Political tourism?
A critical social analysis on ecotourism and the indigenous struggle in the Ecuadorian Amazons

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Abstract

Enabled by a Minor Field Study scholarship from SIDA, this thesis examines indigenous involvement in ecotourism in the Ecuadorian Amazons. Indigenous people are the most marginalized social group world-wide, and coincidingly often live in resource rich pristine land. The oil-rich lands of the Amazons is called a resource frontier and is now increasingly important for the tourism sector, which comes to entail conflict of interests between the State and indigenous communities living in this area. Both the global call for sustainable development and national policies of “Buen Vivir” promotes ecotourism as an ecologically, socio-economically, and culturally sustainable activity. Scholarly opinion suggest that ecotourism generates potential tools of empowerment for the involved indigenous communities. With this backdrop and with the theoretical framework of the postcolonial debate, main opportunities and challenges are examined with the correlation of tourism ventures and socio-political implications in the local reality of indigenous organizations in Tena, Napo. Complex impediments are uncovered and analyzed within the social field of indigenous ecotourism. The conviction of the study holds the call for attentive cross-cultural communication in order to continue the seemingly inevitable path of globalization in a more sustainable and non-discriminatory manner.

Keywords
Indigenous, Ecotourism, Postcolonial debate, Ecuador, Amazons, Social structures, Cultural survival, Sustainable development
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1. Introduction

This research is introduced in the following chapter by putting both the concept of ecotourism and the indigenous struggle in a global and national perspective. First, the research topics are described in a contemporary context followed by a presentation of the specific aim and research questions of the thesis. Then as background information, indigenous discrimination is put in a historical perspective, and finally the concept of ecotourism is explained and defined.

The call for greener politics and sustainability awareness is a global trend, reflected in United Nations Development Program launching the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) for year 2030. Ecotourism, which is promoted and elaborated in the United Nations World Tourism Organization as means to accomplishing the 2030 SDG’s, is recognized to accommodate synergy between goals regarding combating climate change, sustainable economic growth, and cultural preservation. The global goals have been enthusiastically adopted into the National Development Plan of Ecuador, which shares the perspective on ecotourism being a key alternative revenue-making to the prevalent, large-scale unsustainable extraction of natural resources. Intention of developing this sector within the country has been addressed in the development plan, proposing that “the greatest comparative advantage of Ecuador is it’s biodiversity” and accordingly thus proposing that the “medium- and long-term strategy is to build a society of bio-knowledge and community eco-tourism services” (Senplades 2013, 70; 79). Ecotourism is also promoted as means for realization of policies concerning Buen Vivir in rural areas (PlanDeTur 2020, 97-99; Senplades 2017, 86). Buen Vivir is a concept prevalent in Andean politics derived from indigenous beliefs, explained further in section 1.2.1. The industry of ecotourism, or sustainable tourism, has been a significantly growing sector within the international tourism industry the past few decades, also following the global trends of growing environmental consciousness and sustainable development (Zeppel 2006, ii).

Acknowledging the Ecuadorian Amazons as a resource frontier is understanding that the area has coinciding importance from three perspectives. Firstly, it’s a source of governmental revenue making, due the richness of natural resources, such as oil and timber. Secondly, it is an attractive destination for ecotourism, with widespread viewpoint as an opposing alternative to

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1 Creation of platform www.tourism4sdgs.org, for policy makers, international organizations, academia, donors, companies and all tourism stakeholders to engage in SDG implementation strategies as well as action, conversation and collaboration towards a sustainable tourism sector.

2 Executive Decree No. 371, 2018
oil industries, even portrayed as so in media. Thirdly, it is ancestral homeland to many indigenous people. However, due to circumstances affected by global and national politics, along with structural social discrimination, this third perspective seems to end up overlooked. For that reason, this research aims to draw attention to this perspective in relation with the two mentioned aspects, as well as analysing social mechanism that contributes to the occurrence of the neglect.

1.1 Aim and research question

Going to the local reality in a popular ecotourist hub Tena, in the Napo province of the Ecuadorian Amazons, this study wants to examine the lived experiences of ecotourism ventures, by interviewing indigenous and correlated subjects. The objective is to generate ample understanding and in-depth discussions regarding the incentives and risks for the indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazons to engage in ecotourism and examine what political role it could play in the indigenous social struggle.

With theoretical framework of persistent coloniality in the social reality Ecuador, the aim is to view current situation of indigenous people in ecotourism from a critical stand point, immersing into the postcolonial debate and examine some main impacts and limitations of the involvement in ecotourism perceived by the research participants.

There are two interlinked research questions guiding this thesis. The first is inquiring experience and the second meaning of such, and are as follows:

- What socio-political significance has involvement in ecotourism by indigenous communities generated in the region?
- What structural social issues hampers ecotourism to benefit the indigenous communities?

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2 The indigenous people interviewed in this study all identify themselves as Kichwa, the largest nationality in the region.
1.2 Contextualization

1.2.1 Indigenous circumstances

It is necessary to take the historical context into consideration when approaching contemporary issues. Indigenous people, in Ecuador as well as globally, are a marginalized social group. Indigenous population in Latin America has from the arrival of Columbus year 1492 gone from presumably 100% to about 40% around the years of independence in the beginning of the 19th century to currently 8% (Robinson 2008; The World Bank 2015). According to World Bank data, these remaining 8% are in general much poorer and represent 17% of the category “extremely poor” of the world population. These statistics reflect their infamous history of colonization, enslavement, exploitation and prevailing social inequality. One must take into consideration that the definition of who is “indigenous” is a somewhat loose and complex term, much due to the diversity within the category. Some guidelines are recommended by the UN Indigenous Permanent Forum, being foremost the self-identification, at the individual level, and acceptance by the community as their member. Further, they can have some or all of following traits; distinct language and culture; distinct social, economical, political systems; and strong socio-cultural linkage to their territories and surrounding natural resources. There is roughly just over 1 million people that identify themselves as indigenous of the 16 million population of Ecuador. A large part of them live in the Amazons, and in province of Napo they constitute a majority of the population.

The protest and resistance of the indigenous people has been a considerable reason for their survival. Only in 1989 was indigenous rights passed as a part of international human rights laws by the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, declaring juridical rights such as “free, prior and informed consent” required from indigenous people in order for the state or private companies to get access to their territories. The variation of incorporation and commitment to international indigenous rights is vast throughout Latin America. Chile does not recognize them in their constitution and have criminalized indigenous social protest. Ecuador on the other hand claims the oldest and strongest indigenous movement in Latin America, although five countries have higher indigenous population ratio (The World Bank 2015, 25;
Yashar 2005, 85). It is home to the political coalition of 14 indigenous nationalities, CONAIE (Conferederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), which in the 90’s initiated several indigenous “uprisings” and spearheaded the ousting of three presidents around the turn of the millennia.

