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Cultural boundaries and ontological crossings: exploring local discourse on intercultural education from an Amazonian Indigenous territory

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ABSTRACT



This paper explores multiple conceptualisations of interculturality situated within an Ecuadorian Amazonian Kichwa indigenous territory expressed through local discourses. Considering Amerindian perspectivism I analyse three discursive moments occurring within this territory. The first, is a community elder's narrative constructing a distinctive 'inside' versus an 'outside' describing the tension and historical role of education as inherent to sustaining a territorial project. The second, is teacher's representation of intercultural education as that of balancing between an 'own' versus an 'outside' education, presented as part of workshop; and the third, is expressed through an interaction between a student and teacher resulting in the explanation of 'ancestral' education in contrast to a 'western facing' education. I suggest that whilst diverse conceptualisations of interculturality reflects differing ideological tensions over intercultural education these can be understood as congruent with the territorial political project, reconstructing both cultural and ontological boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural education; ontologies; cultural boundaries; Indigenous Amazonian territory; ethnography

Introduction

The conceptualisation of interculturality, framed in the context of Latin America, has been central to the debate of its critical positioning as a decolonial process challenging a continuation of an assimilationist state project and so cultural essentialisation. This debate was made visible during the 1980s when it was formulated in response to a demand for intercultural bilingual education as part of the rise of indigenous politics within a national political agenda in Ecuador. This moment has been understood to represent a historical political turning point that aimed to challenge and transform the colonial hierarchical racialised state project (Gustafson 2014; Walsh 2010). The notion of interculturality has since expanded to many other areas of governance and similar intercultural bilingual education models have been adopted throughout most countries

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in Latin America (López 2021). It would seem therefore that interculturality in education now reflects the recognition of ethnic diversity and indigenous cultural rights at the core of state governance.

However, at the institutional level of state schooling, research has demonstrated that the focus of intercultural education has tended to be on how culture and difference are translated into a specific pedagogic content (Aikmann 2012; Granda 2019; Perino 2022). From a critical and decolonial perspective, interculturality has lost its initial radical and socially transformative notion and has been appropriated by a dominant discourse that only superficially celebrates cultural differences within a neoliberal political agenda (Altmann 2017; Davalos 2008; Hale 2005).

This debate over the conceptualisation of interculturality frames what an intercultural education is understood to be about: on the one hand interculturality as challenging the hierarchical construction of difference and the positioning of epistemological pluralism; on the other the simplistic recognition of cultural categories which continues to essentialise culture (Aman 2022; Granda 2019; Mignolo 2012; Walsh 2010). Research from this perspective tends to demonstrate the tensions that exist in intercultural education between a critical interculturality articulated from a subaltern subjective position and that from a dominant socio-cultural position.

As part of the growing literature framed within the ‘ontological turn’ (discussed below), I incorporate Mario Blaser’s proposition of ethnographic work as a ‘controlled equivocation’ (2014). This implies a process of cultural translation as central to the ethnographic work that aims to move beyond a cultural concern, allowing for the presence of a radical alterity central to this translation. This paper, therefore, aims to broaden the conceptual debate over the notion of interculturality, by exploring interculturality as *also* framed within situated discourses paying attention to the possibility of making present a ‘radical alterity’ (Blaser 2014).

It is important to consider this further possibility since intercultural bilingual education appears to be caught between demonstrating the articulation of a critical intercultural perspective and/or reproducing essentialising cultural categories. Here, I aim to consider how interculturality may be articulated in relation to the situated and historical experience of education analysing three discursive examples expressed within a particular Kichwa Amazonian indigenous territory, while being attentive to the possibility of a diverse ontology.

This paper is broadly divided into two sections. The first provides the theoretical framework, discussing key debates over the conceptualisation of interculturality in the context of Latin America, and then a brief explanation of the analytical approach relating to an ontological turn in ethnographic theory.

The second part moves into the ethnographic field, providing a rich description of the Ecuadorian Kichwa Amazonian indigenous territory in which I conducted my research. The research methodology is presented including a critical reflection of my own positionality as researcher, to then move on to the empirical account that rests at the centre of the analysis of this paper – the narratives of two members of the community: a community elder narrating her encounter with education and the relationship with the struggle to sustain a territorial political project; and an explanation of ‘western’ and ‘ancestral’ education as part a lesson within the subject of indigenous cosmovision. Linking these two narratives is a description of a workshop in which the teachers position the notion of ‘an

own education' as part of the community's political project. Finally, I bring the key themes that emerge from the analysis together to propose the conceptualisation of interculturality as coherent with communities' practices and discourses requiring an acknowledgement of the presence of radical alterity.

Conceptual debates of interculturality in education

Interculturality has become a key concept in education globally. UNESCO formulated its guidelines on Intercultural Education in 2006, which establishes 3 guiding principles for 'international action for the field of education' (UNESCO 2006) as follows:

- (1) Respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all.
- (2) Provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society.
- (3) Provides all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.

These three principles within UNESCO's guiding document are then incorporated into educational competences. The educational objective of an intercultural education can therefore be read as a universal educational strategy to develop these competences. The development of these individual competences results in the aim of intercultural education seen as an educational tool for peaceful coexistence between *cultural* differences.

