Report - Yachay Wasi School visit to Quito - Ecuador

The Yachay Wasi (House of Wisdom) Intercultural and Bilingual School in Quito, a glimpse into the future…



The Yachay Wasi starts the day with dance.

When Jesica (from Somos Semillas) first mentioned the school as we drove towards the mighty Yr Wyddfa mountain in North Wales, I became very enthusiastic about visiting Ecuador. The idea of supporting an indigenous project based on popular education seemed quite ideal, but what I found was beyond my expectations!

The Yachay Wasi school is located in a southern neighbourhood - Francisco Matis in Quito, on a hill overlooking the city. The school was founded 30 years ago by Mashi Fernando and Mashi Laura. ‘Mashi’ is a term of endearment to refer to someone, akin to a fraternal friend, which I learned very quickly. As soon as I met all the children, they began calling me Mashi Javi. Everyone in the school, both children and teachers, uses this term to refer to each other.

The school was formed in response to the racist attitudes towards indigenous people in Quito by white and “mestizo” Ecuadorians. The founders of the school are Kichwa, a nation that expands from the Ecuadorian Amazon along the whole of the Andes. The Kichwa people are agrocentric, cosmocentric and biocentric, which means that

their social, political and cultural practices are intricately woven into their everyday lives:

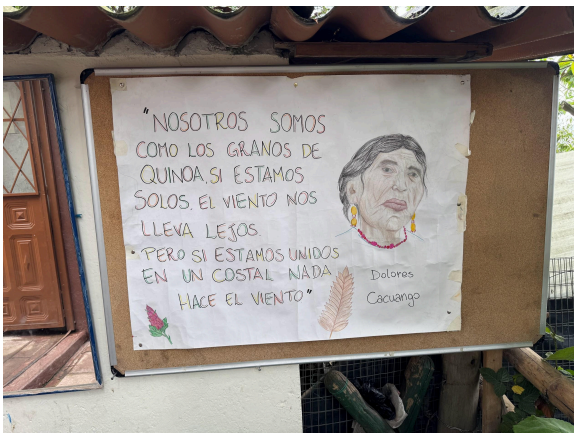
1. **Ritual:** everything must begin with a ritual that pays respect and asks for permission - ‘mingachiway’ - from the Apus, the spirits that dwell in all aspects of nature.
2. **Sacred Nature:** the Kichwa people believe that everything is sacred - from the tallest mountain to the smallest rock, every plant, tree and microorganism, is sacred and part of Pachamama; the cosmic and physical God of the Tawantinsuyo’s people (Abya Yala/South America).

According to some human rights organisations, the Kichwa people are “arguably” the biggest nation of the first nations people in the world. They are a proud people, and their bravery and rebellion has enabled them to preserve their language, cultural practices and cosmovision despite over five hundred years of Western colonisation and oppression. As a nation they are politically active within the spheres of the Ecuadorian government and society at large. Through their confederation of indigenous nations, the CONAIE, they are constantly advocating not only for human rights but also for the rights of Pachamama, which is considered an entity with legal rights within the Ecuadorian constitution; they have forced the Ecuadorian government through mobilisation and direct action to terminate contracts with powerful oil multinationals such as Occidental, successfully ousting the company from Ecuador.

The school



The symbols at the entrance of the school: Chakana



Ecuadorian Indigenous heroin Dolores Cacuango

The physical space where the school resides was donated by the parents of mashi Fernando, over 30 years ago. They themselves were indigenous campesino migrants who spent all their lives working on menial jobs in the city and who endured endless forms of prejudices from Quito’s inhabitants. One of mashi Fernado’s father’s employers sold him the land on credit, which he paid off with labour for the rest of his life.

The school comprises a three-story building featuring a small library, a computer room, two small classrooms, a medium sized open space for physical education and

assemblies, and a small room for guests/visiting teachers on the third floor. On the second floor there are four small classrooms, on the ground floor 2 classrooms and two patios. A large roofed area provides the space where the children can play, as well as an area for practicing rituals and dance before class each day. There is also a kitchen where a dedicated volunteer, the mother of a student, prepares food daily for all the teachers and other volunteers.

Within the school there is also a large flat that is home to mashi Fernado, Laura and their daughter Ninari, the new school director. There is also a visiting teacher, Cynthia, a young woman from the Ecuadorian diaspora in Spain, who currently lives at the school and has dedicated her life to its mission. There is a large open piece of land (the Chakra), next to the building. This is the heart of the space and has been cultivated with all varieties of food, including multicolored corn, pumpkin, beans, chillies, fruit trees including lemons and oranges, all kinds of medicinal plants and a polytunnel for other vegetables. There they keep bees, have a composting area, and have compost toilets in the space. There is even room for three llamas, which all the children from the different grades take turns to look after. A large part of the school ethos is to '*campesinar la ciudad',* which means to bring the Andean belief system to the urban context.

