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Autonomy, productiveness, and community: the rise of inequality in an Amazonian society

Natalia Buitron *London School of Economics and Political Science*

In Amazonian societies, autonomy is said to be a core value motivating egalitarian politics. This article shows how the quest for autonomy and productiveness presently sets in motion processes that encroach upon these very values. Among the Shuar of Amazonian Ecuador, the realization of autonomy and productiveness increasingly depends on the capture of state resources. Shuar interact with the local state as members of relatively recent sedentary communities and through the mediation of elected leaders. In these processes, 'community' itself is transformed: being a channel to regenerate domestic livelihoods, it also becomes an end in itself, giving rise to new economistic attitudes while legitimizing inequalities between commoners and leaders. The article suggests that the pursuit of autonomy and productiveness within a process of village formation is central to the transformation of egalitarianism that occurs when small-scale Amazonian polities engage with nation-state politics.

On a Sunday morning in 2012, Tiwiram[1] took Silverio and me for a tour around his family's garden to show us the different varieties of tropical vines that he cultivated with his wife. The Shuar – who form the largest of the Chicham-speaking[2] conglomeration living on both sides of the Amazonian border between Ecuador and Peru – use these vines in psychotropic vision quests which grant their seekers a heightened sense of purpose, power, and predictions for the future. Silverio is a Shuar education officer in charge of designing curricula to improve the career prospects of indigenous youths. Tiwiram is a renowned shaman who fights for Shuar territorial self-determination. Patting a thick vine with his hands, Tiwiram said, 'This kind of ayahuasca allows you to see your future career. It shows you if you are going to be a schoolteacher, a politician, an engineer, anything. Once it shows you your life, there is no return'. Perceiving a hint of fatalism in Tiwiram's words, I asked him to tell us more about the career prospects he had in mind. 'It's all the same these days', he answered, staring intently at the badge from the education's ministry on Silverio's shirt:

> Schools now prepare us for peonage. [Once they graduate], we tell our children to find jobs because we want development. Our authorities give us money and contracts. It's nonsense. Why can't we just

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> make our own way and create our own forms of work? Maybe it's not worth it to lose our freedom for a salary, to be on a contract. It's called progress, but really it is slavery!

As Silverio and I left, we talked about what Tiwiram had said. Taking a more pragmatic stance, Silverio told me that Tiwiram may well see it that way but, as a leader, he is also aware that that's exactly what his fellows want. 'Shuar want projects, contracts, and public works, and this is how, as leaders, we can bring development to the communities'. Like Silverio, many Shuar are passionate about developing their villages by equipping them with roads, high schools, infirmaries, football pitches, electricity, bridges, and all the amenities of development available in big market towns. In their view, all these public works and services are means to further their own autonomy and productiveness. However, the development of villages is made possible through deals with the state which impose new forms of authority and control on Shuar villagers.

Autonomy and productiveness are core values animating Shuar ideas of the good life. Autonomy means both the capacity to live with a measure of economic sufficiency and the freedom to live and work as one wishes within one's territory, without following external orders. Productiveness means fecundity and prosperity: the power or efficacy to regenerate the vital resources that allow one and one's family to live contentedly. Leaders must show commitment to local autonomy. Shuar trust that elected leaders will be able to funnel external resources so that people can live well: that is, autonomously, shaping their own livelihoods and existences while laying claim to wealth historically controlled by the *apach*, as Shuar call mestizo people. Leaders are expected to stake a strong claim to state resources and to redistribute them among their people while keeping the government at bay, taming its voracity, preventing it from further encroaching on native territory and undermining Shuar ways of life. To do this, leaders like Silverio spend a great deal of their time attending meetings, writing petitions, signing agreements, and negotiating deals to procure projects and state contracts. That morning in the garden, as Tiwiram reflected on the visions of new professions and careers, his words encapsulated the core contradiction of the Shuar struggle for autonomy. This contradiction is particularly acute for leaders such as Silverio. In the pursuit of autonomy, they not only become full-time, salary-dependent, and subordinate workers, but, as we shall see, they simultaneously undermine the autonomy of their people.

In this article, I explore the dilemma of pursuing well-being through resources that threaten personal autonomy. Why, I ask, do people who value autonomy end up accepting processes that encroach upon this very value? The thrust of my argument is that Shuar accept this form of encroachment because the practices and attitudes required to pursue community development gradually redefine their cherished values of autonomy and productiveness. While historically anchored in relations of mutuality, the pursuit of autonomy becomes increasingly dependent on contractual relations predicated on hierarchy and control. Crucially, the attainment of well-being becomes gradually attached to the development of public services and facilities provided by the state through the mediation of elected leaders. As a result, people more willingly cede control over the tempo, organization, and goals of productive work to supra-domestic bodies, in stark contrast with the ethos of self-sufficiency that has historically characterized subsistence production in autonomous domestic units.

These developments complicate our stereotypical understandings of traditionally egalitarian postcolonial Amazonian societies. Classical studies of sociality and power relate Amerindians' expressed preference for the autonomy of persons and small kin groups to their egalitarian political ethos, which, following Clastres (1989), is commonly described as 'anti-state'. In this view, Amazonian leaders are essentially stripped of any real power to impose their will on others, because the values and institutions of their societies systematically undermine the accumulation and/or centralization of power. The prevalence of autonomy and equality are evident in the way native Amazonians organize productive processes. It is argued that the autarkic quality of domestic production fundamentally circumscribes the exercise of political power (Brown 1993: 310). Barring the sexual division of labour, individuals benefit from direct access to the means of production. Similarly, everyone can master the generative skills and life-giving techniques that guarantee everyday sustenance. As Descola put it with reference to the Shuar's neighbours, the Ecuadorian Achuar, '[N]o supralocal authority or mediation could ever threaten the privilege the members of a household enjoy of reproducing their own symbolic capacities of intervening in nature' (1996: 327). A concern for autonomy is also evident in the way people orchestrate co-operation. As they privilege individualized modes of procurement, co-ordinated labour in larger groups remains a fluid affair (see, e.g. Overing 1993: 31). Thus, good leaders privilege strategies of mood management over strategies of domination since productive sociality is achieved through respect for individual preferences (Overing 1989: 162-4). According to Overing (2003: 18), in 'non-contractual' societies, such as those of Amazonia, the only contract is the imperative of extending autonomy to others.