Aman (2015) critiques interculturality as mobilised by dominant transnational entities such as UNESCO and its conceptualisation through much of the anglophone academic literature as a universalising concept. At the core of this critique, from a decolonial perspective is that interculturality becomes articulated fundamentally from the concept of cultural difference and not the construction of difference as a historically contextualised colonial process. From a decolonial perspective, interculturality needs to be read in relation to the position of enunciation, i.e. its articulation from a geopolitical subjective position. This is understood in terms of the critique of modernity as a Eurocentric hierarchical epistemological project in which an epistemology is established as universal and politically neutral (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Significantly, the critique centres around the shift multiculturalism supposedly represent in terms of the recognition of cultural differences, as no shift at all given that an epistemological hierarchy is maintained. European modernity continues to construct a hierarchy of difference establishing a single all-encompassing epistemology (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

By contrast to the dominant discourse of interculturality, Walsh (2009) proposes that a critical interculturality emerges with the positioning of an indigenous political agenda as a counter hegemonic discourse. In Latin America, the articulation of interculturality was first discussed in the late 1970s by indigenous educators in contrast to the dualist notion of a bicultural education (Walsh 2002), which continued to homogenise indigenous culture and identity in relation to a socially dominant national cultural identity. The adoption of the concept of interculturality as part of the political demand for an intercultural bilingual education (IBE) in Ecuador in the 1980s was an appeal for a

transformative national political agenda. This intercultural bilingual education represented a direct challenge to the aim of the twentieth-century educational assimilationist state building project. For Walsh and others, the expansion of formal education during the 1940s was a direct consequence of the need to expand citizenship based on a unified national identity. This unified national identity is constructed on the notion of a White and *Mestizo*¹ dominant cultural identity, that brandishes indigenous identity as historically in the past, and therefore a clear continuation of colonial racialisation of difference (Montaluisa 2008; Perino 2022; Walsh 2009).

However, much of the literature is critical of the institutionalisation of IBE, since it appears to be framed by the dominant universalising concept of interculturality (Aman 2015, 2022; Martínez Novo 2014). As Aman (2015) explains, the universalising conceptualisation of interculturality sets up a double bind. It implicitly assumes both a pluralistic notion of cultural identity inscribed as dynamic and socially constructed, as well as maintaining the notion of culture as bounded, in so far as the interaction required to bridge cultural differences must occur between distinct Others (Aman 2015). An intercultural education from this dominant position therefore requires the demonstration of a cultural content whilst at the same time assuming the need to develop ‘openness’ as an individual competence to share/bridge these differences (Aman 2015, 2022).

It seems that IBE is caught in this demonstration of cultural difference, to claim recognition of specific cultural rights. This critique reflects Charles Taylor’s (1994) analysis of how difference framed as a concept of culture through policy, inevitably results in an imposition of an essentialist notion of cultural boundaries as a means for political recognition. For example, the emphasis of IBE policy centred on linguistic specificity as a means of recognition of cultural identity, has put into question the role of IBE (López 2021). This is because, as research shows, Spanish as the socially dominant language, rather than the corresponding indigenous language continues to be used as the main language of transmission in the classroom in Latin America (Granda 2019; López 2021). The essentialisation of an indigenous language in correspondence with a specific cultural identity can result in a vicious circle that sets up the demand for a constant demonstration of cultural differences to justify an IBE.

This is not to say recognition of linguistic rights is not important. Aman (2015) for example, draws attention to the differing discourses on interculturality by making a linguistic differentiation between interculturality as a dominant educational discourse and *interculturalidad* as framed by indigenous educational actors from the Andean region. Aman explains that *interculturalidad* enunciated by indigenous educational actors whilst not free of essentialising notions of culture, notes that this is framed for revealing differences constructed through colonial difference. Whether it is the importance of not losing the language of ‘one’s grandparents’ or the significance and claim to ‘territory’, for Aman *interculturalidad* as enunciated by these indigenous educational actors is a radical claim to ‘lo propio’ (one’s own), a claim to knowledge from other subjectivities:

Viewed from this angle, *interculturalidad* activates the discourse on “lo propio” [our own] as part of a radical claim for epistemic rights rather than cultural ones—or put differently, for *interculturalidad* rather than *educación intercultural bilingüe* [IBE] or even interculturality, whose recognition of cultural or linguistic diversity does not necessarily translate into epistemological diversity. (Aman 2015, 113)

The essentialisation of culture seen from the perspective of differing geopolitical subjective positions in principle, do very different things. This has been discussed as strategic essentialism. For example, Rappaport (2005) highlights how Nasa educational cultural activist made continual reference to an 'original' culture as geographically located in relation to an interior territorial space. Rappaport's analysis demonstrates how the dynamic construction of cultural boundaries is made possible through the articulation of an 'original' and is brought to play together with the positioning and revealing of difference as a historical social construction, i.e. indigenous as colonial racialised construct. For Rappaport this tension is not incoherent and is inherent to the possibilities of articulation of a political project, it is what enables 'cultural difference to be utilized as a process of constant and deliberate bringing-into-existence of a cultural project' (2005, 38).

From a decolonial perspective, interculturality on the ground, as Aman and others demonstrate, is articulated from a subaltern position to reveal difference as a colonial socio-historical construction and to position epistemic pluralism (Walsh 2009). However, is it also inevitably articulated in terms of demonstrating cultural differences from essentialist cultural categories responding to the institutionalisation of sustaining a particular cultural identity for recognition of specific cultural rights. In this way, intercultural education from a subaltern position is caught in the need to demonstrate difference reproducing essentialist cultural categories to claim specific cultural rights. However, this is not a simple appropriation but is negotiated as a means to actualise and sustain an 'own' cultural political project. The debate from a decolonial and critical perspective revolves around the intention and possibilities that are created in the demonstration of cultural differences. As Rappaport describes the construction of an alternative 'own' cultural project is both situated and is constantly emerging. Similarly, the articulation of 'intercultural education' in the indigenous territory in which I conduct my ethnographic study can be understood as coherent with cultural work done in bringing into existence an own cultural project.

The move I consider here is that the concept of interculturality whilst being interpreted from a cultural perspective as the dynamic construction of cultural boundaries can also be understood in coherence with the presence of diverse ontologies at play. This, I suggest, may provide differing possibilities as to how essentialism is mobilised in relation to territory. I am not proposing another 'truer' conceptualisation of interculturality, simply the possibility of multiple and diverse concepts present when interpreting what intercultural education is about. For this, my analysis takes an ontological turn to expand the potential concepts at play as part of the ethnographic process.