The people: the Yachay Wasi School Ayllu (community)



Mashi Ninari and mashi Laura.



Mashi Fenando explaining the Pachakuti to Cinthia before then Social Science class.

The school is now spearheaded by mashi Ninari, the director and daughter of the founders. She embodies the method and philosophy of the school: Ninari is an ecofeminist, anti-patriarchist, anti-racist, political activist, musician and educator who is completely in love with her ancestral roots. These are symbolised in her anaku (traditional dress), which she wears daily with pride as a political statement of her identity and resistance towards the colonial project. She is a fierce advocator of the Kichwa language, which is one of the subjects she teaches in the school and a relentless fighter for women's rights; she is an organiser of several indigenous women spaces, including the founder of the first Samba band (*batucada*) of indigenous women in Quito.

Ninari's father, mashi Fernando, now a volunteer elder in the school, holds important ancestral wisdom and is an avid intellectual writer and political activist and educator. Mashi Laura continues to be an educator and the mother chakrera (main person in charge of the chakra). She is a herbalist, holder of rituals, spirituality and seeds, and she is an important contributor to the general ancestral method of education for the school. She writes and is a political activist among many more facets.There are many other Kichwa teachers, including Cynthia, and the school receives volunteers from the US and Italy who contribute to the children's education by teaching English and serving as support teachers.

There are currently 69 children from the ages of 4 to 12 who receive all their primary education in the Yachay Wasi school. Alongside Kichwa, there are children of mixed heritage, Quechua, Afro Ecuadorian, Afro Colombian, and some of whom have been forcibly displaced by violence from Colombian territories bordering Ecuador and Venezuela.

In addition to the conventional subjects such as Math, Science, History (from an Indigenous perspective) and Languages (Kichwa, Spanish, English), all activities are both in Kichwa and Spanish. The children also learn how to organise, raise their voices in public spaces and conduct public demonstrations through arts and ritual addressing issues in the public sphere. I witnessed them talking publicly against multinational oil corporations and conducting rituals of healing on poisoned rivers by oil spillages in their northern territories. Their discussions on gender, identity and sexuality are profound; Ninari is openly lesbian, is an active advocator of women's reproductive rights and abortion is a subject of discussion and study in the school. The children also learn music, capoeira, poetry and agroecology.

The Chackra



The food and medicine garden - Chakra



Medicine and beekeeping at the Yachay Wasi

On the first morning I arrived at the school, I was given a tour of the whole grounds by the children of year 6 and 7. They took me from place to place, showing me the medicinal plants and explained what each was good for, along with their chemical properties, traditional names and uses.

All the children are required to participate in the Chackra 'rising', which involves not just 'growing', but also nurturing plants that are both for medicine and for food. This is a very important aspect of their cosmology that children actively learn: all living

things are siblings and therefore must be treated with dignity and respect. It is often the case that when a child becomes uneasy for whatever reason, they are encouraged to talk to their siblings and Apus in the Chakra to help them calm down. I witnessed this practice working when a small child reported feeling better after having spent 10 minutes in conversation with the plants and llamas, which I thought was a much more effective strategy than to send children to the “naughty corner” or to detention.



Children teaching me about medicinal plants and me teaching them about rock meal and minerals

Interspecies and beyond-human communication is not merely a trendy ‘new age’ or Montessori method at the school. For the Yachay Wasi, it is a fundamental principle of their cosmology. This approach forms a decolonial agenda that allows the children to conceptualise the ancestral world of the Andes; a pluri-world inhabited by material and non-material siblings that can communicate and cooperate to ensure the equilibrium of life. Therefore, there are rituals and observances of these for everything such as the birth and death of a person, river or forest. Celebrations include the equinoxes (feminine/moon); Pawkar Raymi for blossoming, planting or harvesting; Inti Raymi - the festival of the Sun (male/sun) marking the beginning of

the year; Killa Raymi (female) – the festival of the moon and harvest, and the winter solstice known as Kapak Raymi (male) - the Andes summer.

These rituals are agrocentric, represented in the Chakana - the Andean cross and ancient symbol with astronomical connotations. The Chakana assists in identifying dates for rituals as well as the elaboration of the Agro-festive Community Rituals Calendar (CARAC acronym in Spanish). The calendar is a tool used to identify signs; the emergence of a type of flower at a certain time, the arrival and departure of migratory birds marking the beginning of a certain time to cultivate a particular plant, etc. These practices are highly functional in a culture that is still very much connected to its observation of the environment and the acknowledgement of signs in that given environment; it is “the way in which the Apus or Pachamama herself speak” - as I was told. This technology is an ancient tool to observe the changes throughout the year, enabling people to decode the ecology of a place that is alive and “talking” to them as they “grow/raise” food and medicine for the ayllu (community).