This depiction, however, has largely emerged from the observation of relatively atomized societies consisting of independent households or slightly larger intimate sharing groups. Yet over the past decades, many native Amazonian peoples have experienced a rapid transition from a highly mobile lifestyle based on small, fluid, politically autonomous family groups to a relatively sedentary life in large, nucleated communities. These transformations have ensued from a gradual process of state formation and capital expansion in the region, which has consolidated through the resettlement of migrant populations, the missionization and territorialization of native populations, and the development of agro-extractive frontiers. Scholars have documented how these processes of resettlement and incorporation into the state have engendered a reconfiguration of native models of territoriality and community whereby fluid social boundaries are being increasingly fixed in corporate and juridical terms (Rosengren 2003; Rubenstein 2001; Turner 1993). Similarly, legally recognized villages have made group-level co-operation and contractual obligations more prominent among people who value personal and domestic autonomy (see, e.g., Erazo 2010; Fisher 2000; Greene 2009; Killick 2008; Sarmiento Barletti 2017).

Recent theoretical contributions have analysed these transformations (Hewlett 2014; Kelly 2011; Santos-Granero 2015*a*) with reference to the long-standing 'openness to the Other' and the creation of kinship that characterize Amazonian social life. The starting point of these analyses is that in native Amazonian cosmologies, the reproduction of self and kin is symbolically dependent on relations with the outside (Fausto 1999: 934; Overing Kaplan 1981: 163-4). Linking this idea with the importance of conviviality and equality in social relations (Overing & Passes 2000), some studies trace recent developments in sedentary villages to long-standing indigenous conceptions of the good life (Sarmiento Barletti 2015). But while an openness to the other and the pursuit of the good life are certainly central features of Amazonian sociality, I question whether we can assume that convivial values are reproduced unchanged while people's lived worlds are dramatically transformed. For example, an emphasis on the continuity of social values might lead us to expect that the prioritization of autonomy automatically ensures equality. Yet we know from work in other regions that a central challenge facing so-called 'egalitarian' indigenous peoples in their interactions with modern states is to preserve internal equality while developing centralized forms of leadership that enable them to confront external pressure (e.g. Boehm 1993: 237; Gulbrandsen 1991). Much work thus remains to be done to understand the extent to which the dispositions and desires that individuals cultivate as they incorporate new practices to live well in villages may lead them to aspire to different social goals.

As such, studies of the meanings and consequences of corporate community and group autonomy in Amazonia are particularly urgent. They could also provide the basis for sustained engagements with other regional literatures which have demonstrated the importance of such forms of organization for indigenous self-determination (e.g. Colloredo-Mansfeld 2009; Orta 2013). My aim here is to provide an in-depth analysis of the implications of village formation for a specific Amazonian group in the past decade. This, I believe, is an important step towards future comparisons with ongoing research on indigeneity, and its multiple interconnections with the state in South America and beyond (Canessa 2018; Postero 2017; Veber & Virtanen 2017).

I argue that Shuar respond to external pressure by resourcefully pursuing domestic autonomy and well-being. This pursuit, however, creates dependencies, commitments, and forms of community investment which challenge and reconfigure traditional ways of achieving autonomy and well-being. To develop this argument, I first describe the main historical developments that help to explain why Shuar began to embrace the idea of developing sedentary villages and incorporating state resources, and the recent prominence of elected leaders in this process. I then examine Shuar understandings of productiveness and their long-standing preference for autonomous work. I also show how Shuar channel state resources by mobilizing forms of community work and the brokering of their leaders. When they channel wealth through projects that benefit individual families, Shuar can reassert their traditional values of autonomy and productiveness. By contrast, when they enter into contractual relations with the state to build public facilities, they project these values onto new forms of community development, and, as a result, these values get reconfigured. This reconfiguration supports the emergence of a new logic of production, one that results in labour specialization and increasingly requires self-reliance in the market, paving the way to inequalities and stratification.

The rise of community

The livelihoods, desires, and challenges that Shuar experience in the present cannot be understood unless we consider three interrelated aspects of political centralization which they have co-produced alongside external agents over the past century: sedentarization, state integration, and formal leadership. A brief exploration of these processes will set the context for the long-standing pursuit of autonomy and productiveness described in the next section.

Shuar have traditionally derived their livelihoods from a combination of slash-and-burn horticulture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. However, in the Shuar forest communities of the Makuma area where I conducted fieldwork,[3] the relative destruction of the subsistence base caused by nucleation and resource over-exploitation has made forest self-provisioning less reliable. As a result, people depend on a combination of subsistence horticulture, cash crop-farming, timber extraction, wage labour, and state-derived resources.

Historically, Jivaroan social organization has had no centralized political authority linked to chiefdoms, village communities, or unilineal descent groups. Shuar have been politically egalitarian, in the sense 'that people of the same age and sex have enjoyed equal access to or control over resources, power, and prestige' (Rubenstein 2001: 266). Up until the 1950s and 1960s, the Shuar of Makuma were semi-mobile and widely dispersed. Households were spread out along the banks of rivers and formed fluid bilateral kindred groups linked by marriage alliances; such groups centred on the influence of one or two 'great men' whose authority was restricted to tactical decisions in times of open hostilities. While marriage alliances and the 'gravitational pull' exercised by the great men gave some cohesion to these groupings (Taylor 1983: 334), the household largely operated as a politically independent and economically self-sufficient unit of production and consumption (Harner 1972: 41; Mader & Gippelhauser 2000: 75).