The ontological turn, and ethnography

The 'ontological turn' in social theory (Escobar 2007) came to the fore around the turn of the twenty-first century. It has been taken up across various disciplines and in interdisciplinary research which means that there are various ways in which ontology as the basis of enquiry is being used (Blaser 2009; Turska and Ludwig 2023). Ontology is usually identified within philosophy and is concerned with the kind of things that exist and the relationship between these. The ontological turn within ethnographic and social theory is concerned with questioning the limitations and assumptions that underpin

categories established by the modernist ontological divide of Nature/Culture. Central to the ontological turn in ethnographic theory is not a simple culturalist interpretation of differing perspectives on the 'world' but purposely pluralising ontologies (Turska and Ludwig 2023).

The reason for purposely pluralising ontologies is that the notion of differing perspectives on the world ultimately sustains a modernist ontological dualist category as to what is human/non-human, inanimate/animate, nature/culture (Blaser 2014). As a result, some perspectives are provided epistemic legitimacy, (that is, 'valid' ways of knowing) and others that are not. The epistemic hierarchy is (re)established which not only makes invisible the lived reality, experience and knowledge of historically marginalised communities, but also denies the conceptual frameworks of these communities as valid ways of worlding (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018). As Blaser states 'Ethnographic theory's re-engagement with radical alterity interrupts these forms of sameness by radicalising a key aim of postcolonial theory, namely the challenge to 'deeply enshrined colonial and Eurocentric ways of categorising the world.' (2014, 21)

A turn to ontology in ethnographic theory aims to move beyond a comparison between differing cultural perspectives, 'but also from within, not a comparison of ontologies, but comparison is ontology' (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 10). The critique laid on 'traditional' ethnography, as inherent to a colonial process assuming a singular perspective on the world resting on total transparency in the ethnographic interpretation of the Other, is what De Castro labels as conducting an 'uncontrolled equivocation' (1998). Following De Castro, Blaser (2009) describes ethnography as that of conducting a 'controlled equivocation', which implies reconceptualising cultural translation as a relative ontology.

Ethnography as a relative ontology requires acknowledging that what is present is ontologically diverse, whilst not bracketing off differences in terms of 'beliefs' and so different cultural perspectives on the world. Cultural translation as a relative ontology, aims to allow for the ontological categories that emerge to be fully explored in conducting an ethnographic interpretation. A controlled equivocation does not aim to fully 'know', instead a controlled equivocation acknowledges that the ethnographic encounter is inherently a bringing forth the limits to know, where these limits take seriously the presence of a radical alterity. It is an attempt to understand what is of concern that moves beyond a cultural relativist position and so challenges a single interpretation from a hierarchical set of ontological categories. As Blaser (2014) proposes, it does not aim to settle the 'interpretation' but rather provide the space and possibility for an 'and' not an either/or.

In this way, attention to narratives on the role of education and discourse framing intercultural education, reveals the construction of cultural and ontological boundaries that merge and mobilise past and present agency to sustain a legitimate territory. However, before turning to the analysis of the articulation of education through discourse, I briefly contextualise the territory in which I conducted my ethnographic study.

The territory

The indigenous Ecuadorian Amazonian territory in which I conducted my ethnographic study was only recognised by the state as an ancestral territory in 1993. It occupies an area

of 135,000 hectares located along one of the main tributaries that leads to the Amazon River, relatively close to the Ecuadorian/Peruvian boarder.

Most of the territory is covered by dense Amazonian rainforest and is made up of 5 communities, with approximately 2000 members belonging to this territory. Families live off traditional subsistence farming, and fluctuate between living in the territory and living in the regional towns and cities, for work, study, etc. The territory is inaccessible by road, it can only be reached by motorised canoe or by the small proper airplanes that are commonly used across the Amazon region. The national military in coordination with missionary churches, constructed these short grass runways in Amazonian communities during the twentieth century, to receive goods and for communication with strategic outposts.

In the late 1990s, the political leadership of this territory gained international recognition due to their resistance to oil extraction projects. To this date, this territory represents a significant political actor within the indigenous political agenda. Each of the 5 communities has its own elected organisational leadership as well as a central leadership group, and all adult members form part of a general assembly. The leadership posts rotate every 3–4 years which means most adults including men and women, will at some point take up some form of leadership role. Children and teenagers are also present in community assemblies though they do not have an official vote until they are 18. This means that experience of political organisation starts from very early on and leadership is relatively diffused among community members.

In terms of schooling, each of the 5 communities has a small primary school. Only the central and slightly larger community has one teacher for each of the 6 primary school grades, most have 2–3 teachers encompassing multigrade classrooms. A secondary school for all 5 communities is located close to the central community. The first permanent school was constructed by the community funded and run by the Dominican missionaries in the early 1960s, though according to the elders a single multigrade classroom temporarily appeared in the 1940s. At the time of my research between 2013 and 2015, approximately 400 students between the ages of 5 and 21 attended the community schools with 32 teachers. Of these 32 teachers only 3 did not identify as originally belonged to this territory with 2 of these identifying as *mestizo*. Out of the 32 teachers, all had a degree-level teaching qualification which is unusual for what is considered such a ‘far-away’ rural location. The reason for this, is that most of these teachers obtained their degree qualification in 2010 via an innovative in-situ teacher training programme developed as a multiagency project involving, the community organisation, the bilingual intercultural education system, a national and international university, and an international NGO. This project reflects the capacity of the local leadership to create networks and mobilise resources within the context of its own protagonist role as a political actor. It also meant that whilst the schools formed part of the public national intercultural bilingual education, there was also a strong sense of the role of education as part of the political agenda for self-determination.

