A Reflection on *How Forests Think*[1]

Eduardo Kohn and Manari Ushigua

What does it mean to think with a forest? How is this done? And why?

I reflect here on these questions on the occasion of the Spanish translation of *How Forests Think*, and I have invited the Sapara leader Manari Ushigua to comment. This is part of a wider conversation we have been building over the last few years in our attempt to develop new forms of thinking for these times. As Manari says, our exchange of ideas is a form of reciprocal healing (*pariyumanda ambinakuna*). Dialogue, he says, is the medicine we offer each other; it acts as a means of mutual orientation. His words appear in italics, and alternate with my own text. At times, they serve as affirmations or clarifications; at other moments, they let the ideas at hand take on different paths. They fall on the text as a shadow. They are adumbrations of how thoughts from the oneiric world can guide us.

How Forests Think is a philosophical endeavor, given that it seeks to radically represent how we think as we face the current epoch, which some have named the "Anthropocene"; an epoch marked not only by unprecedented climate change that we human beings (or, at least some of us—the so-called "moderns") have set in motion, but also by all the ecological and social fragmentations that these processes of change bring.

In the everyday world, people do not yet realize what is going on with the planet, but when we take aya waska, *the spirits* (tsawanu) *say, "the Earth can no longer stand it. It is tired. You are too many. If you do not change, the Earth itself, the waters, the earthquakes will kill you." The message they give us is that if we want to continue living, we have to learn how to think and to live in a new manner. For example, you, Eduardo, you take tobacco to speak about these things. That is how people in the future will do it. Your book points to a change in the form of our work and our speech, and also in the form of our study. We begin to touch, we can say, a future. And that future is already here. Climate change is pressuring us to begin living*

1 This text is a translation of the introduction, written in dialogue with Manari Kaji Ushigua, to the Spanish translation of Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). The contribution of Ushigua—shaman and leader of the Sapara people—appears in italics.

the future in this moment.

My goal with this book has been to show that there is a way of thinking—of creating concepts—with the very concepts that are born from the living world; from that world called "forest" in English, *sacha* in kichwa, *naku* in the Sapara language.

When I walk in the forest, I feel a strong pressure to begin thinking in a new way. And your book is like a door that opens us to that new way of thinking. We are always creating concepts with the forest. For example, we can say that the Naku project—which serves to allow people from the outside to learn, with the help of the Sapara, to harmonize with the thoughts of the forest—is itself a philosophy. Inside, in the forest, you know, we talk about how to use tobacco, about how to connect with the spirit realm through dreams and walks in the forest, and about how to understand things from the point of view of the spirit realm. And this is important because today we think too much from the material world. With everything that is going on with our planet, we have to remember once again how to live with the spiritual world. So, what we see with this example is the creation of a concept; it is a way of understanding life. And this concept has a life of its own. It is a spirit, a God (Pyatsaw)*, a child that grows little by little, if we nurture it properly.*

How Forests Think is a work of metaphysical speculation, which tries to create the conceptual tools necessary to produce a radical turn of mind—a *tyam*, as people say in Kichwa. Thus, this book is a political intervention. It sheds light on the urgent need to start thinking in this other way, and of doing so for the good of all the beings, human and non-human, that form part of our vast living network; an ecological web that is at once astonishing, fragile and, in general, invisible. This book argues that this is the only way of realizing the true *sumak kawsay* (harmonious, or "good," living).

Sumak kawsay *is a concept that comes from the spirit realm and points to the importance of being in balance with the world of the forest. When we accomplish this equilibrium, we can act with respect towards others, recognizing that the forest has its own life and its own way of helping us and all other living beings. We, the Saparas, deepen our knowledge of this concept by means of Kamungwi. Kamungwi is an enormous forest in the middle of our territory where our ancestors were born. By means of our relationship with this space, we are thinking a great deal about how to create concepts for understanding each other better, for relating to the forest and for connecting this knowledge with the wider world. Our aim is not to harmonize our life in the material world by intervening in a direct way. That would be a bit difficult. Life, rather, finds its own balance when we lie down and, by means of dreams, enter the spirit realm. That is where our bodies find their own equilibrium between the spirit realm and the material world. And with this balance, our materialist desires—of always wanting more and more, without rest—will appease themselves. Coming into balance, we will find enough to live well.*