At least since the 1960s, the majority of Shuar have concentrated in villages called *centros*, which literally means 'centres' and has the connotation of indigenous sedentary communities. These communities are administrative and juridical entities recognized by the Ecuadorian government. As will become apparent, the process of sedentarization itself was the first instance in which a quest for domestic autonomy resulted in new forms of dependence. Among the Shuar of Makuma, state and missionary colonization led to two subsequent phases of sedentarization: in the first phase (1940s-1980s), missionaries promoted concentration around cattle co-operatives, while, in the second phase, which extends to the present, Shuar have formed *centros* and assumed direct control of relations with the state via ethnic federations and electoral offices. Sedentarization was triggered by the implantation of Catholic and Evangelical missions and by a series of agrarian reforms whereby the Ecuadorian government encouraged impoverished highland peasants to establish privately owned farms in the Amazon to take pressure off highland cities (Rubenstein 2001: 274). One of these reforms stipulated that to acquire land titles, an individual or family had to exploit at least two-thirds of the land in its possession. The result was to force indigenous populations such as the Shuar 'to imitate the colonists modes of production' and increasingly rely on mission-and-state resources, 'or risk losing all land to the colonists' (Hendricks 1986: 36). Acting as an indirect envoy of the state, a North American missionary agency, the Gospel Missionary Union, conducted the first systematic effort to evangelize the Shuar of Makuma via the establishment of a mission in 1945.[4] To encourage a village-based way of life, missionaries promoted a strategy of community development centred on cattle-breeding and on the creation of public infrastructure (e.g. airstrips, mission school, radio stations, a hydroelectric plant, shops). According to Shuar accounts, the prospect of acquiring cattle and manufactured goods was the main incentive for settling around the mission.

With time, the cattle co-operatives also became an instrument of resistance against land-grabbing from settlers. By becoming cattle-ranchers, Shuar were able to demonstrate to mestizo authorities that they could put the land to productive use. The co-operatives provided a model for creating ethnic federations that allowed Shuar to apply for collective land titles. Titles were only assigned to state-defined *centros*. In fact, as I discuss in detail elsewhere (Buitron 2016), since the creation of federations, membership of *centros* has determined Shuar access to land, public services, and external wealth. And since settling in *centros*, Shuar relations with government institutions and representatives have gradually intensified owing to the decline of forest self-provisioning. Also, since 2012, when the Ecuadorian government has sought to expand regional extractive industries, Shuar have mobilized against the prospect of oil field development in Makuma. Pressed to defend their livelihoods and territories from the intrusion of an encroaching state while also relying more and more on state resources, Shuar have increasingly participated in the electoral indigenous movement at the regional and national levels. Since 2009, they have enjoyed unprecedented victories in the regional elections, placing Shuar candidates in strategic offices of the whole province, which previously had been occupied by mestizos. Shuar expect their elected leaders to act primarily as brokers, capturing and redistributing valuable resources. There are two kinds of brokers: village-level brokers situated in *centros* who cultivate relationships with politicians; and full-time paid officials elected to higher levels of government expected to divert resources from the state to *centros*.

When the co-operatives and *centros* were created in Makuma and Shuar began to hold elections, some of the first men elected to public offices were great men who had established personal links and trading relations with missionaries. One of the key negotiations between the first generation of nucleated Shuar and the missionaries was whether parents would send children to the mission school. Many did and, as Shuar gained independence from the mission, the skills gained by this generation of literate Shuar became an essential asset for formal leadership. Gradually, the first generation of trained bilingual teachers replaced the great men in public offices. The influence of great men stemmed from age, generosity, speaking ability, and prowess in hunting and warfare (Hendricks 1986: 62). By contrast, the authority of contemporary leaders depends on the institutional framework sanctioned by the state. Yet their local influence still derives from their individual qualities and from their superior knowledge of mestizo society. Indeed, it is this knowledge that gets them elected. The essential assets for brokering relations with mainstream politicians derive from literacy and the entrepreneurial skills acquired through formal education. This is a requirement met only by university-educated Shuar qualified for white-collar jobs, that is, 'professionals' (*profesionales*), as villagers call them.

As leaders get elected beyond village-level positions and gain access to greater external resources, villagers become more vigilant about the possibility that their leaders could be corrupted by the central government. To reflect this, Shuar draw a distinction between local government levels, where they have been able to appoint and somewhat successfully control their officials, and central government, or '*el gobierno*'. When villagers talk about *el gobierno*, they have in mind its President[5] and his entourage of colonist politicians, who command inexhaustible riches. Shuar hold the central government responsible for the mining/oil laws, taxes – all attempts to exploit native lands. Villagers thus want their officials to procure money from the regional state's coffers without falling prey to the central government's tricks. Sedentarization, state encroachment, and reliance on formal authorities have impinged on Shuar livelihoods and self-determination – and have made it necessary for Shuar to find new strategies to guard their autonomy. I will explore these strategies in detail in later sections, but first I shall examine the forms of productiveness and autonomy that villagers wish to protect from external encroachment.

Autonomy and productiveness

There is no word in Shuar to translate literally what I call 'autonomy', but the closest native term is *tarimiat*,[6] which designates the domestic core that creates the conditions of emplacement, self-determination, and ownership necessary to achieve well-being. Well-being entails personal and domestic autonomy, and both are intimately interrelated since individual independence presupposes affective and productive relations with kin. When villagers refer to 'their own family' (*winia shuar* – 'my family', 'my people'), they typically refer to the members of their household, though the term can encompass more distant relatives depending on context (e.g. the extended bilateral kin web, all Shuar people). A household, which typically consists of a husband, one or two wives, and their unmarried children, creates the condition for prosperity through conjugal complementarity as well as the forging of core social alliances with affines. Only through marriage can a person achieve self-sufficiency by becoming a household owner (*jeentin*) and avoid relying on others, a situation that would be tantamount to acknowledging one's ineptitude. Shuar emphasize that the best marriages are those in which each spouse excels in her or his gender-specific sphere of expertise, and when they are united in pursuit of well-being.