Methodology

The data I present here, is a small part of a larger ethnography to explore how intercultural bilingual education policy and practice was implemented and negotiated from a

specific indigenous territorial perspective. Over a period of two years, I made a total of 10 visits to the territory, each one for a minimum of 3 and maximum of 6 weeks. I took part in general community activities, including collective work parties known as ‘mingas’, community assemblies and general household chores with the families I stayed with. In schools, I conducted classroom observations in each of the 5 primary school with a minimum of two teachers for two whole teaching days on at least two separate occasions and observed 4 secondary school teacher’s lessons, again on two separate occasions. I took observational notes for the entire teaching sessions, but only took audio recordings for sections of the lessons when I identified as potentially ‘rich points’ of interpretation (Martin-Jones and Martin 2017) that referenced local practices and knowledge that emerged as part of classroom interactions.

Positionality

The ethical process to conduct this research not only required individual consent from those I interviewed as well as teachers and school leadership in order to observe and audio record lessons, but it also required permission by the local indigenous leadership as gatekeepers to enter the territory. Local leadership, however only granted initial permission to enter the territory and a space on the agenda of one of the community general assemblies to present my interest in conducting research within the territory, the objectives and logistics this entailed. Only after receiving approval at the general assembly, which was not guaranteed, was I able to initiate the research including the necessary logistical coordination.

Whilst I was clearly seen as an ‘outsider’, as a white, European woman conducting research from a prestigious and therefore privileged university from the North, I wasn’t the first or only one. Researchers, collaborators, volunteers from national and international organisations, tourists, government officials and missionaries, form part of this territory ongoing history and if not a daily common sight, ‘outside’ visitors are a relatively regular occurrence. However, I was not a total stranger since my partner and I, have developed friendships with key community members from 2005 onwards working together and coordinating popular education programs including a young people’s network of the Ecuadorian Amazon region in resistance to extraction projects. It is unlikely I would have been given access to the general assembly, if I had not been identified as an ally in which the research could potentially support the ongoing struggle for self-determination. This meant that I was acutely aware of the sensitivity of researching within this territory. Also, given my background, I had an ongoing in-depth understanding of the wider political context in which the schools as part of the IBE system functioned. I understood some, though not all the tensions between different actors, and the differing discourses around these issues. What is important to note is that as a native bilingual myself (Spanish/English) I had before initiating this research expanded and incorporated a sufficiently shared linguistic repertoire to enable me to pass as an urban Ecuadorian, but most significantly to understand differing discourses in relation to Ecuadorian Amazonian local nuances in Spanish as well as identify what I potentially wasn’t able understand.

Whilst my level of Kichwa has never advanced from a basic level of communication, most community members are fluent bilinguals Kichwa/Spanish speakers. As part of the

research and due to my limited use of Kichwa I therefore conducted all interviews and conversations in Spanish, with some use of basic Kichwa. The lessons sections I recorded, mostly corresponded to those more organic interactions in the classrooms that took a bilingual form Kichwa/Spanish. Since my knowledge of Kichwa was basic but sufficient to identify relevant content, for the transcription and translation of these I worked with a Kichwa native speaker and linguist specialist.

Nadia's story: only nuns can enter Heaven, and an Indian girl cannot become a nun

At the time of my research, Nadia² was part of the elder's council representing one of community's central leadership roles. Nadia was in her late 60s to early 70s. She had seven adult children, some of which had studied abroad, including her eldest daughter who was a doctor who graduated from Cuba. Nadia was a widow: her husband had died relatively young but had been a key leader in mobilising the community and gaining territorial autonomy. I had spent some time around Nadia's home, since my partner knew one of her sons and her daughter-in-law was the secondary school director and they all lived together. I had wanted to interview Nadia about her knowledge of the territorial political struggle and experience with formal education for a while, but Nadia was always very busy and rarely alone.

One morning I did find Nadia alone peeling a large batch of yucca³ in preparation for the thick semi-fermented staple known as Chicha,⁴ and asked her permission to record our conversation. Nadia spoke fluent Spanish and picked up having experience living in various urban centres as well as travelling abroad.

When I asked Nadia about her own formal education, she explained she hadn't gone to school, though at the time, there was a state run one classroom school. According to Nadia this school was attended mostly by the children from the army barracks temporarily posted across the river and some boys from the community. Nadia explained that indigenous girls were not sent to school and her parents, though converted to Catholicism, mistrusted both schooling and the missionaries who came to the communities to recruit children for the missions. Having a rebellious nature, as Nadia described herself, she was curious and enticed by the stories of heaven told by the nuns, and so decided to run away as a young teenager to the mission to train as a nun. In Nadia's words, she wanted to become a nun 'to be able to go to heaven'. The reality of the mission was very different from what she had expected. She, together with other young indigenous girls, were put to work for long-hours performing manual labour. They were also indoctrinated into Catholicism, having to kneel and pray chanting words which as Nadia explained she didn't really understand. However, the worst thing was, to Nadia's surprise that she was told *she* wouldn't be able enter heaven anyway, since as the nun explained, 'only nuns could enter heaven and an 'indian' girl couldn't become a nun'! From Nadia's story it is not clear how long she stayed at the mission; however, she did eventually return home.

Nadia's testimony resonates strongly with the historical analysis of the relationship between the State and the so called 'Indian' settlements of the Amazonian Ecuadorian region. A colonial relationship was maintained until the late 1980s, by which the demarcation of governance by distinct Catholic missions granted by the Spanish crown was reproduced under republican state governments. This maintained the legal and political

figure of tutelage over the indigenous population, much like a guardian in relation to a child, in each of the corresponding Catholic missions' demarcations. In other words, particular indigenous peoples were categorised as 'pre-subjects'. For the Amazonian region in particular, formal education was introduced via Church missions including in the 1940s public schooling. As Davalos (2008) states, education was underpinned by the principle of conversion, in becoming a potential Christian subject and so recognised as possible political subject. Education throughout the twentieth century for the indigenous population is encountered as the lived experience of both being denied subject status as well as the only possibility of potentially becoming a subject recognised by the state.