Sumak kawsay, then, is not simply the pursuit of a "*buen vivir*" (literally, a good life), contrary to

this phrase's usual translation—and domestication—in the Ecuadorian state's discourses. Rather, it is a way of giving attention to the special properties and qualities of life itself—*kawsay*—in order to find within it a way of living well; it is an engagement with an ethical orientation that itself comes from the living world. Although it takes a whole book to explain, for now I can say that this ethical orientation can be seen in a forest when we achieve the capacity to think with it in a manner that reflects the form of the forest's own thinking. The thoughts that a forest generates come in the form of images. And an image, be it sharp or blurry, "good" or "bad," has the ontological property of a simple totality whose holistic quality, in formal terms, is harmonious, or *sumak* in Kichwa. Connecting with these sylvan thoughts and appreciating how they are reflected in our own thinking requires that we also think by means of images. This is why, as people from the Amazon like Manari emphasize, entering the world of dreams, that oneiric sphere of associative images, is so important for achieving a connection with the forest's thinking.

We connect to the forest through our dreams. Dreams are persons, and they come to tell us what seems to them to be amiss in our ways of being. That is why it is very important to connect with them. That is how we, the Saparas, ask the owners of the animals for permission to hunt. The same thing happens with the fish and the plants that we use, and the same thing happens with the rivers, given that as humans we have always to act with them in mind. Your book talks about how these beings think. It has the aim of creating the kinds of connections we can have with them.

Sumak kawsay, in this sense, is a call for finding a path to live well, which draws from the particular way in which a forest—that dense ecology of beings, wherever it may be found—has the capacity to manifest the topological harmony of a simple totality of some kind. Thanks to its vital density, the Amazon's tropical forests, along with those who live with them, give expression to this totality in a manner that is unequaled on this planet. I want to make clear, however, that all of us live surrounded by forests (those that hold and sustain us, those inside us, and those we brush by everyday) and so that all of us, and not only the people of the Amazon, are "people of the forest." To learn once again to think with the forest is a first step toward "ecologizing" our ethics. This is the real spirit of *sumak kawsay*.

Sumak kawsay contrasts with the "modernizing" ethic that has marked us and our whole planet over recent generations. This ethic is the opposite of what is harmonious: it is, to put it in a single word, fragmentary. Its end is to achieve a good life for some human beings at the expense of transforming all other beings into objects—fragments—whose only function is to serve as resources to that end.

How Forests Think is a call to remember who we have always been and, in this way, also a call to realize the possibility that our life be continuous with the life that sustains us in a liveable present. That is to say, it is a call to remember a manner of living that lets itself be guided by a prior living form that

feeds us. As the Saparas highlight, the reality that sustains all life is in its essence "spiritual" (*tsawanu* in the Sapara language).[1]

Tsawanu, for us, is a spirit. We humans have tsawanu. All the plants, the very forest, and even the Earth have a tsawanu, a spirit. By means of our tsawanu—the invisible part of our life—we connect with the other beings on Earth. In the material world, beings appear to be very different. For example, some beings, like humans or birds, move. Water also moves. It is a person and therefore it has tsawanu, like us. Others, like plants and the Earth itself, remain still. Nevertheless, they sleep, and they wake, and therefore also have tsawanu. So, there is not too much difference.

This spiritual life is the plane of the *sachaguna*, the beings of the forest, whose totality we can at times see in its simple beauty by means of dreams, visions, and also through long walks through the forests and other "ecologies of beings" that still, despite multiple threats, continue to endure on our planet. To connect with the spiritual life that emerges with life itself is essential for the good life; without this connection, we fall into an existential abyss. This is why our ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis.