The Amazon rainforest is an immensely biodiverse area often referred to as the lungs of our planet. It is also home to numerous indigenous nationalities and communities, also those who live in voluntary isolation. In 1970’s, a lot of oil was discovered in the Ecuadorian Amazons subsoil. The discovery spurred Ecuador into a long-lasting period of economic, export-oriented growth. Today, oil blocks cover a large majority of the surface of the Ecuadorian Amazons, prominently overlapping territory that pertains to indigenous people. Increasing oil export, along with the government’s commitment to neoliberal policies, impelling privatization and free markets, has put a lot of restrain on indigenous people and their Amazonian territories. The Ecuadorian economic crisis in the late 90’s, the alleged exhaustion of the neoliberal model, and the cross-regional political trend referred to as “the pink tide™️, enforced by the national indigenous movement, led to a leftist regime. Rafael Correa governed Ecuador 2007 to 2017 and promoted a social “Citizen Revolution” claiming the end of neoliberalism and re-wrote the constitution. The new Constitution is influenced by the country’s strong indigenous political movements. It incorporates the indigenous concept and philosophy “Sumak Kawsay” which has been translated to Buen Vivir in Spanish and interpreted into public policies. It derives from ancestral Andean indigenous cosm vision, emphasizing the significance of a harmonious relationship with Pacha Mama (mother earth in Kichwa). Based on these ideas, the Ecuadorian Constitution now acknowledges, as first country in the world, the Rights of Nature and, as stated, promotes ecotourism for rural development.

### 1.2.2 Ecotourism

The amount of tourist visitors has tripled the last two decades in Ecuador, and the country has received the award “World’s Leading Green Destination” by the World Travel Awards™️ for six consecutive years since 2012. In this thesis, ecotourism is viewed as field

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1. A large area of land, that is awarded to oil drilling and exploration companies by a country's government. ([www.wikinvest.com/wiki/Oil_exploration_block](http://www.wikinvest.com/wiki/Oil_exploration_block))

2. Epithet for the political leftist turn several Latin American countries, experienced in the beginning of the new millennia spearhead by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.
containing intersecting social relations from indigenous and non-indigenous worlds. Defining ecotourism as a concept, TIES (The International Ecotourism Society) provides following description: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (TIES, 2015).

Their guiding principles relevant in this study include promises such as:

- “Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climates.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.”

As pristine landscape and ecotourism go hand in hand, ecotourism often occurs in areas home to indigenous people, with various involvement of the local communities. Considered to be socio-culturally sustainable and learning-oriented, it is claimed to contain potential tools for empowerment for indigenous communities involved in ecotourism projects, and creating this synergy between development, ecology and indigenous social rights (Coria & Calfucura 2012; Davidov 2013; Zeppel 2006, 67-69). However, the expansion of ecotourism has been made possible in the Amazon area through expansion of infrastructure and oil roads built in the 1970’s when the discovery of the black gold was made. So even if ecotourism is approached as an alternative for ecologically sustainable revenue making, the sectors are closely interlinked, and the one does not rule out the other. In whatever way ecotourism might be portrayed, there is a call for a more profound understanding on how the involvement can cause new complex circumstances and relations for the indigenous people.
2. Previous research

In this section, important information and conclusions from previous studies relevant for this thesis, are presented. First some historical aspects are summarized in early studies, then the inconclusive concept of empowerment and aspects of political significance are debated upon. Following, some thoughts regarding ecotourism in relation to Buen Vivir are presented by two case studies, and conclusively the main issues of previous studies are summarized, leading into next chapter providing theoretical framework needed to, in accordance with the aim of the study, understand these main issues better.

Studies of impacts of involvement in ecotourism in Kichwa communities around Tena, Napo provide perspectives of that which has been referred to as indigenous development, that is development within indigenous communities. Wesche (1993), for example, wrote an early research focusing on the initiation and expansion of ecotourism in the area, having data from the area since the 1960’s. He argues that ecotourism is an ally against forces of environmental and cultural threats against the Kichwas in the region. He acclaims the Ecuadorian Amazons as a resource frontier and sees indigenous ecotourism as a pro-active strategy against exploitation in the globalized development system. Colvin (1994) reports on a case study of the community of Capirona, having their involvement in ecotourism generating local benefit by a sense of empowerment. The Capironas are considered pioneers in the endeavour of being in completely initiated and operated only by the families in the community.

An analysis has been made on key factors of empowerment in indigenous community of Palenque, Mexico, by Mendoza Ramos and Prideaux (2014). The frame of analysis entails five dimensions to indicate empowerment; economic, social, political, psychological and environmental. Aspects of cultural empowerment are included in the psychological dimensions, stating that ecotourism could generate empowerment by providing indigenous communities with “pride in traditions and culture through tourism recognition of their uniqueness and value of their culture” (by Mendoza Ramos & Prideaux 2014, 466). However, Colvin (1994) and Davidov (2013) brings to attention the consequence of “cultural production”, where traditions are being revitalized for the sake of portraying an exotic experience and their culture is being commodified for the tourist. Also Johnston (2000, 90) considers this to be an issue, with the tourism business being part of the consumerism cultures prevalent outside many indigenous communities, exemplified by the author in the occurrence of commercialization of photos of
indigenous individuals and souvenirs manufactured in Asia, providing revenue but not in the pockets of corresponding people.

Johnston (2000; 2006), contributes with extensive literature with anti-capitalist perspectives, considering institutional impediments for indigenous people. She affirms that indigenous nations in Ecuador have been “developing their own tourism enterprises as means of fighting oil development on ancestral land” (Johnston 2006, 12) and also sees this as a sustainable alternative, although within the realm of capitalist development. Oil companies have been reported bribing people living in the Amazons, many of them indigenous, to ally or work for them, but according to Jarett (2014, 64)”community tourism has provided the Wairí Churi with additional income needed to resist these offers”, acknowledging, together with his observed increase of communities cultural pride, that ecotourism “carries strong political significance” (Jarrett 2014, 60). Similarly, Johnston (2000, 89) argues that the engagement in ecotourism “can be a powerful addition to the toolbox of indigenous peoples fighting for their rights”. The mentioned scholars have acknowledged the role of ecotourism as an alternative to oil extraction in indigenous territory, from a perspective of political ecology, which is a predominant standpoint in written literature on the subject.

Jarett (2014) provides an analysis of ecotourism in indigenous communities in the perspective of the national policy of Buen Vivir. He views the small-scale, local initiatives as a way of operationalization the policies. The author advocates “the need to consider not only how sumac kawsay has been articulated as an ideal of contemporary indigenous movements and a guiding principle for Correa’s “post-neoliberal” regime, but also how indigenous peoples at the local level are actively designing their own small-scale projects in ways that make “living well” possible.” (2014, 43). Jarett’s study exemplifies “culturally appropriate initiatives” (2014,51) having indigenous people self-administer their territories and resources in a manner in which the values of the indigenous philosophy and values are passably considered, operationalized and respected. However, the author clarifies that the tourism-involved indigenous people of his study didn’t have explicit or intentional connection to the ideals or political project of Buen Vivir, but rather converges with what the ideology could manifest in reality, a conclusion made by the author himself. A study on the connection between the policies of Buen Vivir and ecotourism in Nicaragua has been made by Fisher (2018). He states in his article that there is a strong connection between Latin American politics and the tourism industry, exemplified in “projects like Buen Vivir” as it encourages to “re-politicize socio-ecological relations, valorize Indigenous knowledge and call attention to structural inequalities” in wider contexts (2018,
6). He further discusses the difficulty to put tourism development inside or outside of the logics of neoliberalism, instead calling attention to the “dynamic system of relationships between habits and attitudes, citizens and states, communities and their environments.” (2018, 16).