Nadia was unable to become a nun no matter what she did because she was positioned as an Other at an ontological level. The personal account of exclusion as a Subject is a powerful testimony of the depth of injustice and abuse suffered. In retelling this story, Nadia relates her experience in context with the process of organisational political resistance and the existential threat from the territorial land grab by the Church and national colonisation projects promoted by the agrarian reforms of the 1960s and 70s. Nadia continued her narration as follows:

... to be as we are now, with a secondary school, with many things, this was done by organization. We organised ourselves. But without the mission. The mission prohibited us [from collective organisation] ... all missions prohibit that we become an organisation, that we speak [about this] ... And we became organised ... Now they address us, before they only addressed us as 'comadres',⁵ now they address us individually, those that know us. Now there is equality, we all get on, we also fight, before we could not argue back (Nadia, 2015; author's translation)

Nadia clearly reveals a marked relational hierarchy established between 'types' of Subjects. In this case Nadia relates how '*they*' did not refer to her and other women of the community as individuals but instead were addressed under the generic term of 'comadre'. 'Comadres' in this way is functioning as a homogenising term towards indigenous women based on their indigeneity, as well as reinforcing an imposed relationship which controversially denies an equivalent subject status. Nadia enunciates this authoritative figure as a '*they*' also marking an 'outside' in contrast to a collective '*we*', mobilised from within, i.e.: *we became an organization*. Nadia expresses the ontological subjective relationship as historically established, setting up a clearly lived 'outside' *they*, vs a lived 'inside' *we* based on the denial as Subjects.

An inside '*we*' is therefore constructed and narrated as part of the historical denial of Subject status by an outside '*they*', which is directly challenged through the exercise of collective agency. The exercise of agency is demonstrated via political organisation in which an inside '*we*' is able to disrupt the claim over land by the Church mission and government policies, at this historical moment in time. Eventually, as previously mentioned through wider political organisation this leads legal recognition of this indigenous territory by the State in the early 1990s. However, as Nadia tells, this territorial boundary is intrinsically linked with the existence of an inside '*we*'. For Nadia the change in recognition of subject status is evidenced both in that '*they*' now refer to her and others by name, and that '*we*' can 'argue back' to those representing an 'outside' authority, thereby having a voice as political subjects. Subject status is therefore part of a historical struggle in the context of unequal power relationships which is intrinsic to the construction of boundaries as an

‘inside’ vs. an ‘outside’. The mobilisation of collective agency enables the political legitimisation of territory inherent to the possibility of the continued emergence of a cultural project, to sustain relative autonomy in relationship with the State.

Not forgetting how to be ‘inside’

The political struggle also implied the possibility of obtaining material resources such as the existing schools, which from the 1990s formed part of a bilingual intercultural education system. At the time when Nadia’s children were growing up, a secondary school did not exist within the territory and those who wanted their children to receive secondary schooling had to send them to live temporarily in the locally regional urban towns. Nadia explained how sending her children to the ‘white’ urban town meant great sacrifice, it required taking on a significant financial burden, having to cover schooling costs, housing, and food, but it also meant exposing her children to abuse and discrimination on their own, potentially leading to alcohol abuse or worse.

Antonia – Why not stay in the community and not go to secondary school or university?

Nadia – Because it is also necessary, because how are they going to face these things like we now have to face [referring to oil extraction projects], it is necessary to know that of over there too. But without leaving behind that of here. But there are people however, that integrate only with that of over there, they want to forget that of here, but not my sons they are not of that mind. First that of here, they don’t forget how to be here ...

Antonia – And how do you not leave behind that of here ... ?

Nadia – It’s maintained living as we are, when they come from over there, being as we are, as we live, because those that integrate totally to that of over there, they come here and they don’t want to do anything of here, they do not even want to speak Kichwa, they only teach their children Spanish, and they don’t know Kichwa. (author’s translation)

Nadia’s explanation reveals how education is firmly constituted in terms of an ‘outside’ that needs to be engaged with to sustain an ‘inside’ and how this implies a potential ontological risk. She thus implies the existence of boundaries, by explicitly referring to an inside as (that of here) ‘lo de aca’ in relation to an outside, ‘lo de alla’ (that of over there). Nadia mentions the need to have studied outside to ‘know that of over there, too’. ‘Outside’ knowledge as Nadia explains is necessary in the context of the continued possibility of sustaining a territory and a political and cultural project against the very real threats that undermine this. Nadia constructs an inside in contrast to an outside but does so not only in terms of geographical boundaries but more substantially in relation to practices and knowledge of how to be ‘here’. An imagined centre is constituted as a way of bringing to existence of a cultural project defined by differences in the construction of boundaries: particular individuals, identified as cultural workers, can be understood as ‘travellers’ that act to create a space of interlocation (Rappaport 2005, 38). Travellers are therefore those who conduct and bridge this ‘frontier successfully in the construction of a hybrid discourse that articulates metropolitan forms of expression with indigenous cultural forms’ (Rappaport 2005, 40). Nadia positions her children as travellers and as successful interlocutors, for her this also implies the ability of travel whilst not ‘forgetting how to be here’: in other words, how to ‘be’ when returning to an ‘inside’.

However, interpreting strategic essentialism as the construction of boundaries only from a culturalist perspective in relation to bringing to existence a continuous cultural project, may miss the potential for understanding the enunciation of being and returning to an 'inside' more literally in reference to a crossing between ontological boundaries.

