation, augmented technological know-how and legalization. Moreover, the fact that many saw mining as integral to Shuar culture further energized the sense of agency.

Speaking with the Shuar of Kenkuim, our impression *is not* that their principal aim is to return to a glorified past of Shuar traditions, culture, hunting, fishing, and agriculture. Even though cultural resistance remains pivotal, most community members seem to accept that their destiny is to continue a path already marked by a significant insertion into the outside world. For example, while struggling to rescue and strengthen Shuar culture in terms of language, dancing, gastronomy, etc., they acknowledge that deeper external interaction provides the younger generation with better opportunities for education, health, sports, and inclusion in the Ecuadorian State. There is also an increasing awareness that socio-cultural protection may benefit from the advancement of local eco-tourism. Also, Fausto Juank mentions that livestock and chicken rearing may—with adequate infrastructural conditions—be an economic alternative to mining (interview, Congüime, December 19, 2019).¹²

12 In fact, a cattle project is already in place with the support of Exploken. Moreover, agricultural work has been re-incentivized through a joint agreement with the parish council (Junta Parroquial) of Nuevo Quito, which provides chickens to Shuar families for commercial and reproductive purposes.

Judging from the examples above, the Shuar have not completely delinked from the colonial matrix of power. A radical and rapid return to a traditional indigenous society has not been accomplished. Nonetheless, most community members agree that the situation is better now than before the Exploken era, although they acknowledge that gold is a non-renewable natural resource. With a minimal ecological impact, mining provided revenues that enabled the reinforcement of other types of capital: physical (infrastructure and equipment), human (education, training, know-how...), social (organization or agency), etcetera.

In our decolonial and postcapitalist view on sustainability, the Kenkuim Shuar case is, despite its imperfections and relatively disadvantageous position in global capitalist structures, an extraordinary example of socio-ecologically sustainable mining. Judged from historical extractivist experiences, it may serve as an alternative model of human-nature-society relations, specifically in terms of ecological, socio-economic, and cultural justice.

6 Concluding remarks

In this article, we have explored and problematized the ways in which the gold mining venture of the Kenkuim Shuar community transfigured social interactions, livelihood, and local understandings of culture. Employing a decolonial and postcapitalist approach to sustainability —beyond the idealized and simplified dichotomization of the strong versus weak labels—, we have interpreted the foundation and operation of this locally administered mining company as both delinking and re-existence in a context largely conditioned by ecologically destructive capitalist extractivism and the omnipresence of Western modernity. Whereas delinking connotes the disconnection from —but not complete liquidation of— colonialist practices, re-existence refers to coping with a world largely determined by outside forces without entirely leaving it, a dual approach that requires a modification of agenthood. Amidst the overall endeavor of safeguarding and reinforcing socio-cultural, ecological, and economic values, delinking/re-existence in Congüime manifested itself in strategies of both resistance and adaptation, viewed in this study as constituting idiomatic counter-responses *vis-à-vis* capitalist and colonial discourses and practices of domination.

At first glance, indigenous mining may conceptually appear as oxymoronic. Evidently, mining by itself does not strengthen Shuar culture and traditions, but it generates socio-economic incentives for local socio-environmental and cultural recovery and reinforcement. Therefore, the Exploken project could to some degree be considered a compromise with global capitalism and the gold market, but more than ever before on Shuar terms. Although local and

socio-environmentally responsible mining was enabled by a progressive political transformation at the national level, and a stronger insertion of the community into the orbit of the state, it was foremost a result of local level Shuar agency. By articulating and acting upon the menaces of global capitalism, the Kenkuim Shuar gained an increasing sense of pride, which added to their repositioning as agents of sustainable gold mining. Several of the Shuar interviewees emphasized that the Exploken project has contributed to a growing sense of self-esteem at community level and that the *shuarization* of mining —answering to local ethical, ecological, cultural, and economic values—, ended their former status as victims of capitalist coloniality.

In the analytical sections, we exemplified how different Shuar actors have articulated their experiences with Exploken from socio-cultural, ecological, and economic points of view. A clear majority argue that this communitarian mining experiment represents a viable alternative to destructive extractivism. Many also hold that this transformation is necessary for the survival of Shuar forms of life in a rapidly changing world. More precisely, it is not only an experiment to safeguard and strengthen Shuar culture, territory, and the environment, but also a way to partly integrate, partly resist, a world profoundly conditioned by the logics of global extractivist capitalism. Although this transformation is gradual and addressed by the Shuar in diverse and pragmatic ways, our case suggests that the socio-ecologically sustainable mining of the Kenkuim Shuar is a decolonial step in a postcapitalist direction.

7 Dedication

This article is dedicated to the vibrating memory of the local historical Shuar leader Pedro Juank.

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