The Migration of Indigenous Ecuadorian Youth in the Age of the 'Migration Dream': Migration as a Collective Effort of a Village to Sustain its Cultural Identity in a Globalised World

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the migration of the young generation in Salasaka within the context of the 'age of the migration dream' (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010), and on three approaches to answering the question of why people migrate through migration theories: the economic approach, the systemic approach, and the narrative approach. It discusses the decision-making processes relating to migration, which are key to understanding perceptions and attitudes towards migration within communities. To gather data on this topic, longitudinal observation and interviews were conducted in the village of Salasaka in the Ecuadorian highlands, a community where cultural heritage and cultural identity, as locals understand it, are deeply valued. Nowadays, the youth have developed new ways of maintaining 'traditional' customs. They more often move away from the village than their grandparents, who lived in an endogamous environment. The text contributes to a broader understanding of migration as a social phenomenon, particularly in relation to the preservation of cultural heritage in the context of globalisation, as the traditional and the modern become intertwined in the context of an Indigenous village shaped by migration ties. A key concept for understanding migration in this kind of village, as the research found, is collective remittances and the use of modern means to sustain tradition.*

Keywords: *cultural heritage; cultural identity; globalisation; illegal migration; indigenous village; indigenous youth; migration narratives*

Introduction

Ecuadorians are a population with a rich experience of migration. In 2020, about 8% of them (approximately 1.2 million people) lived abroad (Jokisch 2023). Mass emigration from the country began in the 1980s, mainly to the United States (in the 2020s, this accounted for 41% of Ecuadorian international migration) and from the 1990s, to Spain (in the 2020s, 36%), and less so to other European countries and other countries on the American continent (Jokisch 2023). Statistical data show that migration attracts mainly young men, regardless of whether they are single or married. They are often from rural backgrounds but migrate to large cities; 64% of migrants to the US live in the New York metropolitan area (Jokisch, Pribilsky 2002).

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I volunteered in the Ecuadorian village of Salasaka, which was experiencing a large wave of illegal migration to New York at the time. I was able to follow the discourse on migration and observe the decision-making processes that accompanied the migration wave. Two years later, I returned to the village to collect more detailed ethnographic data and record the decision-making processes and ideological background of migration directly in the source rural area of Ecuadorian migration, or more precisely, a variant of it captured in one particular village. During my ethnographic fieldwork, I volunteered as an English teacher at a local school in cooperation with a local NGO.

The topic addressed by this research revolves around a significant and ever-present question: whether to migrate and leave one's family and village behind or to stay and support the community on site. Migration narratives opened up the question in everyday practice, framing the choice as a dichotomy between staying with one's family and preserving cultural ties or leaving in pursuit of a dream of a more prosperous life abroad.

Salasaka

The village of Salasaka is recognised as a cultural heritage village within Ecuador. It is located in the Tungurahua Province in the center of Ecuador, halfway along the road from Ambato to Baños. In written materials, it appears under the designation 'Salasaca' or 'Salasaka'. In this text, I use the written form Salasaka, which is more common in the local environment. The parish of Salasaka covers

a territory of 12.49 km^2 and the population census indicates it has 6,288 inhabitants.[1] This was almost 7% more than in the last census in 2001. This means that despite the large-scale migration, the population is not decreasing but, on the contrary, increasing.

The inhabitants of Salasaka belong to the Kichwa Indigenous people, the largest Indigenous nationality with nearly 800,000 members, who make up 12% of the population of Ecuador.[2] As an Indigenous village, Salasaka has the specific status of being ethnographically documented (Velázquez and Jiménez Jerez 2021) and attracts tourists as well as curiosity seekers. The opportunity to visit it is advertised on several websites.[3] External interest in tradition may also reinforce the tendency among the older generation to still live in a traditional way in terms of their dress and livelihood; they work in agriculture and eat the food they produce.

However, this village is also going through social change resulting from globalisation. There was a generational shift when the younger generation began to drift away from the villagers' traditional ways. While their parents worked in agriculture and often had only a basic education, and some of their grandparents did not speak Spanish or did not know how to read or write, many in the young generation study at universities, work in state offices, appear on television, moderate local cultural events, or produce artisanal artefacts. Customs and traditions are, however, proudly displayed and celebrated even by the younger generation. My informants actively participated in their community gatherings, striving to uphold their traditional clothing, such as the poncho, the Kitchwa language (the Ecuadorian dialect of Quechua), and traditional celebrations. There, I realised the importance of everyone's responsibility to their community and their village. Also, there was a political effort in 2021 to focus on Indigenous rights and support them. According to Corr and Powers (2012), during continuous disputes with the majority, Salasaka, rather than becoming another mestizo community, became a zone of cultural resistance as Indigenous actors made a conscious decision to maintain a specific cultural identity (Corr and Powers 2012: 25). 'Ecuadorian writers have frequently described the Salasakas as fiercely protective of their territory and their cultural identity and as proudly refusing to show deference

1 https://citypopulation.de/en/ecuador/parish/admin/tungurahua/180758__salasaca/

2 See for instance the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs: https://iwgia.org/en/ and the United Nations Population Fund: https://www.unfpa.org/.