This allows for the possibility of bringing to existence a diverse ontology considering the concept of being able to retain a diverse 'perspective' as proposed by Vivieros de Castros' description of Amerindian perspectivism (1998, 2004). Amerindian perspectivism is not a simple cultural view of the world but is understood as a different form of being and world, in other words a diverse perspective is a diverse ontology. For De Castro (1998) Amerindian perspectivism radically opposes a modernist construction which constitutes a fixed and shared physical existence versus a relative cultural perspective on the world, i.e. a dualist Nature/Culture divide. Amerindian perspectivism implies a common culture across all beings versus relative corporeal forms, in this way the ability to change corporeal form is the ability to acquire knowledge of the world through this change of perspective, i.e. 'perspective is world':

In Amerindian cosmology, the real world of the different species depends on their points of view, since the "world in general" consists of the different species themselves. The real world is the abstract space of divergence between species as points of view. Because there are no points of view *onto* things, things and beings are the points of view *themselves*. (as Deleuze would say, 1988:203) (in De Castro 1998, 9)

De Castro (1998) describes this change in perspective told in relation to an encounter with a powerful 'Other', which in Kichwa is often referred to as Supay. There is much written about 'Supay' in Andean literature, described usually as powerful entities that have no fixed corporeal form and having been translated as evil spirits. However, anthropological literature (as well as my own lived experience with Amazonian Kichwas) is one where the description of these encounters with Supay is complex, and though emphasised as highly dangerous and to be avoided, can also be an encounter where power is gained. Amazonian Kichwas frequently refer to changes in corporeal form and related perspective through storytelling, songs, and narratives, however, only some retain the ability to change corporeal form (Kohn 2015; Uzendoski 2004). An encounter with Supay involves a change in corporeal form forced by the Supay which can mean gaining power through acquiring this knowledge through this perspective. However, the danger lies in not being able to return to the original perspective, i.e. back to a person form (De Castro 1998, 2004; Uzendoski 2004). Only, some highly knowledgeable individuals such as yachaks (powerful shaman) have the power in an encountering with Supay to retain the ability to change perspective back to the original form and so avoid being fixed in a different perspective (De Castro 1998).

Nadia emphasises the risk involved in the boundary crossing between an inside and an outside as that of a potential permeant departure, a forgetting how to be 'inside', referring to those that make this crossing and 'integrate totally to that of over there'. In Nadia's telling of boundary crossings there is an implicit notion of knowing how to travel as the ability of not forgetting a way of being, which is constitutive of an 'inside' in contrast to a way of being 'outside'. 'Inside' and 'outside' are constructed not only in terms of geographical crossings or cultural perspectives, but also as an ontological crossing requiring the ability to know how to return to an original perspective, a not forgetting how to *be* 'inside'.

Interpreting strategic essentialism as the construction of boundaries only in relation to bringing to existence a continuous cultural project, may miss the potential for understanding the enunciation more literally in reference to a crossing between ontological boundaries. In this way territory and being are co-constructed, which corresponds to a wider indigenous discourse that describes territory as an inherent relational aspect of ones being. Both the possibility of constructing a cultural project as well as the possibility of sustaining an ability to change ontological perspective is implicit and brought to existence through discourse. I will now explore how this is articulated directly in relation to intercultural education translated to that of the need to establish an own education within the territory.

Our education and 'lo nuestro'

Prior to my ethnographic study, in 2010 I was invited to a general community assembly that had been specially called to discuss a plan for developing and implementing a local curriculum, stated as 'un currículo propio' (our own curriculum). Repeatedly expressed by the community's leadership was the importance of establishing an 'own education', summarised as; 'we need our own education where our knowledge and outside knowledge is taught' (Community assembly, April 2010). It is important to mention that an 'own education' was not meant as an independent system separate from the public intercultural bilingual education system but as part of this.

Four years later, in conducting my ethnographic research I was surprised to learn that this 'own curriculum' was a cause of tension between teachers and community leadership since it had not been able to be implemented. One of the reasons given, was the loss of the draft document outlining this curriculum drawn up at the end of the in-situ teacher-training process. I was told this document had been misplaced and there were no hard or digital copies to be found. The need for a tangible document, whilst at first may seem trivial, is however revealing, reflected the growing political tension at the time over the governance of an intercultural bilingual education system.

In 2009, the semi-autonomous national intercultural bilingual education department under the governance of CONAIE was revoked and subsumed under the centralised Ministry of Education. In 2011 a new education law was passed which among other things declared the entire education system as intercultural. Whilst rights to cultural specificity within an intercultural bilingual education system were retained this had to be integrated within delivering the national curriculum (for an in-depth discussion of this period see Álvarez Palomeque and Montaluisa Chasiqiza 2012; Martínez Novo 2016 and Rodríguez Cruz 2017). Specific cultural characteristics such as language specificity, and the inclusion of 'indigenous cosmovision' as a separate curricula subject were officially incorporated as citizenship criteria relative to indigenous nationalities within the specificity of IBE. However, the danger lies in that cultural differences in this way appear static, requiring being demonstrated and tend towards the essentialisation of difference. The anxiety from both teachers and community leadership was therefore evident throughout the time of my research. 'Our own education' as representing a relative level of educational autonomy was under threat from having to comply with centrally established curricula content and learning outcomes whilst simultaneously having to demonstrate differences in relation to demonstrable fixed criteria. In this way, an

education project aiming to sustain a balance between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ power relationships for relative territorial autonomy was under threat.