The Method: Ishkay Yachay – two ways of knowing

The Eagle and The Condor is a more than 2000-year-old Andean prophecy. As I learnt at the school, it speaks of a time where two ways of knowing would come in contact and from this a new ‘Pachakuti’, a new epoch would begin, instigating a cycle of conflict and chaos. This is in reference to 1492 and the arrival of Europeans in the now known territory of the Americas and the later developed ideas of the industrial revolutions and the “enlightenment” times in Europe. The prophecy goes further to say that a new era would begin when these two ways of knowing would balance each other out. It is believed that the Eagle represents the western way; intellectualism, order, structure, logos – with an emphasis in the mind, and the Condor represents the indigenous knowledge, creativity, feelings, the heart and the eros.



It is within this epistemological understanding that the school’s curriculum is set. Children are educated to centre themselves within Andean cosmology and principles, yet without ignoring what modern science is also telling us. As proof of this, I participated in a session where the school invited a Kichwa woman chemical engineer to discuss her research on hair, water and crude oil, highlighting how fibers inspired on the chemical composition of hair are being used to address and clean up oil spillages. It is important that the children learn from modern methods, but not as one being imposed over the other, but rather in a reciprocal and complementary relationship; Ishkay Yachay.

The children’s education is also intercultural, which means that for this institution no one way is being superimposed on others. For example: the school celebrates and highlights the African Andean historical heritage. All children learn about maroon communities and their struggles for freedom, their leaders, as well as their culture, music, celebrations and rituals, which are also practised in the Yachay Wasi. The children are all encouraged to wear clothes that celebrate each individual culture, so some children of African descent wear clothes that allude to their heritage with pride. The school has many Afro-Ecuadorian visiting teachers, artists and musicians who also work with the children. The school supports and advocates for the struggles of the Afro Ecuadorian communities in the highlands as well as in Esmeraldas, a coastal region inhabited mostly by people of African descent and where recently there has been oil spillages caused by crude oil multinationals in the area.

The New Yachay Wasi Project of Biocultural Education in Agato – Otavalo Region.



Taita (father) Imbabura, sacred volcano and home of the new Yachay Wasi School branch

On my 5th day of the visit and after having participated in the school activities, classes, lectures, rituals, dances and facilitated workshops in agroecology in the Chakra with the children, Ninari took me to Agato in the Otavalo, a Kichwa region. This area is well known for the extraordinary andean artisan textile industry, Lake San Pablo and the mighty Taita Imbabura volcano, sacred to the Kichwa people. A couple of years ago, Mashi Ninari started to build another building for a second branch of the Yachay Wasi School on a plot of land in this ancestral territory two hours north of Quito. We stayed in Mashi Ninari’s grandmother's house, where I

learnt so much about the personal histories and struggles of the indigenous and campesino movement in Ecuador, sharing wonderful traditional Kichwa food comprised of multicolored sweet corn and all kinds of beans, also of many colours.There I listened to stories where magic and reality intertwine, like reading a book by Gabriel Garcia Marquiez. In this community, mashi Ninari, her parents and other colleagues spend their weekends organising.

The need to have a school that promotes the Ishkay Yachay (two ways of knowing) in their ancestral territory arose from a deep concern and years of observation on the impact of the invasion of Christian Evangelical and Mormon churches. These groups have moved into the area and are building large buildings for the evangelisation of the Kichwa people, which is affecting their ancestral way of life. These churches and their practices are part of the colonial project of eradicating indigenous ways of knowing and being, where the emphasis is to demonise any Kichwa practice that venerates Mother Earth as a living god, instead of worshipping Jehovah. Attached to these churches are also new schools for primary and secondary education for young people.

The main objective of the Yachay Wasi School is to create a space where people can celebrate and elevate the Kichwa way of life and where children, young people and women can build resilience and feel pride of who they are, as well as become critical thinkers to face the new evangelisation project. Furthermore, they want it to also be a space for residentials where city and urban communities of young people can meet and collaborate, learn from each other and have a place to practice freedom.

They are seeking support from the AMT to build the necessary infrastructure for their new space. The plot of land is 17m x 53m. One of the ideas is to create a bioconstruction project where the community in general can learn how to build a large structure with traditional ecological techniques and designate a large space for the chackra (food growing). The new building would consist of many different rooms for academic and artistic learning, modelled on the existing space in Quito.