Coria & Calfucura (2012) overview some case studies in the region and claim that “in practice, ecotourism has often failed to deliver the expected benefits to indigenous communities due to a combination of factors, including shortages in the endowments of human, financial and social capital within the community, lack of mechanisms for a fair distribution of the economic benefits of ecotourism, and land insecurity” (2012, 47). Conclusively, the challenges the Ecuadorian indigenous ecotourism face have much to do with “how to institute and maintain community-control over tourism in marginalized groups where neo-colonial power relations still prevails” (Johnston 2000, 91).
3. Theoretical framework: The Postcolonial debate

The following section provides a theoretical foundation in order to enable deeper understanding of the issues indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Amazons, and around the globe, might face. By scrutinizing the postcolonial debate, this section enables the uncovering of the political significance and structural issues in the performed research. Firstly, the origins and concepts of Postcolonial Theory is briefly summarized. Then the sociological perspective of the theory is explained, and further connected with the framework of critical social theory. Next, an historical contextualization of the postcolonial debate is outlined, followed by some important points of critique and contestation in the debate. Finally, response from indigenous countermovement within the context is presented as aspiration for decoloniality.

Postcolonial theory arose in the second half of the 20th century and was initially focused on discourse-analysis and decolonization of the ex-British colonies in Africa and Asia. The theory’s main objective is to probe the aftermath of colonization, as well as shifting ontological and epistemological perspective from the colonizers to the colonized (Young 2016). It is a critical approach to the dominant paradigms and ideologies characterized by the western societies. Postcolonial theory is often associated in academics with literary discourse analysis. However, it can also be applied for in-depth analysis of discursive events and social phenomenon, as in this thesis. The theory has many related variations and sub-categories relevant to the Latin American context, such as postmodernism, neo-colonialism and Occidentalism. In this thesis, Occidentalism is preferred as discursive theoretical term for the analysis, as the division between oriente and occidente is commonly used in everyday communication in Ecuador when referring to the Amazon world versus the urbanized “modern” world. Mignolo (2011, 20) calls Occidentalism “the overarching imaginary of the modern/colonial world system” and is originally an academical response to the fundamental book for Postcolonial Theory “Orientalism” by Edward Said (1978).

In a broad sense, postcolonial studies apply a critical approach to how people’s percept and values the differences between the modern western world (“occidente”) and non-western world (“oriente”). It considers what socio-historical events that has influenced these experiences and values (Mignolo 2007; Mignolo 2011; Young 2016). Touching upon these issues within a
variety of disciplines (such as linguistics, economy, cultural studies, etc.), the authors of the book “Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the postcolonial debate” declare that: “problems related to the scenarios of neoliberalism, globalisation, migration, social movements, cultural hybridity, and the like cannot be appropriately analysed without an understanding of Latin America’s coloniality” (2008, 5). Concurrently, issues concerning indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Amazons needs to be given in a sociological context.

3.1 A sociological foundation

“Western expansion since the sixteenth century has not only been a religious and economic one, but also the expansion of hegemonic forms of knowledge that shaped the very conception of economy and religion” (Mignolo 2011, 22, emphasis added).

Stated that postcolonial theories work under a multidisciplinary sphere, in this thesis the sociological aspects of the debate are most relevant. Understanding that socio-political mechanisms and the globalized system are based on the dominant, occidental world views (ontologies) and ways of the knowing (epistemology) and found as “new” forms of colonization mechanisms. Colonization is in this sense understood from a sociological perspective, affecting human behavior on societal and individual level, and not as the actual occupation of physical territory. From the enforcement of slavery in the initiation of the colonization of the Americas, to the current form of colonization characterized by enforcement of occidental paragraphs and institutions. The unequal and discriminatory forms of power relations become more implicit in social and political life. Power is here also referred to as in a sociological sense, based on ideas of Michel Foucault, as an omnipresent force of truth-claiming that, beyond repressing and censoring, actually “produces reality and knowledge” (Munck 2013, 145). Social power is in this meaning something that acknowledges one way of being, thinking and knowing, as correct, and dismissing others as wrong. This sociological approach refers to the structural foundation in society on which exploitation of the subjugated other is legitimatized and reproduced by paternalism and dominant authorities.

3.1.1 A critical social theory

“Critical theory is a practice of ongoing discovery, a permanent challenge to uncover the political in the everyday, to examine why we believe the things we do, and to analyze what work our worldviews are doing in shoring up particular norms, hierarchies, and exclusions” (Jung 2015, 190).
With roots in Marxists criticism of the capitalist society and influenced by psychoanalysis, critical theory is regarded as a school of thought (i.e. Frankfurt School, early 20th century) in an ongoing academic debate, rather than a particular or definite theory. Putting structural, social inequalities in perspective, an understanding that the social reality we live is constructed and re-constructed in inter-human communication and relation is necessary. This is particularly a process through knowledge and education systems, and the general acceptance of “what becomes socially constructed is disproportionately the result of dominant institutions in society” (Dahms & Jalata 2015, 86). Critical theory is as much a theoretical approach, as it is methodology for academic research. Somewhat problematically, it is used as critique on the dominant paradigms, systems and institutions, from these dominant paradigms, systems and institutions. With the acclaimed purpose of contributing to emancipatory discourses and social justice, the objective of the theory is to bring “the prospect of emancipation from visible and invisible systems and structures of power” in to the academic domain (Dahms & Jalata 2015, 79). Particularly, the standpoint helps to shed light on the impacts the capitalist world system has made on indigenous people, as “progress for some has been at the expense of disempowerment, impoverishment, and sometimes genocide for many others” (Dahms & Jalata 2015, 83). Exposing these invisible social forces is seen as means to enable emancipation, liberation and empowerment for marginalized people.

3.2 Coloniality of social reality

“From the project of the Orbis Universalis Christianum, through the standards of civilization at the turn of the twentieth century, to the current one of globalization (global market), global designs have been the hegemonic project for managing the planet” (Mignolo 2011, 21).

Mignolo (2007, 155) states that postcolonial studies and debate pertains to a particular kind of critical social theory. To understand this consensus, a roughly outlined historical trajectory of colonial imposition will follow. The explicit and implicit power, calling it coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), has since the official end of physical colonization in Latin America after independence wars in the early 19th century, been driven and legitimized by different occidental social mechanisms, or projects, from the missioning of the catholic church to the current global development programs. A fundamental condition for these mechanisms and/or projects, to function is ethnical social stratification, also known as social marginalization or racism (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000).
This following scheme, borrowed from Julia Roth (2017), is a rough guide to the different stages, albeit overlapping, of how these discursive changes has developed through time. Religion, as a social mechanism and/or project, was relied on for legitimation to exploitation of the “new” land and people in the Americas from the 16th century. After the era of Enlightenment of the 18th century, leading intellectuals began to question the religious paradigm with new principles of science and philosophy, aspiring for societal modernization and civilianization. In the mid 20th century, a normative, international, discourse of development, referring to economic growth, arose, promoting consumerism culture. By appointing some nations to be underdeveloped, there was a consensus regarding them being in dire need “for the (white) western hand to help subjects along” (Escobar 2012, 8). Henceforth a legitimation of western domination has been created, and “reality had been colonized by the development discourse” (Escobar 2012, 5).

![Social mechanisms of coloniality](https://wbu.belefeld.de/cias/wiki/Occidentalism.html)

As previously mentioned, social stratification is required in order for the globalized capitalist system to function, and in the current consensus of globalization the argument of Moraña et al. (2008, 12) who sees “globalization as new incarnation of (neo)colonialism with its structuring principle of capitalism that not only allows but requires coloniality” as a process withholding socially inclusive policies. The starting point of the globalization is hard to pinpoint, although pivotally affected by when Columbus first set foot in the Americas with the initiation of a world market. However, since the 1980’s, together with neoliberal ideas of free markets, intrusion of international agencies in national politics and economy, the neglect of social aspects of economic growth, effects of globalization have spiraled. Socially marginalized groups, such as indigenous people, in poorer countries relying on export of natural resources, has taken a hard hit from this, where the governments prioritize global demands before local needs.