In the contemporary world, we value only one part of our life, which is the material part, the visible part, the part that you can touch. But the invisible part, which is the most important, we have forgotten. This is the spiritual part—our vital connection with the living tsawanu. The climate crisis is a spiritual crisis given that we have forgotten the living tsawanu that connects us to all other beings. The first step for making a new connection with our spiritual side is to remember our dreams. With How Forests Think*, we ask that you read, that you wake up, and that you begin to dream.*

An endeavor like this book is of course speculative given that its end is to imagine a possible future. But its form of speculation is special because it is born from the empirical—that is to say, from the everyday, from the earthly and from lived and shared experience. This is due to the fact that my profession, anthropology, is an empirical science. Anthropology encompasses its central question—What does it mean to be human?—not from the philosopher's armchair, but through a reflection on how we, the researchers, are affected by our deep cohabitation with the beings that live in the very places where we work. We find this opening in the field thanks to our main method: ethnography. By ethnography I refer to a set of technologies for slowing down and freeing up thought through a deep and sustained engagement with, and attention to, a place and the ways of thinking it holds. This engagement is undertaken with a view to understanding how the kind of thinking that emerges ethnographically displaces and deforms

1 Mauricio Castillo, Javier Felix, Carlos Mazabanda, Mario Melo, Maria Moreno de los Rios, Roberto Narvaez, Belen Paez, and Manari Ushigua, *La Cultura Sapara en Peligro ¿Otro sueño es posible? La lucha de un pueblo por su supervivencia frente a la explotación petrolera* (Quito: Terra Mater, la Nación Sapara del Ecuador y NAKU, 2016), 7-10.

the ways I customarily think, with the goal of finding ways to work with that transformation.

We have lost the art of listening. Now the first thing we do when something appears before us is to take a picture. The cell phone has changed us entirely, but if, seeing a bird fly, you stop and begin to look without trying to capture it with a picture, that is another form of listening; it is even a form of greeting it. In this book, you speak about how to listen and how to work with this kind of listening. In this way, you are recovering something that we used to practice in the past and that the Sapara continue doing today. We will see how this practice of listening evolves. In the work we do, we will have to learn to be more sensitive to be able to listen to what the spirit realm tells us.

By listening, I am not referring to the act of hearing well, but to something more radical. Ethnographic listening is a practice that seeks to open us to the unexpected, leaving aside the usual schemas with which we think. What do we learn from listening in this way? Putting this method into practice in the middle of a tropical forest—that vast network of living and thinking beings—the ethnographic practice of listening changes. In entering the everyday world of the residents of Ávila, the Kichwa-speaking Runa community in the Ecuadorian Amazon where this research was carried out, one can realize that this world also comprises beings of another kind—that it involves plants, animals and even "spirits," the *sachaguna*, who also people the world we call the "forest." When we learn to listen alongside the Ávila Runa to these beings, our ethnographic methods change; when we listen to what these beings have to say, moreover, what it means to be human also changes. If we are capable of thinking with other kinds of beings, then what kinds of beings are we? This book seeks to think and work with this cosmic opening.

As I mentioned earlier, my work is speculative. My question is: What if the residents of the Amazon with whom I have learned to open myself up to these forests are right, and the forest really does think? Some Amazonian communities have wagered a whole form of life on this audacious idea, which, as we have begun to recognize, contains a real planetary hope. And some, like the People of Sarayaku and the Sapara Nation, with whom I have collaborated in the last few years, have decided, as part of a politics that is local and cosmic at the same time, to bring this speculative message to a wider public.

This is evident in the *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) declaration of the People of Sarayaku.[2] In contrast to the western vision, which treats natural spaces as simple, inert funds of material resources to be used for the single benefit of human beings, *Kawsak Sacha* proposes that the so-called "natural" world is composed entirely of living selves—persons—and by the communicative relations that they maintain with each other and with us. This is a radical document, but not because of its content. These

2 Pueblo de Sarayaku, "Declaración Kawsak Sacha—Selva viviente, ser vivo y conciente, sujeto de derechos," Retrieved from https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Kawsak-Sacha_Declaracion-español.pdf (2018).

concepts are shared by a great number of Amazonian peoples and are well known to anthropologists. What makes this document radical is the fact that it offers itself as a concrete political proposal that aims to confront the current problems of the world where we live, wagering that by adopting them and transforming our laws and public policies accordingly, we can achieve a good living-in-harmony; the true meaning of *sumak kawsay*.