3 For instance: https://esperanzaproject.com/cosmology-polycrisis/the-salasaka-of-ecuador-weaving-wisdom-healing-and-tradition/; https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g7794056-d23855852-Reviews-Turismo_Comunitario_Salasaka-Salasaca_Tungurahua_Province.html; https://www.socialbnb.org/en/l/turismo-comunitario-salasaka-twobedroom/6065ebc4-9565-40d7-a9b3-7eab1a5d6169

to whites' (Corr and Powers 2012: 8). They value their traditions in response to the majority and find themselves in a specific position as an ethnic minority with its own social inequalities. There is a continuous movement in Ecuador for Indigenous rights and for continuing Indigenous traditions.

Migration and mobility in the age of globalisation

Postmodern sociological theories can be applied to the potential migrant's decision-making, as today's globalised society frames it. Youth in many places share things in common and follow the same social media. So even though life is different, the influences of globalism can be applied. The case of decision-making in Salasaka can be imagined through the eyes of postmodernist authors, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000). The village of Salasaka is, on the one hand, a very traditional village, but, on the other hand, also a very globalised one, and the transnational community can be an example of that. In Salasaka, everyone has international ties with somewhere else, and the village can be seen as influenced by these experiences.

Bauman (2000) uses the term 'liquid modernity' to characterise society today. He argues that modern societies have moved from static structures and stable institutions to a fluid and fragmented state. Contemporary society lacks certainties and is constantly changing, and long-term stability and commitments are disappearing. There has been a shift from the traditional to the postmodern in terms of internationalism, relationships, and identities, where social arrangements have become transitory and uncertain (Garforth 2009). Society, therefore, has an anomic structure (Durkheim 1966) with no clear norms or rules. It is in a time of change, where modernisation, globalisation, and transnationalism make the possibility of migration omnipresent (Bauman, 2000).

People can break free from traditional roles; however, to break free means getting rid of certain bonds. There is then a constant conflict between the certainties of family and birthplace and freedom from that. According to Bauman (1999 in Beck 2007), modernisation pushes society away from static tradition towards openness, changeability, seemingly endless development, and new possibilities. And new forms of migration derive from these new space-time flexibilities and various new globalisation forces (King 2002).

> The world becomes an infinite collection of possibilities: a container filled to the brim with a countless multitude of opportunities yet to be chased or already missed. There are more – painfully more – possibilities than any individual life, however long, adventurous, and industrious, can attempt to explore, let alone adopt. (Bauman 2000: 61)

Structures break down structures and thus yield opportunities for the development of subjectivity and agency. What ensues is individualisation, where responsibilities, consequences, and side effects are transferred to the individual actor. Individuation is a paradoxical pressure to create and shape oneself in terms of not only one's own life but also the bonds and webs of relationships one has to one's place, which influence people's decision-making. Everything, including decisions actors make in their lives, such as about migration, work, or family, is a personal decision that we must understand as personal risks with all their contradictions. It is not just options that get individualised; it is also poverty, which becomes an individual responsibility. There is always an option to improve the situation, to take responsibility for not having a job, and to migrate. The question is then whether migration is an individualised decision or a means to achieve a particular goal of a village. However, personalised responsibility can unfold along a prevailing narrative (Beck 2007; Bauman 2000).

Social media contributes critically to people's decisions as well. Globalisation is experienced through the sharing of information on social media. People can learn how others live in different countries through Instagram or Facebook or about how to migrate to the United States illegally on TikTok. Social media contributes to the feeling of fragmentation, uncertainty, and risk, and helps us visually see other options, possibilities, and choices. In postmodernity, risks are also solely individual responsibilities. Potential migrants are constantly evaluating, based on globalised information, whether or not to migrate and how to take their individualised responsibility to the fullest. This can be seen in a concept put forward by Bude and Dürrschmidt (2010: 485–487), who describes the contemporary world as being in the 'age of migration dreams'. Globalisation changes the perception of the fluidity of space, which makes the possibility of migration always present. In this world, everybody is deciding whether to migrate or not. This fact creates an existential dilemma, where the individual constantly operates with the possibility of mobility, the social costs of this mobility, and the possibility of self-realisation. Options and choices seem to be enabling, but they are not always so; 'the gap between option and action can also mean immobilizing exhaustion' (Bude 2010: 486).