To live well means to keep one's family away from danger and to generate domestic sustenance by way of multiplying vital resources. Villagers render the latter idea with the term *ipiampamu*, which means to foster the growth of crops and domestic animals. The term also encompasses the growth of the family through the multiplication of children. The term is routinely translated into Spanish as *productividad*, that is, productiveness, in the sense of thriving, fecundity, and abundance.[7] An abundance of local food is necessary to achieve vitality, strength, health, and affective relations with kin. So how is this achieved? Whether to attain productiveness, social eminence, or, more generally, a worthwhile existence, individuals must acquire visionary power or strength (*kakarma*) by undergoing vision quests following the ingestion of psychotropic plants. The gendered productive capacities that characterize mature Shuar persons are acquired via visions/images of domestic prosperity. In the course of these visions, powerful beings transmit productive skills to the vision-seeker and predict futures of longevity, fertility, and harmonious marriages. Thus, strictly speaking, Shuar do not see themselves as producing anything directly, since what they do is not the simple acquisition or transformation of natural resources to satisfy their material needs. Rather, production, like fertility, hinges on the cultivation of personal relations with powerful beings, both human and nonhuman (Descola 2012: 459).

To illustrate this: of a middle-aged hard-working woman who had a thriving household, people said that 'she had a lot of power because she suffered fasting before taking datura when she was young and learnt many incantations'. With this they meant that the woman had performed the propitiatory rites that enabled her to establish successful relations with Nunkui, the garden spirit, who controls the fertility of plants, domestic animals, and humans. It is useful to think of the combination of hard labour and visionary power to generate productiveness as a form of 'efficacious work'. So, to be successful and efficacious – whether in planting or hunting – people must have a range of knowledge and skills: they must know about the plants and game, and know how to interpret dreams, fast and observe sexual abstinence, manipulate charms and sing incantations. Ultimately, the multiplication of vital resources hinges on the ability to tap external, creative powers and to interact with a panoply of master/owners who oversee different spheres of abundance. Shuar represent these interactions as predatory in character, as they involve the use of specialized language and techniques to captivate powerful others in order that they relinquish vital goods. In more recent times, such beings include Christian deities, missionaries, mestizo bosses, and state agents: that is, all the powerful allies-patrons who oversee coveted resources such as domesticated animals and seeds, manufactured goods, money, and technology. As people transact with different sorts of powerful entities, different languages and techniques are required. Shuar establish an intimate link between technical and symbolic mastery, so that a person's technical ability to access exotic goods reflects his or her superior visionary power. As will be shown later, it is the desire to incorporate the efficacious power of the state that drives the work of developing villages (both bureaucratically and infrastructurally).

Therefore, a desire to enhance autonomy guides the relations Shuar establish with the outside, even while they seek to harness its regenerative powers. In this, Shuar follow a well-known Chicham inclination to evade becoming like outsiders, aiming instead at mastering the latter's sources of power and effectively 'competing with them at their own game' (Taylor 2007: 134, 144-5). Taylor (1981: 672) offers a historical example of this when she observes that the Achuar in the mid-1970s sought to bypass missionary mediation by learning prayers and invoking God to give them God-wealth, that is, cattle. For Shuar today, to seek direct access to the sources of mestizo's welfare makes even more sense because not everything the *apach* possess leads to the forms of autonomy and balanced relations villagers consider desirable. An example is useful here. One day a group of parents from the village of Kuamar gathered to welcome the supervisor of education, also a Shuar man. During the meeting, they complained about the school breakfast, which consists of a daily ration of powdered milk and granola that schoolchildren received as part of the government's nation-wide food programme. They described the breakfast as 'mixed up'. According to some, the government was trying to poison their children. Another parent stated that the problem did not simply concern the breakfast, but other *apach* foodstuffs villagers were eating, which, in his view, were making children grow deformed and develop bad thoughts. So, the villager said: 'We can't wait until the government sends us biscuits and sardines and be content. We have to work ourselves, we have to multiply our resources!' Upon everyone's request, the supervisor was asked to demand money from the authorities so that villagers could directly procure their own selected food and prepare it at home. What this example illustrates is that ultimately well-being is about achieving self-sufficiency both in concrete terms – being able to eat one's own food – and in terms of efficacious work: that is, by controlling the specialized avenues to access valuable resources – in this case, government's budgets. Only thus can villagers attain productiveness without compromising their autonomy: that is, their ability to live and work freely or unencumbered by external pressures and dangers.

In fact, to live well, Shuar need not only the generative skills to live self-sufficiently, but also the freedom to choose how, when, and with whom to work. Productiveness therefore encompasses the idea that work must cater to personal moods and preferences. The same applies to inter-household co-operation. While villagers try to help their fellows if asked to, by lending tools or a working hand, they are also at pains to emphasize the voluntary and spontaneous character of such aid. Requests for help are most often framed as pleasurable invitations to spend time together, always leaving the space for others to opt out without feeling embarrassed. It is this subtle blending of mutual aid and autonomy that characterizes informal work parties (*mingas*[8]). *Mingas* are preferably carried out among sibling and affinal households and are generally conducted in an atmosphere of playful sociability – spiced by loads of food, manioc beer, laughter, and conversation.

But can Shuar preserve this sort of flexibility and practical autonomy when working with state resources in villages? To harness state wealth, they face considerable pressure to come together as a community and to enter into obligatory forms of commitment vis-à-vis fellow villagers and state officials, which have the potential to overshadow voluntary forms of mutual aid. Still, there is some evidence that they can uphold their values, specifically through their use of *mingas*, to benefit from state projects. In such cases, they mobilize the community to generate wealth while loosening its grip to maintain domestic autonomy.