Sumak Kawsay and the Kawsak Sacha declaration, from my point of view, transform the very manner in which we relate to the other inhabitants of our world. Thanks to this transformation, we can balance out our emotions and that is where the true sumak kawsay appears. In connecting with the spirit realm and with the forest itself, we will achieve a change in our ways of acting, our forms of understanding other people and even our forms of government.

If my empirical form of philosophical speculation takes recourse to a form of speculation that is already present in the conceptual work of the various people with whom I am working, this is due to the fact that everyday life is already composed of a form of speculation that is present in the world we call the "forest." With this in mind, one of the characters in the novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers observes:

> Trees are doing science. Running a billion field tests. They make their conjectures, and the living world tells them what works. Life is speculation, and speculation is life. What a marvelous word! It means to guess. It also means to mirror.[3]

Life itself is a form of speculation. It involves a series of "wild" guesses about the world that tells us something about the double meaning of the word "speculation," as Powers underscores. Speculation about a possible world is a guess that emerges from seeing a reflection (as if in a mirror) of the set of living networks that make life possible, which is harmonious and therefore beautiful (*sumak*). It is in this double sense that my anthropological work is speculative. That is to say, my aim as an anthropologist is, first, to develop technologies of access for listening to these messages such that they can be reflected by my own thinking and, second, to look for a way of casting this "sylvan guess" back into the world.

Although I appear to be the author of the sylvan thoughts contained in this book, their true authors are those who think with forests and, beyond them, the forests themselves—forests that think through them and us. My goal is simply, in whatever ways I can, to tune into these messages and to serve as their humble emissary.

When we talk about the forest, we cannot say, "This is my story. This is what I wrote. These are my

3 Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 454.

*ideas," because the true keepers of knowledge (*yachak*) that live in the forest, those who have their roots in the Earth, the beings of the forest (*sachaguna*), owners of the trees, they do not like it when we speak that way. They are listening to us and they do not want us to think that our human thoughts come only from us. These are not our ideas, but theirs. Instead, we have to let the thoughts of a living forest pass through us so that they may reach others. The beings of the forest are offering us these thoughts so that we may live together. And for you, when thinking them, when dreaming and when taking aya waska, what they tell you bursts itself out in your writing* (kilkashkangui kanga).

It is one thing to open up to a "sylvan" form of thinking, and another to look for the words and concepts that can communicate this thinking in a manner that can be transformative. Along these lines, I have begun to think of my work as an instance of what Bruno Latour would call cosmic "diplomacy."[4] That is to say, I use the ethnographic method, based in participant observation, to arrive at a conceptual frame through which various actors, be they shamans, biologists or lawyers, can understand their respective worlds in new ways, thanks to a series of emergent concepts that are born from these worlds but cannot be reduced to any single one of them.

Concepts should not come from the point of view of a single individual, but from the points of view that arise from the work of many people, many cultures, and even many nations. The important thing is that knowledge be born of plurality. Only when that happens, are we really going to know toward what direction we want to walk.

The aim of this "diplomacy" is to understand how we form part of a single, emergent world, and in this way come to recognize that the good of this emergent and shared world is what unites us and guides us in a common struggle to maintain the source of that emergence: the living forest (*kawsak sacha*) that gives us life.

For us, indigenous peoples who hunt in the forest, it is part of our everyday responsibility to do cosmic diplomacy with the spirit realm. The tsawanu of the forest impose rules on us. They do not always like human presence in their midst and sometimes they even want to kill us. So, we have to speak with them directly and make them understand why we need to hunt in order to keep on living. And that is a very delicate thing to handle. They tell us that there is no respect for the Earth, that the spirit of the Earth feels very angry with what we human beings do. So we have to do ceremonies, enter the spirit realm and establish a conversation with the beings that live there, to put them at ease. It is very important to do diplomacy with the spirits, but we are not only doing diplomacy with the spirits of plants or of the forest or of the Earth itself; we also have to do diplomacy with our own lives, with our own spirit. Because sometimes our spirit also begins to take its

4 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

own decisions, saying: "Look, this body is of no use to me. I am already on my way out." Some people have died in their sleep like this. They die, and they do not wake up anymore. That is how, sometimes, we have to do diplomacy to continue to be connected with our own bodies.