As part of my research I conducted several workshops with the teachers and the community leadership. In one of these workshops I aimed to explore the conceptualisation of *lo nuestro* (that which is ours) versus *lo de afuera* (that from outside) from the perspective of local teachers and the difficulties of translating this into classroom practice. Of the 32 teachers, 19 took part in the workshop in 4 groups of discussion, to consider the purpose of teaching ‘that which is ours’ and what may this look like in the classroom. All 4 groups stated ‘using our language’ as well as specific cultural practices, identified with ‘our stories, legends and crafts’ as representative of ‘that which is ours’ in the classroom. These aspects of cultural specificity which would appear to be relatively tangible and have been integral to the broader IBE model from the start. However, as has been widely discussed in the literature (and beyond the remit of this article), language specificity and its use have been difficult to implement and is a highly complex issue in the context of IBE. Significantly, teachers also referred an educational purpose as ‘the autonomy to make all our decisions by consensus’ and linked to ‘our territory’ Therefore, *lo nuestro* ‘that which is ours’ is clearly being articulated in coherence with a territorial cultural project that is sustained via the possibility of the co-construction of ‘inside’ vs an ‘outside’. As part of an own education, ‘that from the outside’ was specified in terms Spanish and English languages, scientific knowledge, subject knowledge and technology and communication. An intercultural education represents the ideal of maintaining this tension and balance representing school as containing both an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’ within the territory. The demand for demonstratable cultural characteristics, appeared to be tipping the balance of the role of an intercultural education able to function in relation to the possibility of co-construction of ‘inside’ vs ‘outside’. Intercultural bilingual education was, in danger of representing too much of an ‘outside’ without being able to demonstrate a clear ‘inside’.

Here, however, I turn to the less tangible characteristics stated in relation to ‘that which is ours’ with the concept of ‘Sacha Runa Yachay’. The literal translation from Quichua means knowledge of the forest person. Neither easily defined nor demonstrable. This term was also officially expressed as part of the community’s outlining of an alternative development plan, named as ‘Plan de Vida’ (Life Plan) in 2003. The document contrasted with central government development plans that circumscribe different forms of land use, including oil exploitation for this region. It can be understood that the teachers were expressing the term Sacha Runa Yachay as part of the official political discourse of this territorial project.

In the workshop, teachers did not seem to want to expand on the term ‘Sacha Runa Yachay’ beyond naming this and translating it into Spanish. However, one of the teachers I stayed with and Franco who I discuss a little further on, both referred to *Sacha Runa Yachay* in reference to the traditional practices of going on *purina*. This relates to travelling to and living in the forest for relative periods of time. An important element of going on Purina as both teachers explained was the connection between the younger generation and the whole family. As such purinas were mentioned as conducted in the school holiday breaks.

Norman Whitten who conducted extensive ethnographic work during the 1970s with Canelos Quichuas (within the region of the current territory in which I conducted this

ethnographic research) made extensive reference to Sacha Runa (Whitten, 1975). Whitten states: 'The ability to understand life's processes, to become integrated with them as an intellectual, questing, creative human is the primary meaning of Sacha Runa – jungle person, knowledgeable person' (Whitten, 1975, 35). Whitten extends this in a footnote to describe knowledgeable person in relation to knowledge of the forest both in terms of a physical understanding as well and the knowledge granted by 'spirits of the forest ... through dreams and visions' (Whitten, 1975, 59). Whitten also describes *purinas*⁶ as significant ancestral links in the deeper forest areas, as way of living in closer contact with the forest and ancestral entities (219).

Sacha Runa appears to have morphed into Sacha Runa Yachay brought into the context of the school project to represent the notion of an intercultural education as that which belongs to the 'inside', 'that which is ours'. There is little doubt that this is articulated as a central element to the possibility of maintaining an own cultural project inherent to the political project of sustain relative territorial autonomy. However, by conducting a controlled equivocation following Amerindian perspectivism, Sacha Runa Yachay can also be articulated as a type of person. From Amerindian perspectivism Sacha Runa and Sacha Runa Yachay is the same thing, since perspective is world and therefore, being, is knowledge of world.

Sacha Runa Yachay whilst not demonstrable as a tangible content in the classroom, continues to be associated with *purinas* that now seem to be adapted around the school calendar. Similarly, to Nadia's narrative there is a need to differentiate between an 'inside' and an 'outside', whereby here, Sacha Runa Yachay can also be understood as the possibility of conducting ontological crossing in the context of what an 'own education' enables.

Franco's explanation: an education that faces west

Franco, one of the community teachers at the time of my research, is in his mid to late 50s and is among one of the most experienced local teachers. He grew up and for the most part has lived within this territory. By the time I observed the lesson which is transcribed in part below, I had developed a good relationship with him. He was one of the teachers most interested in discussing indigenous knowledge and practices, which as he said was probably why he had been given the secondary school subject of indigenous cosmovisions to teach, and which unlike other subjects did not have a formal curriculum or even an associated textbook. Franco had 8 grown up children and he and his wife lived with his wife's parents. Franco had told me that he enjoyed living with his in-laws having much respect for his father-in-law who was one of the communities *yachaks* (shamans), from whom who he had learned a lot.

I had arranged with Franco to sit in on one of these lessons, which included 12 students both male and female ranging in age from 16 to early 20s. The students were sat in individual chairs under a thatched roof made from the leaves of bush like palm locally known as *Lisang*.⁷ The students were randomly positioned, some sitting in huddled groups but others not, though all facing the direction of Franco's desk at one edge of the classroom, next to a greenboard propped up on two chairs. I sat on one of the spare chairs among the students towards the back. The lesson theme as explained to me by Franco was on the relationship between young people and elders, since

Franco felt that most young people were not valuing community traditions and advice that elders had to give. The section I transcribed and translated here occurred towards the end of the lesson when the discussion took a turn towards the relevance of current education and defining the difference between 'western' and 'ancestral' education.