De-collectivizing community projects

One of the ways in which Shuar tap into state resources is by channelling 'productive projects': state-sponsored schemes geared towards the local production of cash crops, animal husbandry, and other income-generating activities. Public resources, including projects, are offered to indigenous populations only if they are organized in legally constituted *centros* which can demonstrate 'good public government'. The disbursement of private and public monies to indigenous peoples is largely premised on the assumption that community-based development projects are preferable to family/individual-based projects. This is because they are thought to enhance fiscal responsibility while being tailored to indigenous people's alleged 'communistic' ethos. Thus, much of the work done by villagers is aimed at mastering the techniques of government required to access projects. Shuar elect formal leaders, run village assemblies, manage community funds, write petitions, and attend project workshops. They have also become *socios* (associates or partners), a new category of political membership used to refer to the commitments and affiliations they have acquired as a result of living in *centros*. Villagers also care immensely about training the future brokers of *centros*, which they do by sending their children to school so that they can acquire the knowledge necessary to run villages. As an elderly man bluntly stated in a school meeting, 'If there aren't going to be Shuar capable of writing petitions and drumming up resources, we might as well drop the community'. When villagers deploy the term 'community', often via the Spanish *comunidad*, or conveniently translated into the Shuar term *irutkamu*,[9] they refer to the village membership group or the kind of 'we' that emerges from the relations and specialized skills required to funnel wealth and develop public works in *centros*. This statement reveals the widespread perception that the community is a sort of vehicle: a set of knowledge practices and symbolic techniques that Shuar require for funnelling resources and living well.

Villagers conceive of projects as their own productive work. Indeed, they call them 'work' (*takat*), just like gardening. And just like gardening, work for the projects is meant to create productiveness and ensure autonomy. This makes sense because villagers are not only doing the hard work of growing the cocoa crops and raising the animals given as part of the projects, but they are also involved in controlling the symbolic techniques required to persuade state agents to release these coveted resources. A closer look at the way the villagers of Kuamar dealt with one such venture will shed light on the ways Shuar reassert personal and domestic autonomy while enacting 'community work'. One morning, the people of Kuamar welcomed a group of technical trainers from the provincial government who came to run a reforestation workshop. Lots of people came to the village's communal house curious to learn how on earth one could find any use in planting more trees when there were so many already in the forest. The head of the trainers started by briefing the assembly about the different phases of implementation of the tree nurseries, before introducing a few methods for carrying out 'community work'. She instructed villagers about the importance of using worksheets to develop a rota system to distribute daily tasks: watering the plants, weeding the plots, and so on. At this point, Marco, the broker who had invited the trainers, intervened to clarify that 'since his family would be responsible for all the work, the worksheets and all those methods wouldn't be necessary'. A bit confused by this intervention, the trainer insisted that the project would require 'community work', reasoning that 'a family alone is not going to be able to sustain all the necessary work'. In her experience, she said, 'these projects tended to fail because people don't commit to work together'. At this point, the President of Kuamar felt compelled to intervene. He said:

> Look, Mrs Engineer, in the past we have tried this community method you're suggesting but it just doesn't work for us. At first, everyone says, 'We will work together' and then nobody shows up. Here every family is responsible for its own thing. We have granted permission to Marco to do this project and if he calls a *minga*, we will do *minga* with him; but every one of us has other [household] responsibilities to mind.

In the end, everyone treated the project as Marco's rather than the community's and villagers came to his aid when he called *mingas*. The organization of spontaneous *mingas* reveals a great deal about how 'community work' is locally appropriated. In *mingas*, participants help other families but do not share responsibility for the outcome of the work or for the use of resources. Co-participants, therefore, do not become co-proprietors and, as a result, they can never control the labour of others. So, whilst villagers perform 'community work' – for example, by attending the meetings and workshops necessary to funnel resources – they also try to de-collectivize the actual implementation of projects to preserve domestic and personal autonomy.

The style of co-operation in voluntary groups is significantly different from the centralized rota system proposed by the trainers. The rota system presupposes that someone takes responsibility for assigning and overseeing the work; that everyone shares responsibility for the general outcome or that someone becomes responsible for controlling the work of others and for dividing labour among them, so that each carries out a task at a specified time in the pursuit of efficiency. Thus, whilst the people of Kuamar do depend on one another to attract and manage state wealth derived from projects, they reassert the value of freedom in work over the forms of communal control promoted by development agents. As shown by the example of the reforestation project, they do so by following pre-existent principles of co-operation, thereby choosing a form of mutual aid that remains voluntary, can be terminated at any point, and preserves the personal autonomy of all participants. However, there are occasions when villagers enter into more contractual obligations, which introduce less negotiable external controls.

The rise of contractual relations

An alternative means to access state monies is through the development of infrastructure in Shuar *centro*s. In indigenous accounts of village formation across the world, a compelling reason for embracing sedentary life is the bodily and material transformation that villages facilitate through improved access to consumer goods and/or infrastructural development (Killick 2008; Rival 2002: 161-6; Stasch 2013). This resonates with the reasons the Shuar of Makuma provide for their embrace of village life. Even after the dissolution of the cattle co-operatives, the people of Makuma chose to remain nucleated in *centros* to continue to benefit from services and public infrastructure and to ensure that their children could attend school. The popularity of public works such as schools, trails, and football pitches has to do with having direct access to the amenities found in towns without having to put up with the expenses and troubles of living among mestizos. But public works are also popular because they create direct opportunities to access cash through public contracts, even if these introduce new forms of subordination and inequality among Shuar people themselves.

Public contracts work as follows. A village-level broker embarks on the usual business of funnelling state resources, but instead of securing a project which procures resources that can easily be de-collectivized (seeds, barnyard animals, etc.), he or she gets a contract from a Shuar official working in one of the local governments for a public work that targets the whole community (school and trail improvements, etc). Only individuals, rather than whole communities, can become contractors, even though, to carry out the work, a contractor employs other people in the community. And since a contractor usually receives full payment upon completion and external auditing of the work, the broker-cum-contractor is prompted to impose conditions and deadlines upon people's performance of the work. Further, the system of deferred payment gives the upper hand to officials, since they draft the terms of the contract. So, to benefit from state resources through contracts, villagers are turned into daily labourers, subject to external orders and conditions.