### 3.3 Contestation in the postcolonial debate

A main opposition of Postcolonial Theory is the paradoxical and limiting issue of its aim to critique a system ideology, within the system itself. Another common contestation of
Postcolonial Theory is regarding its emphasis on cultural differences between the *oriente* and *occidente*, the dichotomy of the colonizers and colonized. Critics such as Chibber (2013) and Dhawan (2018) call upon attention to the risks with these tendencies among postcolonial studies, that of static categorization of cultures and the tendency of exaggerated binarity between them. Challenging the theory’s criticism of capitalism, the mentioned authors speak of *universalism*, arguing that human needs and aspirations are universal, and not socially or culturally created.

In the scrutiny of the social world within academia, this notion calls for cautious approaches when analysing other nations and cultures, to prevent any over-emphasis on *otherness* and reproducing it by putting new academic perspectives on such. E. San Juan Jr (1998), is not convinced of the benefits of postcolonial theory and studies, arguing that Postcolonial studies mainly serves to a utopian dream to soothe the conscience of the *occidente*. Albeit somewhat cynical, he raises an important question in the matter, being; how important are new academical, philosophical and political perspectives for the social struggle of indigenous people in Ecuadorian Amazons really?

### 3.4 Indigenous social decoloniality

Decoloniality, or decolonial thought, refers to the emancipation of the social coloniality of power. These socio-political tendencies have been influenced by the strong political resistance of Ecuador’s indigenous movements, aimed at challenging the *occidental* hegemonic idea of administrative homogeneity (Yashar 2005). Together with other new social movements, with the associated “identity politics” erupting in the 1980’s, the resistance was triggered by neoliberal regimes, and enabled by the prevalent democratic wave in the region. Coincidingly in time for the 500-year anniversary of colonization in the Americas, CONAIE, as previously stated, gained large political momentum in the 1990’s and contributed to the establishment of the concept *Buen Vivir* in current politics. The concept represents indigenous contestation and alternative to capitalist development and holds potentiality to facilitate the struggle for local decolonization (Altmann 2017).

However, Hale (2004) and Robinson (2008, 298-309) calls attention to that these political tendencies of multiculturalism can be ambiguous, if not misleading, as they seem to fail to challenge the structural issues. The embrace and incorporation of indigenous struggle by the
State and global institutions who simultaneously promote policies that reinforce their structural inequality, such as the commodification of natural resources on indigenous territory, contains such ambiguity. This perspective suggests State-elite’s motives of appropriation or co-optation aimed to dismantle the movements and keep status quo under control. Hale (2004) proposes it is time to apply critical view on the new political spaces created by the indigenous movements, presenting imbedded limitations in the achievements. He uses the term “indio permitido” (the permitted, or allowed, indian), referring to the “indio” who has learned the ways of occident and substituted protest with proposal. This creates fragmentation within the indigenous movement, and the old saying of “divide and conquer” comes to mind, but in a version of “diffuse and maintain status quo”. Further, it shows a form of glass ceiling in society reached by the recent indigenous movement when being granted some cultural rights. The essence of the term deals with the underlying, persistent coloniality of thought despite new spaces for empowerment, meaning that “these reforms tend to empower some while marginalizing the majority” (Hale 2014, 16).

4. Method

Followingly, the approaches and methods used for the realization of the research are described. First, the epistemological framework and perspectives are outlined, later followed by the presentation of operational measures used in conducting the study.

4.1 Methodological foundations

This paper is an in-depth analysis of the social realm lived by the indigenous people, therefore it was made as a qualitative research study. It lies on an interpretivist foundation, meaning understanding the social world through perspective of the participants, and a social constructivist approach, meaning the view on social issues as a result of human interaction (Bryman 2016, 380).

The objective of this study requires the perspective of the indigenous, and so the mentioned notion that social research in “western science and the modern academy have been part of the colonial apparatus” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 2) has to be taken under consideration. Accordingly, the form of reasoning and relation to theory in the
analysis is of inductive/abductive nature. “With abduction the researcher grounds a theoretical understanding of the contexts and people he or she is studying in the language, meanings, and perspectives that form their worldview.” (Bryman 2016, 401). The research questions are approached with a discursive analysis on the social field of ecotourism, as a discursive event, engaging in “examination of the form of discursive interaction used to communicate meaning and beliefs” and the “consideration of the social context in which the discursive event is taking place” (Bryman 2012, 538).

4.2 Use of methods

4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

This method of collecting qualitative data consists in interviews guided by a set interview questions but maintaining an openness to follow-up questions that may arise, keeping a somewhat informal, conversational sense to the interview. Using semi-structured for this study I aspire for in-depth analysis of referred topics, aiming for focused interviews “using predominantly open questions to ask interviewees questions about a specific situation or event that is relevant to them and of interest to the researcher” (Bryman 2016, 213).

Sampling for the interviews was done in a purposive selection, “with direct reference to the research questions being asked” (Bryman 2016, 416), that is going to Tena, Napo and contact people and organizations relevant for the study. Further, the sampling method developed into snowball sampling, where key informants suggested future potential interviewees within their contact network. Author conducted semi-structured interviews with six people in four different local Kichwa organizations involved in ecotourism. Three informants from the Ministry of Tourism in Tena, Napo were interviewed. Chapter 5 is dedicated to a brief description of the interviewees and their organizations. Additionally, the study includes one interview with a key informant (Juan Carlos), who has extensive knowledge and experience of ecotourism in indigenous community as he for many years managed a successful eco-lodge7, in another region.

4.2.2 Secondary data

Secondary data in the study consists of official documents and extensive literature review. The official documents used are all from the Ecuadorian State, being:

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7Kapawi Ecolodge in the Amazonian province Pastaza in Ecuador.
• National 4-year development plans from year 2013 and 2017, by the National Secretary of Planning and Development (Senplades: Secretaria Nacional de Planificacion y Desarrollo”).

• Strategic design for tourist development goals for year 2020, by the Ministry of Tourism (PlanDeTur 2020: Plan Estratégico de Desarrollo de Turismo Sostenible para Ecuador).

Literature was used for extensive deep-dive in the subject, supporting the analysis and enabling adequate formulation of interview questions, consisting of Veronica Davidov’s “Ecotourism and Cultural Production” (2013) and Alison M. Johnston’s “Is the Sacred for sale? Tourism and indigenous people” (2006).

4.3 Ethical considerations, limitations and validity

The previously mentioned complexity of postcolonial studies are taken under consideration throughout the study, approaching the matter with caution in regard to assumptions. Entering the sphere of indigenous studies, awareness must be put to avoid stereotyping, exotifying, homogenizing, victimizing, as in undermining agency of indigenous people, or romanticizing, as in being aware to potential personal bias in favor of marginalized and subjugated groups. However, in regard to potential biases of the study, the aim as such withholds political standpoints, and Bryman (2016, 149) concurs that within qualitative interpretive approach, conducting social research “is never conducting an investigation in a moral vacuum—who he or she is will influence a whole variety of presuppositions that in turn have implications for the conduct of social research”. Furthermore, in alignment with the theoretical framework of the study, “a decolonized academy is interdisciplinary and politically proactive” according to Denzin and Lincoln (2008, 12).