The discussion started because one of the students challenged the previous discussion about the need to respect elders and value their advice. A student had raised the point that most adults insist on the importance of studying but this would seem inconsistent with valuing traditions and acquiring ancestral knowledge, since as he stated education 'here now, is not ancestral'. Below I present the transcript where Franco picks up this challenge and explores a contrast between ancestral and western education: I include the original vernacular transcript and the English translation:

Now a days, about what our 'compañero' has said, I'm going to talk about the shamanism diet, because this was ancestral education, it was Shamanism; work, fishing, hunting, all this comes into the education. But now, currently education is westernized, it faces west, converting us. This western education, I isn't like this [ancestral education], this is why I speak [of it]. (Franco, 2015, author's translation)

Franco addresses the student as 'compañero', a Spanish term similar to the notion of 'brotherhood' and which implies an equal positioning of status. Franco acknowledges the student's argument and appears to make use of this by exploring the notion of ancestral education. Franco directly relates ancestral education to the shaman's diet, stating: 'I'm going to talk about the shamanism diet, because this was ancestral education'. Diet, in this context, refers to a complex practice that Shaman's undertake as part of a becoming. The Shaman's diet is a ritualistic process, it has been explained to me that the foods consumed are those from the forest and involves a spiritual commune with those non-human Others. As Franco explains Shamanism is all that the Shamans do; 'work, fishing, hunting, all this comes into the education'.

Franco explicitly discusses how education now differs from ancestral education, describing it as 'westernized'. He states that a westernised education, 'faces west' and addresses this as 'converting us'. Conducting this analysis in coherence with Amerindian perspectivism and the direct reference to Shaman's practices as an ancestral education, the differentiation between western and ancestral education, is being framed in relation to a change in perspective. Given that the Shaman's acquisition of knowledge is that of having the ability to change perspective, it can be understood that ancestral education is that which is equivalent to the ability to return to an original perspective. By describing 'western' education as a conversion, it can be understood that the danger lies in the fixing of perspective as that of facing west, and so becoming 'western'. Franco closes the lesson, stating 'this is why I speak of it', where *it*, is 'ancestral' education. The emphasis here of speaking by naming ancestral education as Shamans practices, appears to directly relate to the similar notion of 'not forgetting' that Nadia emphasised. Speaking of what is ancestral education to the students would appear to be a way of encouraging the students to recall and engage with the Shaman's practices, i.e. of not forgetting. This 'not forgetting' incorporating an Amerindian perspectivism implies the ability to conduct the ontological boundary that a 'western' education represents whilst retaining the ability to change perspective.

Conclusions

Education in this territory is part of a complex encounter, involving the historical denial of subject status and the need to demonstrate difference as a claim to a territorial project for self-determination. Intercultural education is firmly framed as boundary construction, enunciated as 'lo propio', 'lo nuestro'(ours), 'lo de aca' (that of here) versus 'lo de alla' (that of over there), 'lo de afuera' (that of outside). Nadia's narrative explicitly addresses the dangers involved in this boundary crossing. The significance lies in knowing how to travel well. Conducting a controlled equivocation and taking seriously the notion that perspective is world and that knowledge is therefore enabled as an ontological change in perspective, education can be understood as also representing an ontological boundary crossing. Sacha Runa Yachay as a central concept that defines 'that which is ours' in terms of an 'own education' cannot be understood as demonstrable in the classroom, however as a relative ontology this allows for intercultural education to function as both an 'inside' and 'outside', as that of knowing world by being able to cross ontological boundaries. In Franco's lesson, this is made explicit by contrasting perspectives in which education 'faces west' in contrast to 'ancestral' as the Shaman's practices.

The reference of 'lo propio' 'lo de aca' (ours, that of here) as well as 'lo de afuera' (that of outside) in the context of intercultural bilingual education in this territory constructs interculturality as representing a boundary crossing inside the territory. Interculturality can therefore be understood, not only as a dispute between demonstrating difference as fixed cultural categories of the positioning of the historical racialised construction of difference, but also as the possibility of sustaining a flexible essence. In other words, incorporating Amerindian perspectivism in the analysis of discourses in relation to the encounter with education and territory enables interculturality to also be understood as that about acquiring the ability to change perspective, avoiding the danger of a fixed perspective. Interculturality in relation to education is inherently associated with the possibility of sustaining an 'inside' i.e. a territory in contrast to an 'outside'. In this way, essentialisation may need to be understood beyond that of strategic cultural essentialisation. An essentialist duality incorporated into the role of intercultural education as part of a historical struggle to retain a territorial project is also framed as the possibility of retaining a way of *being* inside in contrast to a way of *being* outside. Conceptualising interculturality in coherence with situated practices and discourse therefore implies extending this to the ability to sustain flexible ontology, of knowing how to cross ontological boundaries.

Notes

1. Mestizo is a dominant cultural identity across Latin America and can be literally translated to mixed heritage, however, for an in-depth discussion of the hierarchical construction a Mestizo cultural identity see Albo 2004; and Walsh 2009.
2. All names of members of the communities are pseudonyms to protect their privacy and it is for this reason I do not specifically name the indigenous territory.
3. Yucca or as named locally in kichwa 'lumu' is the sweet manioc found in the region of South America, the common staple in these regions of the Amazon.
4. Chicha is a generic name for a common staple across the Andean region and beyond made from different starchy products such as corn in the highlands and sweet yam in the Amazon region which is drunk at different levels of fermentation and is usually prepared by women.

5. Comadre is a Spanish term commonly used in the Andean region to refer to a close relationship that though non-familial takes on a similar connotation.
6. Whitten describes purina, as a trek system, connecting the ayllu units (for a detailed description see Whitten, 1975, 19 and 125. See also Harrison 1994, Signos, Cantos y Memoria en los Andes. Traduciendo la lengua y la cultura quechua).
7. Lisang is the local name given to the leaves of the plants used for thatching common across this region of the Amazon.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the data collection included in this paper was obtained in 2014 by the ethics committee of The School of Modern Languages, Newcastle University, UK.

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