At times, the contract system may engender a chain of other informal deals, with every contractor underpaying labourers at the next level. This resembles what Hugh-Jones (1992: 69) observed among the Barasana Indians, who passed on to their relatives the informal work debts that they had contracted with mestizo cocaine dealers and rubber gatherers, by disguising them under ties of kinship and affinity. The difference is that the patrons are Shuar officials and that the practice is legitimized by invoking community development. As Gudeman shows, while mutuality and trade are two different strategies of production, 'they may subsume, veil ... or absorb features of the other' (2008: 14). For instance, on one occasion, a Kuamar villager enlisted the support of his mother and sisters-in-law to help him with a contract to build a trench to transport water to the schoolhouse. He paid them less than 50 per cent of his total contract gain. In turn, the women enlisted the help of other young (unmarried) men to finish the work faster and rewarded them with manioc beer: that is, the women were treating the extra labourers as if they had been summoned to a *minga*. We thus see here the potential for mutual aid to support the multiplication of contractual obligations, which are partly neutralized (via *mingas*), but which also aggravate differences in wealth and power that impinge upon the autonomy (and productiveness) of others.

In fact, contracts reinforce a trend towards accumulation started by salaried workers. A new class of Shuar professionals (composed of state officials and schoolteachers) distinguish themselves by accumulating cattle, renovating houses, and buying sound systems, home appliances, and cars. Professionals are unceasingly demanded to share with kin and neighbours. Increasingly, however, professionals use their salaries to 'help' others by hiring them to do the farming work they no longer have the time to do. Villagers covet these paid jobs because they give them access to cash to pay for non-forest products, domestic emergencies, and the new services offered in the community. Thanks to the commissions they receive, contractors have joined this group of professionals by becoming occasional money lenders and work suppliers in villages. Not surprisingly, therefore, Shuar now routinely distinguish between professionals, with the knowledge to generate money, and villagers, who can only access money through their ties to professionals. Implicit in this distinction is the idea that professionals enact more 'efficacious work' than ordinary villagers thanks to their superior skills, which enable them to funnel money and public works into the community.

Given the intimate connection between generative capacities and production and the importance of personal autonomy in the organization of work, why do villagers agree to such deals mediated by contracts and wages, which clearly create inequalities and dependence? I suggest a couple of interrelated reasons. The first is that people really value performing work to develop villages. As we have seen, villagers prefer to use the *minga* system when implementing productive projects. But there are also a few occasions when they agree to work collectively for a third party in return for compensation in pursuit of community goals. However, agreements of this sort can also be 'colonized' by the logic of the contract. For example, to celebrate a festival, the villagers of Pampants requested a cow from a Shuar rancher, who donated it on the condition that villagers would clear two hectares of his field. The cattleman asked to have the agreement written down as an 'act of commitment' (*acta de compromiso*) lest, he said, 'villagers would forget their obligation once the fun of the festival lay behind them'. This type of work straddles the boundary between *minga* and contract: while the transaction becomes increasingly formalized with a legal authority implicitly guaranteeing the deal, villagers retain relative autonomy in how they work and the equal distribution of the rewards among everyone. The public contract, by contrast, enables the broker to accumulate on behalf of the community while specifying conditions for the performance of the work. It is striking, all the same, that villagers are enthusiastic about contracts. This is because, when a new public work is built, the community is made bigger, it becomes more organized, more beautiful, and, as a result, the leader is seen as engendering productiveness. I am thus suggesting that, in addition to the occasional income villagers can earn, the contract's final product, the beautiful and highly desirable public work, significantly contributes to legitimizing the inequality between contractor and labourer.

Villages require a continuous inflow of work and resources to go on existing. They are made more permanent by an increasing number of public works and services. Most public works are built in the centre of the village, an area that villagers call 'urbanization'. 'The urbanization enlivens the community!' as they say. Indeed, it is in the urbanization that people gather to play football, host festivals, discuss political nominations, and run workshops. If the urbanization of villages does not look well maintained and developed – for example, if it lacks a school, or the central plaza is not weeded – visitors will see this as showing a lack of organization, which reflects badly on the 'good government' that villagers aim to demonstrate. This commitment to making villages big, beautiful, and developed reveals a shifting understanding of community. In the previous section, I showed that the community is primarily mobilized as an instrument to gain access to valuable external resources with which to generate domestic prosperity. But some of the channels through which Shuar access state resources directly target community development. This is the case for contracts through which individual villagers procure cash for their families while helping to improve general conditions in the village via public facilities. Increasingly, therefore, the space of the village takes on a bigger role in people's images of the good life. Thus, from being a means to achieve productiveness, it becomes a form of productiveness – it becomes an end in and of itself.

Consequently, villagers assess autonomy not only in relation to freedom in work and their productive capacities but also in relation to their freedom to engender and enjoy development: the enhancements that public infrastructures bring to their lives. In this scenario, the benefits of economic redistribution obtained via contracts outweigh the rewards of freedom in work, making subordination to elected officials, if not desirable, then more legitimate. Contracts are legal instruments through which mutual aid is co-opted and productive autonomy is ultimately subordinated to the goal of community development. But of more significance here is that contracts also pave the way for the cultivation of new economic attitudes while simultaneously building on villagers' preference for extending autonomy to their fellows.

New economic attitudes

One of the key challenges faced by Shuar officials is to comply with the framework of accountability of the institutions they serve: for example, the requirement to audit the allocation of public resources. Brokers are aware that changes in local attitudes would be necessary for villagers to comply with such a framework. For instance, one day I accompanied Silverio – the official we encountered at the start – to an informal political meeting where his allies proffered some advice with regard to 'how to speak to fellow Shuar during electoral campaigns'. One of the politicians told Silverio that he needed to persuade villagers that the best way officials could serve their electorate was not by providing them with projects but through the audit of public works. In other words, the politician was trying to reconfigure the role of wealth purveyor which villagers have assigned to their leaders, in order to assume an overseeing role more appropriate to his functions as state official.

Leaders deploy ingenious ways of stressing the importance of accountability to Shuar villagers. For example, during a festival celebrated in the community of Pampants, the President of the parish proffered a lecture seeking to inculcate in villagers the value of gratitude. Through an amusing narrative, he told villagers 'that they didn't show enough gratitude to their leaders'. Shuar have 'inverted thoughts', he said, because instead of thanking those who help them, they criticize them. He then compared the villagers' attitudes to the behaviour of a mythical woman called Auju, who personifies gluttony. In the well-known myth, Auju is transformed into a potoo bird and condemned to cry on full-moon nights. She received this punishment after her husband, the Sun (Etsa), discovered that she had been eating ripe squashes while cleverly denying him dinner. Just like Auju, the President said, Shuar eat the goods they receive but do not want to make them grow.