A possible limitation potentially affecting the validity of the research is the matter of language. Authors capacity of Spanish was indeed sufficient to carry out interviews and transcribing material, but the possibility of missing linguistic nuances must be admitted, also in regard to those participants who had Spanish as second language, after Kichwa. The names of the interviewees from the organizations have been changed, as precaution for any potential issue.
5. Presentation of the organizations

AMAPUKIN (A) (Asociación de Mujeres Parteras Kichwas de alto Napo/Association of Kichwa midwives in upper Napo). The organization is based in the jungle close to Tena with 10 elderly women, calling themselves and each other for “mamás”, working for cultural preservation of their ancestral medicinal knowledges. Tourists, volunteers and interns are invited to the organization, providing financial support by staying in the cabañas on their premises, as well as learning from the mamás and keeping tradition alive. Author made a two-day visit to the organization site. **Interviewed:** Antonio (manager for the tourism and volunteer department), mamá Maria and mamá Mariluz. **Nationalities:** Ecuadorian Kichwas

CYRAE (C) (Consejo de Yachak Runa Amazonicos del Ecuador/Council of Amazonian Runa Yachaks of Ecuador). Grassroot social movement founded in the late 90’s, the organizations main objective is to have their traditional medicine recognized. In recent decades shamans⁸, or yachaks as they are called in Kichwa, have become increasingly organized and politically active in Ecuador (among other Andean countries) which has developed into an “important aspect indigenous political identity and of cultural survival tactics” (Davidov 2013, 156). **Interviewed:** Rolando (president of the organization). **Nationality:** Ecuadorian Kichwa

FEPTCE (F) (Federacion Plurinacional de Turismo Comunitario del Ecuador/Plurinational federation of communitarian tourism of Ecuador). A social organization and representative instance founded in 2002, working to promote and improve community ecotourism initiatives on a national level in Ecuador. They provide technical advice and education for community leaders in tourism principles. Approximately 50% of all community tourism initiatives in Ecuador are affiliated with FEPTCE. **Interviewed:** Natal (president). **Nationality:** Ecuadorian Kichwa

Ministerio de Turismo, Tena Napo (MinTur) (Ministry of Tourism). A public entity of the State created in 1992. Managing promotion, regulation and planification of tourism in Ecuador in general and internationally. The Ministry has offices in all 24 provinces, the office in Tena is functioning with four staff members. Working with issues such as certifying community tourist initiatives and safety-approving kayak and rafting enterprises, which are very popular in

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⁸Spiritual and physical healers from ancient indigenous tradition
the area. Interviewed: Sandro (municipal tourism coordinator), Cesar (public administration), and Fernando (secretary). Nationalities: Ecuadorian

RICANCIE (R) (Red Indígena de Comunidades del Alto Napo para la Convivencia Intercultural y Ecoturismo/ Indigenous Network of Alto Napo Communities for the Intercultural Exchange and Ecotourism). An office based in Tena serving as a platform and network for eight Kichwa communities involved in tourism. They manage the administration and transportation to the communities. They are affiliated and work closely with FEPTCE. Interviewed: Justino (coordinator) Nationality: Ecuadorian Kichwa

6. Presenting findings

The following chapter describes the findings and analysis of the performed field study. The sections are themed by the perceived political significance, answering to the first research question of the study, and intertwined with reflections, theoretical analysis and discussion regarding underlying socio-cultural aspects of the themes, responding to the second research question. The first section is regarding ecotourism and State acknowledgement, reflecting upon parallels on other indigenous affairs and correlation with the State. Secondly, some eco-political significance is presented, with discussion regarding how the prefix of eco is an imposition from the occidente. Then, the political significance of cultural survival for the indigenous is described and how ecotourism can serve to strengthen this, but also contains risks and complex limitations. This is further discussed in two subsections, firstly looking at how being indigenous per se might limit success in an economic business company, and secondly discussing potentials and pitfalls of indigenous ecotourism supported by external or foreign organizations.

The method of intertwining data, being interview transcripts in this case, with analysis and discussion in a continuous text is justified by the qualitative character of the research (Bryman 2012, 93). The quotations from interviews are all translated by author. They are marked with the name of the interviewee, followed by the first letters of their organization in (parenthesis). Any comments from author in the interviews are between [brackets] and marked with an M-

*Only key-informant Juan Carlos doesn’t belong to an organization.*
6.1 Ecotourism and State politics

In this section, the experienced correlation between national politics and indigenous ecotourism is presented and reflected upon. Born at a grassroot level as a branch of an indigenous organization, ecotourism in this area have strong political incentives. The promotion of ecotourism as part of *Buen Vivir* is example of State mechanism to answer to indigenous resistance.

From the get-go, the inception of ecotourism in the area has had strong political connotations and incentives, correspondingly initiated and expanding with the rise of the indigenous movement. Tena is home to FOIN (Federacion de Organizaciones Indigenas del Napo), founded year 1969, as a reaction to the grand scale deforestation and other extraction of natural resources in their surrounding area. Justino (R) explains that the idea and origin of RICANCIE was born in an assembly among the leaders of FOIN in the 1970’s, organizing small indigenous communities in the vicinity to form a contestation to the intrusive oil and timber industries in the Amazonian rainforest. RICANCIE, in their inception in the 80’s and 90’s, had over 30 involved communities in the network. Initially, the projects where over-all successful, gained national and international recognition, and the communities were starting to yield some income, buying school material and clothes for the children and, according to Justino (R), empowering themselves (economically). However, after a just few years, the hope had turned into disappointment and there are currently only 8 communities left in the network, which is discussed further in section 7.3.1.

As direct political influence, the indigenous ecotourism has generated the foundation of a new sector of tourism, legally acknowledged in the Constitution and official development plans, namely *communitarian tourism*, or *communitarian based ecotourism* (CBET).

Natal (F) – “Now, we are legally recognized since 2002. We are considered one more sector of tourism in Ecuador. This doesn’t exist in other places. Because in other places, there are only two sectors. The public and the private. The public as in Ministry of Tourism, sectional governments, municipalities. And the other is the private company. In other places. However, in Ecuador there are three. Public, private, and community. Since 2002. Go figure the advances we have made here in this country!”

The exact definition of CBET is a bit fluid according to FEPTCE, due to the heterogeneity of involved communities and nationalities across the country, but essentially consists in the local,
communal involvement and equitable distribution of the generated benefits. According to MinTur, the definition is: "The community sector contributes with an integral perspective with tourism as a tool for local development oriented to Buen Vivir, equity, multiculturalism and care for the natural and cultural heritage." (PlanDeTur 2020, 97). FEPTCE is working on a national level as interlocutor, representing indigenous communities to decisionmakers, shares the perspective of the role of CBET as a political tool for indigenous communities. The interest proclaiming interests of CBET often coincide with the ample objective of indigenous movements in general.

However, with this legal facilitation, together with the previously presented promotion of ecotourism in the national plan of Buen Vivir as a sustainable alternative to natural resource extraction, the mentioned decline of tourist activity in the area seems peculiar. Several of the interviewees express frustration over the widespread failure of ecotourism in the communities and reflect upon the issue.

Juan Carlos – “If the government decided that community tourism was going to be the leading thing, there would be investment in that. Rather than financing new roads or fancy buildings.”