The specific diplomatic effort of *How Forests Think* is directed toward the set of assumptions that form the metaphysical foundation of the West, from which the natural sciences and the humanities are born, and which informs also the political and economic vision that has brought us to this slow ecological cataclysm at a planetary level. If I had written this book for the Ávila Runa, the Sarayaku Runa or the Sapara, I would not have given it the same title. They already know how to think with forests and why. This book has another public in mind. Its goal is to deform anthropological and biological knowledge, and to put these in dialogue with the kind of knowledge that emerges from a living, and therefore thinking, forest.

This has been a difficult endeavor and it has required the development of a technical argument to envision a natural and human science that can be called "psychedelic." The word "psychedelic" seems appropriate to me as a name for this emergent science inspired by the living forest. The Greek etymology of this term (*psyche*: breath, spirit, mind, plus *deluon*: to manifest) sheds light on the way in which the ecological web of beings that are living (*kawsak*), and thinking (*yuyayuk)*, and that form the forest (*sacha*), manifest, or rather, open us (*paskarina*) to a kind of emergent mind. This mind, in Amazonian terms, can be understood as spirit (*amu, tsawanu, yuyay*) and, in shamanistic terms, one can make a connection with it by way of the breath (*samay*).

Thinking in a psychedelic way opens us to the psychedelic thoughts that emerge in the living world. This lets us discover the larger 'I' from which we come, the one that arises when we let the smaller, individual and human, 'I' die. It is toward this emergent 'I' that we once more have to orient ourselves. I hope that this book may serve in some way for the realization of this end.

When you take aya waska, you see patterns or designs (muru), *and each one of those patterns is a door that you can open, through which you can pass and by means of which you can explore and learn. You learn about your life and about the world, and, after some time, that door closes and another one opens. If you take aya waska many times you can understand something wider, the* kawsana yachay *(knowledge of life); you can understand what is happening with the world, and then the mind—*tak*—it closes, and you come out again. We don't always achieve an understanding of that opening. Sometimes, our bodies get frightened, and we wish to return very quickly.*

We are like Pyatsaw. We are makers of spirits. Even right now, in this conversation, we are entering into some of those small patterns (muru), *but we are not completely conscious that we are doing so. However, tonight, we will dream it. That is how the spirit realm works. Your questions in this world have their answers*

*in the tsawanu world, and the questions from the tsawanu world have their answers in the material world. Thinking like this we make ourselves wise (*yachak*). That is how to open yourself with aya waska. But we also open ourselves every night by means of our dreams, and dreaming is something that all the beings on the Earth do.*

*When we see things too much from the material point of view, our thoughts remain closed. In the old times (*kallari uras*), the first people* (*the* kallari runa) *were very open. They lived like the tsawanu. Today, we are more closed, though we are beginning to open the doors again. Little by little we are opening ourselves. With this book we are opening ourselves, again, little by little. When we think, our custom (as human beings) is to arrive at a conclusion. Seen from the spirit world, arriving at a conclusion is like closing a door. With this book, you opened many doors, and they remain open still. You have found a way to conclude, but with general ideas, which keeps our thinking open, allowing for more questions and thoughts to come. You and I are working through these things with tobacco and in this way each "written child" (*kilkashka wawa*)—given that concepts are born and are raised and nourished like children—will live with the spirits. In this way, people will go on reading and reading, and, little by little, understanding and understanding this book. At first, they are going to think that it is difficult to understand, but they will go on reading, and on a third reading the thoughts will make the readers start dreaming, and in this way, the ideas will take a life of their own.*