With stories such as this one, leaders try to invert the direction of power and accountability: instead of leaders having to demonstrate their loyalty to villagers, villagers should be thankful to their leaders for the goods they receive from them. The accountability promoted by the leaders does not simply imply that Shuar should commit to clearly defined conditions of work, as in the case of contracts, or to be responsible and ensure good management of the resources they receive, as in the case of projects. It also means that Shuar should commit to progress: that is, they should change their mode of work so that they can gradually sell their foodstuffs and replenish their subsistence base. Leaders continually encourage villagers to work harder so that they will be able to sell their produce and make money. In so doing, they strive to promote a different understanding of growth and productiveness.

As I mentioned, villagers want to multiply their crops and animals to generate productiveness. Locally, productiveness is geared towards the well-being of the family; it is a means to support each household. Villagers deploy a folk model of self-sufficiency whereby they continuously replenish their subsistence base through a combination of hard work and the mastery of relations with powerful others in control of external wealth. This is an effort undertaken day by day which has little room for future reserves and none for accumulation. As they work and manage resources, Shuar villagers do not follow a conscious maximizing strategy. By contrast, the growth that leaders promote, while emphasizing the value of self-sufficiency, entails the optimization of resource management and the increase of work productivity – this with the goal of making Shuar self-reliant in the market. The leaders with whom I have discussed these issues think that this model is the way forward as it would allow villagers to become independent from state wealth and pay for the community services they are so keen to acquire. The model of self-reliance that leaders have in mind is, of course, based on entirely different economic premises, for it presupposes that Shuar would become either full-time commercial farmers or salaried workers. Hence, from being a means to achieve autonomy, the village itself with all its facilities and services increasingly turns into a kind of public good that activates new forms of subordination to larger powers.

In the same vein, contracts are now popular because individuals are free to enter into them directly without receiving the authorization of other villagers. The contractual system of procurement can therefore appear to be highly compatible with personal and domestic autonomy. But, of course, the kind of autonomy elicited by contracts is tied to forms of obligation which harbour a significant coercive potential. Contractors cannot impose conditions alone; they require administrative power and institutional authority: government, laws, prisons, and police – all instruments which are now within the range of Shuar officials delivering contracts. Yet villagers are receptive to the ideals of development propagated by officials. As their communities grow and new facilities and services create novel forms of obligations, they are increasingly inclined to work for payment, even at the cost of compromising autonomy and mutuality. For instance, once when I was returning home from a *minga* with Marco, my host father, he told me that one of his brothers-in-law, Dionisio, was not in the *minga* because he had started working for a contractor in another community. This fact made Marco consider how one should go about working and living well. Thinking out loud, he said:

> In a few months Dionisio might be able to buy a car, so he's right to take so many contracts ... As I see it, education everywhere is teaching people how to make money, it's teaching them to produce. I have seen in my visions that Kuamar will be a large city, so we will need more and more people like Dionisio who can maintain the city and offer new services. In fact, who is going to be responsible for the city? Our children will. Therefore, we have to think seriously about productiveness.

Marco's words reveal a change to the notion of productiveness which suggests that 'to think seriously about it' will involve creating the kind of people who can enter into contractual deals to make money.

Conclusion

Shuar's increasing reliance on the Ecuadorian state can be explained through their pursuit of domestic autonomy and productiveness. This pursuit crucially hinges on electing leaders who can funnel external wealth while keeping the state's extractive potential at bay. Yet this process – that is, the channels through which leaders and villagers incorporate and multiply the effects of external wealth in their villages – gradually transforms the very content of these values. While Shuar villagers aim to foster domestic self-sufficiency and regenerate local livelihoods, the means through which they do so result in new ways of engaging with leaders and entering into contractual deals. As Shuar reassert group autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant society, they simultaneously legitimize internal differentials of power and wealth between followers and leaders and thereby break the intimate link between autonomy and egalitarianism that has characterized small-scale Amazonian polities.

Egalitarianism in small kin groups results from a situation where everyone has access to the generative skills which guarantee everyday sustenance and confer status. Individuals rather than corporate groups control the means and forces of production even while they must harness these from the outside. Correspondingly, the use of these skills in everyday productive processes prioritizes the autonomy necessary to create enjoyable social relations (Overing 1989: 164; Rival 2002: 99-100). This unique combination of autonomy and conviviality implies that even while some individuals can acquire greater productive powers, they cannot, as a result, monopolize resources or control the labour of others. Rather, as Overing (1989: 172) observes, those who develop more productive skills within themselves than ordinary people, have greater responsibilities than laymen for building the community.

While, traditionally, greater political and ritual power could not be transformed into economic advantage, the specific processes of wealth capture and village formation I have discussed here present a transformation of classical Amazonian intra-group sociality. The professionals responsible for funnelling wealth to build the public space of villages now are increasingly able to convert their generative powers into economic advantage and political control: for example, over desirable resources and the labour of others. These findings contrast with recent anthropological analyses which illustrate how contemporary leaders are largely able to secure access to desirable resources in pursuit of internal well-being and egalitarian relations. For instance, in an edited volume devoted to the concept of 'public wealth', Santos-Granero (2015*b*: 15) argues that while new forms of wealth (from development monies to public infrastructures) 'have radically altered the capacity for wealth accumulation', they have not changed how Amazonians 'perceive material accumulation': that is, as something which acquires value insofar as it engenders well-being and thereby expresses attitudes of compassion, generosity, and care. The Shuar case introduces a corrective into this picture and illustrates how the dispositions and desires that individuals cultivate as they incorporate corporate wealth linked to a village way of life (e.g. acquiring contracts, aspiring to progress, thanking leaders) can in turn redefine convivial values.