Justino (R) – “At a national level, you hear that tourism is a fundamental activity to develop the country. But ... But they do not provide the funds or the technical and economic resources necessary to invigorate.”

Natal (F) – “There are very good arguments and articles to develop tourism as a sector in the country. But ... There is a limitation, that is, not applying what is written. [...] So that is a limiting factor, but the policies, yes, they exist, and are very good. But simply, they are just not applied.”

The laws and rights are written and constituted, but there seems to be a discrepancy for what actually is carried out. This is not rare when looking closer at the policies of Ecuador through the perspective of the legislative promises for the indigenous. In the Constitution there are laws on rights of nature, and indigenous territorial rights. But how are they functioning de facto? Oil and mining are still priority for national revenue making without any concessions of mother nature, and the territorial rights does not concern the subsoil, so the status quo is basically maintained. The repeated re-writing of constitutions and stipulating new rights can arguably be seen from the theoretical perspective of coloniality as means of the State to answer to the social protest of the indigenous, but without actually doing anything different. When I asked what is missing for the realization of the laws, Natal thinks there is an important, missing link between the existing laws and rights and the knowledge of these.

Natal (F) – “Yes, it is lack of application, and lack of awareness among ourselves. Perhaps there are many rights that we have that we don’t know.”
Thus, this use of *occidental* laws and paragraphs works to protect *status quo* at the same time, at least discursively, tend to the protest of the *oriente*. Parallels can be drawn to the legislative promises included in the Constitution with the whole project of *Buen Vivir*. Starting with a strong indigenous movement, incorporated it into national politics, which benefitted a few, but marginalizing the majority by dispersing and weakening the social movements as such.

Natal (F) – “*And the famous Buen Vivir. That does not exist. It is only a slogan from the previous government.* […] For us, Buen Vivir is for them to leave us alone.”

Mamá Maria (A) – “*On television, everyone says Buen Vivir. That’s a lie. Lie. If it’s Buen Vivir, there would be a big project in AMUPAKIN. If it’s Buen Vivir, there would be loans for indigenous parts with low interest.*”

These described issues touch upon the complexity of realizing and operationalizing rights and laws, especially when the population whom it may concern might not be familiar to them. Tourism or not, being indigenous *per se* assumes political significance in Ecuador, and State response to indigenous requests and protests are ambiguous and withhold limiting characteristics of Hale’s “*indio permitido*”. Laws and constitutions are written, but the actual significance and applicability of these laws are questionable, reflecting the lack of strong institutions commonly seen in Ecuador and other Latin-American countries.

### 6.2 Eco-political resistance

In following section, the environmental aspect of ecotourism is analyzed, as it is concurrently an important hot topic in both national and global politics, dealing with trade-offs between ecological preservation and economic growth. The value and meaning of this can vary depending on culture and perspective, something that tends to be neglected.

Interviewed representatives of all organizations did stress and promote the role of ecotourism as a sustainable alternative for revenue making, opposed to oil extraction. Historically, RICANCIE has been involved in protest against oil exploitation in their surrounding territories of the Amazons. In the communities around Tena you frequently see flyers and signs to attract tourist to eco-lodges, eco-hostels and eco-tours. A debate regarding the definition of ecotourism, and what meaning does the prefix “eco” really means, indicating the normative discourse on nature from the dominant world view of the *occidente*. 

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Juan Carlos – “I think, unfortunately, eco-tourism, with the prefix “eco”, has been diluted. They put that to anything. The eco-traveller, eco-lodge, eco-boat, eco-plane... So, it loses the true meaning of eco, because you find it everywhere, at least here in Ecuador, it has very loosely been used for anything and nothing at the same time”

Natal (F) – "Well, the word ecotourism does not exist in our community tourism. That is, it comes from the word of the western world of eco, ecology... For us, the jungle, the Amazon [...] But rather this word comes from the academy, from the NGO's, the western world has the word as "eco" community tourism. [...] For us it means nothing! For us, we have lived thousands of years in the “eco”, as you ["ustedes"] call it. For us; the jungle, our mother earth."

The discussion of the meaning of eco will go beyond what it, as a prefix for a product or service, actually guarantees for the tourists and the occurrence of so called greenwashing11. Eco as in ecology, as a facet of sustainable development, can also be seen as a modern, imposed concern and concept from occidental world. Treating nature in a sustainable way has in many indigenous world views been persistent over history. Now, with the threat of a climate crisis and global warming, historical indigenous knowledges are being considered to be of importance for the global agenda.

An example of how the ecotourism has generated certain political significance for indigenous communities was shared by Natal (F). He explained a situation that arose while he was working as manager at a big ecododge and natural reserve (Napo Wildlife Centre), when former president Rafael Correa came for a recreational visit with his family. The indigenous community (Kichwa Añangu), population of 329 living and working around Napo Wildlife Centre, asked the president to eliminate their territory, 8000 hectares, out of the oil block number 36 of which their land belonged to, with successful result.

Natal (F) – “He took it away. Now it is gone. It is not inside that block anymore. Minus this piece, is the block [shows on a simply drawn map of the petroleum blocues on a piece of paper]. Now it is free, their territory. So, it’s political too. [...] So, then why did Correa do this?! Because the project is very successful. Because Añangu makes four million dollars each year.”

This event, albeit anecdotal, shows a form of empowerment provided to indigenous communities involved in ecotourism. However, it required the ecotourism activity to generate significant revenue, and understanding that money leads to social empowerment won’t help the majority of indigenous in the Amazons in their struggle to maintain their territories and culture. This is a narrow example of how empowerment and new political spaces can benefit a few, and with that continue to marginalize the majority. Nevertheless, ecotourism becomes political

10 "Ustedes" in Spanish refers to the personal pronoun "you" in plural.
11 A term used when businesses or organization deceptively promote products, aims or policies as environmentally friendly.
because its contestation of extractive revenue making, which has strongly been relied upon by the Ecuadorian State for a long time.

6.3 Significance of culture

Cultural survival is an expression, opposed to physical survival, meaning the preservation of indigenous identities, traditions, philosophy and world-views. This struggle is acknowledged by the public sector in Ecuador, as they are promoting cultural strengthening through programs affiliated with ecotourism. Translation of these initiatives in local reality can be somewhat problematic as the idea of culture is a rather fluid concept, and this section discusses on how and if culture be strengthened, without risking “cultural production”, mentioned in chapter 3, Previous Research.

From the public sector, MinTur has within their development program (PlanDeTur 2020, 296) launched a project (“Proyecto 3. Fortalecimiento de la identidad cultural de las nacionalidades y pueblos”, costing around 1,8 million dollars) working to strengthening the cultural identity of the various Ecuadorian nationalities through community tourism. The program has a clear objective to promote the country of Ecuador as a pluricultural tourist destination with the specific goal of “recovery, revaluation and development of pluricultural heritage (PlanDeTur 2020, 296). Application of these ideas can be contested for its genuineness, when the ancestral, traditional activities are promoted and re-brought to amuse tourists is somewhat questionable. Sandro (MinTur) is aware of the issue, explaining cases of people in indigenous communities painting their faces in a way they never had before, using candles even though they have electricity, putting on traditional clothes they normally don’t use anymore, for the tourists. This is examples of cultural production and is in the framework of the postcolonial debate very complex. It could possibly contribute to cultural empowerment and pride within indigenous communities, but it is still driven by an external, occidental request. The problem lies in how the cultural production might contribute to an emphasis of the othering in these situations mentioned by Sandro (MinTur). The social process of othering is a fundamental sociological prerequisite for continuation of racism and subjugation, as demonstrated in figure 3, section 4.2. Engaging in such activities for the sake of the tourist could lead to internalization of racist stereotypes and re-construct the coloniality of relations between the oritente and occidente.

\[12 \text{For more information: } \text{https://www.culturalsurvival.org/}\]
In this research “cultural survival” entails the opportunity, given by ecotourism, to promote and preserve the Kichwa way of well-being and medicine. The mentioned project calls for “promoting the certification of ancestral practices for community tourism” (PlanDeTur 2020, 293) and Fernando (MinTur) prompted that the involvement of ecotourism works better as complementary activity, such as in the case of Amupakin. The knowledge indigenous people have regarding plant medicine has recently come to play a significant role as an impetus for tourism. Ecuador, among other Latin American countries, has in recent years experienced a so-called “shamanic boom” (Davidov 2013,156), an immense increase of international tourist coming to the Amazons to participate in Ayahuasca ceremonies. Davidov (2013, 158) argues that “for lowlands Kichwa communities negotiating cultural survival in conjunction with a desire to be “modern” and participate in the global economy, shamanism remains a powerful, often political, symbol of the former, while simultaneously promising a lucrative gateway to the latter”. Hearing the people from (A) and Rolando (C), tourism for them supports cultural survival in the sense of economic support of their organizations, who are working with ancestral cultural knowledges and practices, as well as the recognition and validation they get from foreigners for their knowledges. Due to the previous mentioned perceived lack of State support, they have strong invested feelings about tourism in regards to their culture.

Rolando (C) – “We want to value our heritage and cultural identity. We do not want the things of our ancestors to be lost. We will try to overcome in this. […] So for me the relation is, if there are no tourist, there is nothing. Without tourist, we wouldn’t know... Now, we have, so we can survive.”

Antonio (A) – “So, the point is... All that is AMUPKAIN, and the mamás, exist because of foreign support.”

In the interviews, the participators are asked if they themselves see any risks with the involvement of ecotourism, and much discussion revolves around the views of the mixing of culture that seems inevitable in the globalized world of today, and whether this could be a threat for the survival of Kichwa culture.

Rolando (C) – “No, look, well, about this, we are not so ... So selfish. Selfish means petty, that we do not want. No, come! And between us we’ll talk, have conversations, right. Come, and exchange of ideas, come exchange of knowledge. Having this intimate relationship, where we connect and understand the foundations.”

Mamá Maria (A) – “Yes, maintain [the culture]. But we also have to receive. To learn. Some things that you [“ustedes”] also know. Also share. I agree with this.”

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13 Psychoactive beverage from a plant growing in the Amazon region, traditionally used for healing and spiritual connection in indigenous ancient culture.
These thoughts resemble to the ideas of intercultural communication, meaning the natural process of hybridization of cultures in a globalized world. It is rare to see a culture be naturally preserved and unaffected by the surrounding world. Then worry comes with the notion of one culture being too dominant and overtaking others, where cultural homogenization becomes a force driven by unequal societal power-relations. The Ecuadorian Ministry of Culture and Heritage had a project with the mamás of AMUPAKIN, where their ancestral fables were translated and written down in Spanish and English and released as a book, possible for online purchases, with the earnings going to the organization fund. The mamás took much pride in this, and this example constitutes of a cross-cultural collaboration with lesser impositions coming from the colonial relations, leading to a more empowering result. There are arguably no need for cultural homogenization, with enough cross-cultural understanding, coexistence is within the realm of possibility. Antonio (A), further analyzed this issue and comes to the conclusion that this complex situation of maintaining a culture is contradictory:

Antonio (A) – “The matter of tourism, it helps.... To have several things, material and economic. An economically stable position to live. Within the occidente world, within the community: [ ... ] Our way of life, our own architecture. And the houses. Yes, that is kept. Yes. But the real goal ... Of our grandparents, I always express myself that way, saying our grandparents and our parents. That ... We get to have better living place. Better house, more comfortable. With light, water, bathrooms... Development. Within the community, the family. They seek for this. The mamás seek for this. Because they say this. That’s why I always say that things that I often say, of my life in the life of the communities, are contradictory. Because we want to protect, keep them. But they also want to live with comforts, physical things, materialistic things. Not because it’s wrong. Because they want life to be better. [M- Is it contradictory?] Yes. It is contradictory, in the ways that we say: ay, maintain our culture, our cosmovision, our ancestors blah blah blah”.

This reasoning is understandable, but reflecting upon the postcolonial debate, it is questionable if it has to be perceived as contradictory. Human beings in general tend to desire some sort of growth or improvement for the better, but what this growth, or development, consists of, could vary depending on culture and ideologies. However, the consumerist culture of the occidente seems to have an immense force of attraction. The thought of universalism, popular among critics of the theories, apply very well here, referring to the universal, human desire to wanting to improve the life and situation for ourselves, our family and our community. Reflecting upon this contributes to the discussion of how much agency globalization of consumerist capitalist culture has from above, and how much of it oblige to the greed of human nature, and how much cultural world-views matters in integrating to the global system.
6.3.1 Entrepreneurial illiteracy

This section lifts the found statements in the study discussing imbedded cultural limitations for indigenous people to conduct successful ecotourism businesses. Even with new official sector of communitarian ecotourism, several interviewees state that the activity still has to be seen as a corporate business concern.

The widespread disillusionment of indigenous communities is brought up in several interviews, who have been excited to join and prepare their home for the tourist, who never comes. As mentioned, the CBET around Tena experienced a boom in the 90’s, and many communities wanted to join in on the prosperity. The volatility of the tourism industry, along with the decline of interest and incline of communities signing up for tourism, and the imbalance in supply and demand has resulted in many abandoned cabanas, built for lodging tourists. To explain this failure further, beyond the previously mentioned lack of government support, some cultural aspects has to be taken into account.

One reason that hampers the opportunity for the communities to be successful with CBET is according to several interviewees the fact that too many communities offer the exact same experience. Representatives from (MinTur), (R) and (F) discuss the lack of understanding for the importance of differentiation and competitiveness of a product. (R) is working actively with this issue, trying to promote different “packages” for the visiting tourist, such as “nature and rafting”, “relaxing and spirituality” or “health and shamanism”. Natal (F) describes some other factors that are lacking in order for the communities to be successful, and mention things such as: lacking sufficient infrastructure and comforts for the “demanding tourist”, the long list of demands to be legally recognized by MinTur, not doing enough promotion, lacking of business leadership and so on. In general, the main reason for the failures seems to be the lack of entrepreneurial thinking among the indigenous communities, according to several interviewees:

Cesar (MinTur) – “I would say that it is something cultural. That it’s distinctly cultural. And ... A lack of business vision. [...] I think that studying is not a determining factor to say that success cannot be achieved. It is my opinion in that part. But rather, it is a bit of the cultural part that... They don’t ... Want to do it.”

Natal (F) – “We do not handle money very well. [...] It’s lack of ... Knowledge, leadership, within the communities. This is our fault, basically...”