This analysis further demonstrates how significant changes can nevertheless occur within a framework that prioritizes continuity. As Londoño Sulkin (2017) maintains, moral selfhood and sociality in the region are often shaped by and reproduce versions of what he calls the 'Amazonian package': for example, the idea that the achievement of a desirable life depends on cultivating relations with powerful but dangerous others. To procure state resources, Shuar mobilize their own ideas of 'efficacious work': that is, the understanding that one must engage with Others by mastering their specialized techniques of power. This is what induces Shuar to engage in a form of antagonistic appropriation of mestizo trappings, which they do by enacting practices of communal governance which, being central to how the Ecuadorian state engages with indigenous people, become central to how they seek to persuade state patrons to relinquish wealth (see also Deshoullière 2016). But the way Shuar do this also reveals the importance of differentiating between the diverse mechanisms whereby resources are appropriated and deployed.

Villagers switch back and forth between different understandings and usages of community. Sometimes the community is simply a channel to access external wealth. When this happens, villagers reassert their own rationale in managing state wealth, resorting to a combination of autonomy and mutual aid to organize internal work. Leaders can mediate but cannot impose conditions on the inflow of wealth and the arrangement of work. By contrast, when leaders control the distribution of wealth through contracts, they can impinge on the productive autonomy of their constituents and co-opt mutuality for the sake of development. Here, the 'community' has become an end in itself. Finally, the community also becomes a means towards the cultivation of new economic attitudes. Indeed, villagers see the ability of leaders and neighbours to 'make profit' as an important collective asset which can contribute to the upkeep and development of their communities. At this point, autonomy takes on an aspirational character, more akin to the orthodox view advanced in capitalist settings where self-interest and individuals' fortunes are said to drive the economy and promote general well-being despite contributing to entrenching inequalities.

I have shown that this is possible because villagers increasingly project their capacities to pursue well-being (and indeed their attainment of autonomy and productiveness) onto the development of villages. By linking their productive capacities and pursuit of autonomy to the production of ever more durable villages, Shuar extend not only the spatial but also the temporal horizons of their regenerative projects. While reproducing persons and households, Shuar also begin to reproduce larger institutions such as villages and, through them, material and status inequality. Infrastructurally equipped c*entros* are not only harder to move and too expensive to leave; they also generate dependency and considerable temporal commitment. Not surprisingly, elected officials insist on the importance of commitment in their lessons to villagers.

Importantly, inequalities stabilize in Shuar society, not because leaders turn against society, as Clastres (1994: 116) would argue, but rather because, through their brokering and interpretative work, Shuar leaders help to shape the very notion of a separate society: the public space of villages Shuar are increasingly passionate about and willing to work for. Yet it is possible that future visions will increasingly bring forth pessimistic images of unbearable dependence, such as those evoked by Tiwiram at the start of this article. A crucial question is thus whether the capacity to generate productiveness at the level of the village will be experienced in the valuable forms of efficacious work and self-sufficiency. 'We Shuar are very few if compared to the mestizo', a Shuar leader told me one day, closing his sentence with the telling remark: 'but beware, we're also very talented!' Visions of the future, then, will depend on the talents, forms of efficacy, and careers Shuar will continue to cultivate.

NOTES

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[1] All personal names in this article are pseudonyms.

[2] Previously known as 'Jivaroan' (see Deshoullière & Utitiaj in press). Here I follow the new convention using 'Chicham' to refer to the linguistic family, which also includes the Achuar, Awajun, Shiwar, and Wampis.

[3] I have conducted a total of twenty-three months of fieldwork in the southeastern Ecuadorian foothills in the province of Morona Santiago (2011-13 and 2018), within a network of villages in the Makuma area, and settled in a village called Kuamar, which numbers approximately 170 people.

[4] For accounts of sedentarization promoted by Salesian missionaries, see Descola (1982) and Rubenstein (2001).

[5] The incumbent for most of my fieldwork period was Rafael Correa, who served from January 2007 to May 2017. He was succeeded by Lenín Moreno, also from the PAIS Alliance.

[6] *Tarimiat* also denotes the first wife. Leaders use the expression *tarimiat pujustin* (foundational or good living) with reference to territorial self-determination.

[7] To describe Shuar ideas of regeneration, I prefer 'productiveness' to 'productivity', which is the economic measure of productive effort calculated in terms of output per unit of input.

[8] From the Kichwa *minka*, the name for collective work of obligatory character, a fact that has led some ethnographers to suggest that its adoption among Chicham groups reflects a transformation 'in the representation of the relations of solidarity' (Descola 1982: 232) and of 'work' (Hendricks 1988: 226). Shuar adopted the institution when they created cattle cooperatives; prior to that they designated interhousehold work parties as 'an invitation to work' (*takat iniampramu*). See Buitron (2016: 171) for a discussion of the overlaps between the practices associated with these different institutions in contemporary villages.

[9] From the verb (*irut-*), which expresses ideas of gathering and reuniting, and sometimes settling.

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Autonomie, productivité et communauté : l'essor de l'inégalité dans une société amazonienne

Résumé

L'autonomie est présentée comme une valeur centrale motivant des politiques égalitaires dans les sociétés amazoniennes. Le présent article montre comment la quête d'autonomie et de productivité met aujourd'hui en branle des processus qui compromettent ces valeurs mêmes. Chez les Shuars d'Amazonie équatorienne, la réalisation de l'autonomie et de la productivité dépend de plus en plus de la captation de ressources étatiques. Les Shuars interagissent avec l'État local en tant que membres de communautés assez récemment sédentarisées et par l'intermédiaire de chefs élus. Par ces processus, la « communauté » elle-même se transforme : de canal de régénération des moyens de subsistance domestiques, elle devient aussi une fin en soi, suscitant de nouvelles attitudes économistes tout en justifiant les inégalités entre la population et les chefs. L'article suggère que la poursuite de l'autonomie et de la productivité dans le cadre d'un processus de formation de villages est au cœur de la transformation de l'égalitarisme qui se produit lorsque les petites collectivités amazoniennes s'engagent dans la politique de l'État-nation.

Natalia Buitron is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she also received a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology, focusing on themes of moral selfhood, village/state formation, and socioeconomic change in Amazonia. Other research interests include childhood, education, and indigenous social movements.

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. n.buitron-arias@lse.ac.uk