These mentioned traits observed among indigenous communities are fundamentally opposed to what is needed for profiting and succeeding in a capitalist society. There seems to
be this glass ceiling for the potential success for indigenous people, as they are not culturally prone to these entrepreneurial requirements in running a successful business. Natal (F) explains the hardships of economic management in indigenous communities straightforwardly: “because you know, the money is not ours. Money is an imposition that comes from the occidente world.” As stated by many scholars, capitalist globalization requires social stratification, and the group on the bottom might constitute of those who are mostly culturally wired against the “efficiency” of consumerism based on economic growth depending on extraction of natural resources. Understanding this dilemma could help to understand the reported overrepresentation of indigenous people under extreme poverty line, when the global system as such is discriminating other values, cultures and ways of life.

6.3.2 NGO’s and international support

Building upon the discussion from foregoing section regarding the cultural barriers for the indigenous to successfully manage an ecotourism business, this section analyses the occurrence of consolidation and mergers by external actors and the implications of such.

Communities involved in ecotourism that reportedly gained success all share a common, pivotal trait. They are, or have been founded, supported and/or managed by an NGO. Several interviewees (Carlos, R, MinTur) and a visit to the organization AMUPAKIN describes the problem for the communities not being able to manage and administer the tourism endeavor without external help.

Juan Carlos – ”The Achuar say they want to do everything, they want to do the marketing, the administration, the operations... But also in the learning path, they come to realize there is strategic partnerships.”

Support and collaboration is highly desired among communities, but the pitfall is the creation of dependency, which can hamper true empowerment for the communities. This shows a complexity of the issue, with the discussion going beyond the matter of NGO-support being good or bad. It depends. An example of this is described in the following scenario:

The construction of the buildings where the mamás of (A) work, was founded by the Spanish Red Cross. They built large cement buildings with sterile interior design in the midst of the Amazonian jungle, despite strong protest from the both from the locals and mamás, who desperately wanted the houses to be built according to ancestral architecture. This is for them essential, when they in their ancestral clay-houses feel more connected to mother earth, which
facilitates their medicinal healing treatments. Today the main house with shining tiles is dusty and almost abandoned.

Mamá Mariluz (A) – “The project was requested with infrastructure of this area, local architecture. But the red cross of Spain said; No! With that it will not last. Better with cement. And well, the mamás; no, we do not want that, we want this. But they ... As they were the ones who were financing, they said we do what we want. And the mamás cried; We do not want this! But ok. As it is not our money, they are doing us as they want. But ok. They stayed with that.”

This paternalistic behavior from the occidente raises an ontological and epistemological discussions in the sphere of medicine and technology, connected to culture and tradition. How incoherent it might sound, whether tile or clay floors are better for health-care practice depends on who you ask, and how one defines “better”. According to Red Cross, their construction for health maintenance more developed and enhanced in comparison with the one asked for in the oriente. They presumably wanted to provide them the best, most modern constructions, for the sake of optimizing good health. But the result, as the Red Cross left the project some years after, is money not so well spent, as the local needs and requests were foreseen.

However, representatives of (A) and (C) express gratitude to foreign help and support, where the public sector fails to do so. Previous example does not mean that the work of NGO’s or international aid is contra-productive in general, but calls for the reflection against the postcolonial debate and the coloniality of reality, as it reproduces the notion of one world-view as the correct one in a paternalistic manner. A crucial factor to enable genuine beneficial use of NGO’s and ecotourism is the importance of providing support where and how the locals wish to be supported. As Johnston (2000, 95) puts it ”for sustainable "ecotourism" to become a reality, governments and multilateral organizations need to listen to indigenous peoples and adjust their funding priorities and work programmes accordingly”. Emphasis lies on the concept of collaboration, the case above shows the need for intercultural and cross-cultural communication in order to prevent limitations for empowerment for the indigenous organizations when being supported by NGO’s.
7. Conclusions

This chapter is dedicated for summarizing, conclude and discuss the performed research, directly answering to the guiding research questions of the thesis. The in-depth analysis of the involvement in ecotourism by indigenous communities, was used as an example field to scrutinize the social reality lived by the indigenous in the Ecuadorian Amazons. Applying sociological norm criticism to current consensus is crucial to understand the socio-political effects of existing hierarchy of world-views and truths. This enabled to generate better understanding of historical and contextual social relations of indigenous people living in the area, who are compelled to participate in the global system but also appear to inhibit restraints of doing so successfully.

The political significance of ecotourism in indigenous communities is perceived in several perspectives, primarily for the notion that indigenous identity as such carries political weight. Regarding indigenous ecotourism and State politics; the discursive progress on a national level such as the promotion of Buen Vivir with ecotourism contains, beyond inspirational rhetorical outlooks, limitation in the local realities. The study suggests that the issue lies in the discrepancy between the writing of such clauses, and their implementation. This is affected by the hierarchy of knowing and lack of cross-cultural understanding, but also reflects institutional weaknesses of the country. Contributing to a more ecologically sustainable revenue-making, opposed to the lucrative extraction of natural resources, is also political. As described in section 7.2, indigenous people have been able to defend their homelands against oil exploitation through ecotourism. Strengthening the indigenous culture by providing economic support and international awareness for the communities and organizations involved in the preservation of ancestral tradition through ecotourism also holds socio-political significance. However, despite the “altruistic image of eco-tourism” (Johnston 2000, 90), the tourism business represents the consumerist capitalist culture, the dominant culture of growth-obligated, profit driven globalized system, established on exploiting the vulnerable. Ecotourism is part of the expansion of capitalist globalization, as the economic activity but also as cultural influence, which too has political significance. Knowing that the monetary system is an imposition can contribute to understanding the social meaning behind the poverty statistics presented in section 1.2, indicating indigenous exclusion of the global capitalist system. This conclusion is based on the socio-cultural impediments the indigenous face presented in the study, together with the notion of the immense heterogeneity within the category “indigenous people” in Ecuador but
also globally, yet still sharing this common trait of poverty.

Following conclusions are based on analysis of what was uncovered by adding the second research question of the study into the equation. Ecotourism projects with the indigenous that assimilates well to business logic and/or that are supported by NGO’s, is seemingly where it can benefit the indigenous communities. The study presents some more and some less empowering examples of collaboration in the case of AMUPAKIN. But the dependency on external support, including tourism, risks generating neo-colonial relations. Building upon the ideas of the “*indio permitido*” (Hale 2004), the question is how beneficial can ecotourism then really be if it benefits the assimilated few, on the expense of the majority and thus hampers progress of genuine and fundamental equity for the indigenous communities. However, the discussion goes beyond whether ecotourism is good or bad for the indigenous communities, but rather demonstrates the persistent coloniality of reality which implies limitations for their cultural survival and development.

Striving for cultural survival and simultaneously living to improve their situations, as well as avoiding internalization of racism with cultural production, is a difficult dilemma. The dichotomy of indigenous and non-indigenous, *oriente* and *occidente*, is arguably needed to highlight ongoing structural discrimination rooted in the coloniality of social reality, but it is also risky business. It may cause overlooking common, universal traits and desires of human beings, and over-categorization may lead to presumptions and stereotyping. But listening to the participants of the study using this dichotomy in their way of describing reality, comes to show that the distinction, for them, is real. For closure, this study shows that the structural social issues that marginalize the indigenous, in the ecotourism sector and beyond, is the persistent coloniality of social reality and lack of skilled cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication implies understanding, respecting and including views and knowledges of local, marginalized groups of varied nationalities and cultures. This is crucial for developing sustainable and non-exploitative ecotourism projects, but also an important aspect in building political designs and public policies, such as *Buen Vivir*, as well as for implementing the United Nations global project of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.
8. References

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