> Bauman (2000: 38) perhaps points us to the existential core of the dilemma of mobility/immobility when he argues that in the end, it all comes down to the balance between "self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible or unrealistic". (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 487)

There is a dichotomy between moving abroad and staying and waiting, which Ibañez Tirado (2019) describes as a dichotomy of contrary action. Wolhfart (2015) states that a migrant's dreams occur at two levels. The first one is a pre-migration dream, which is made within the local context of the sending country and influences a migrant's decision-making. The other one, the post-migration dream, is the dream that was challenged by the reality of the receiving country. The post-migration dream and the notion of success in the receiving country also determine the pre-migration dream of the community in the sending country. These two dreams are, therefore, interconnected and strongly influence each other. Furthermore, migration is facilitated through these dreams. There is an attempt at a 'good life'. The question is how to fulfil the dream of a 'good life' (Wolhfart 2015). There is a hope of a 'victory of faith over experience' when migrating abroad, a hope influenced by migration dreams (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 486).

However, staying can also be seen as a hope for things to get better. There is also a 'faith that the future will be better' as a reason to stay, despite economic hardship. 'Many potential migrants stay due to "limitations of language," "attachment to the land of origin," and trust in proven survival strategies embedded in "social networks and family support … [that is] tied to the home base"' (Wallace 2002: 614f in Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 486). Bude and Dürrschmidt (2010) recognises two other modes of life journey besides migration. The first is to collectively improve the local situation (to change things locally). The second is to resign to poverty and a lack of resources (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 486).

According to Bude (2010), globalisation has also changed people's sense of belonging. Belonging, being committed, and being engaged in a place and a community become an accomplishment. 'This "banality of belonging" is an essential part of the "concrete structuration of the world in which we live" (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 492). There is an emerging and active search for a place where a person belongs. This place is not given but has to be chosen, found, or created. There is an urge to 'really belong' and 'admit the need for roots'. On the one hand, the urge to find the place where a person belongs forces people to take responsibility for where they live and change their space. On the other hand, it pulls people to an already familiar place and their birthplace or makes them more conscious of their cultural identity (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010).

To understand the approach to migration in this text, it is first necessary to explain three approaches to migration: economic, systemic, and narrative.

The economic approach describes migration as a utility – a calculated option for potential migrants. This approach is frequently used as reasoning in contemporary discussions of migration in the media, as it argues about the different value of currency and quality of life in the receiving country compared to the

sending one (Massey et al. 1993: 434). As White (2016: 15) states, the decision to migrate depends on the relative utility of the current location vs alternatives. Individuals make their choices, in the light of the substantial wage disparity between the United States and Ecuador.

The economic factors that attract people to migrate to a different country are described by one of the classic migration theories: the 'push and pull' migration theory. According to this theory, there are forces that make people either stay or migrate. The classic push and pull theory of migration explains decision-making processes as based on the influence of push factors forcing individuals to leave their home country and pull factors attracting them to the receiving country. The push factors are the influences that lead people to leave the country, such as bad job opportunities, a non-democratic political system, or insufficient resources. The pull factors, such as material benefits, economic gain, and social rise, attract people to the receiving country. Migration occurs only on the condition that the factors pushing the migrant out of the original space and those attracting them to the destination space reach a certain intensity (Drbohlav and Uherek 2007).

Migration from Salasaka can also be explained through a systemic approach. There is an unequal social structure that potential future migrants find themselves in, and they act accordingly (Bourdieu 1998). Migration viewed through the lens of systemic theory reveals a complex interplay of historical, economic, and social factors shaping the movement of people. Those who decide to stay in their place of birth in Ecuador may do so because they have good opportunities and have built a life there. These opportunities can come from cultural heritage and the effort of Salasakans to keep tradition alive, as well as from outside sources, such as the support of the government and politics, where the Ecuadorian Indigenous party is powerful. Other sources of income may come from abroad, such as international business, tourism, or support from local NGOs to provide education to communities impacted by social inequalities. The life of young villagers can be influenced by various factors that develop throughout their life, and according to the systemic approach, when making decisions individuals consider what a place and context offer in terms of opportunities and quality of life. According to the systematic approach, migration tends to increase during crises (Castles et al. 2014), such as the COVID pandemic.

An alternative approach to studying migration, compared to the perspective of migration as a decision of utility or necessity within a given historical and economic system, is through narratives. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) understand narratives as a component of narrative practices which comprise the storytelling, resources used to tell stories and the circumstances in which stories are told (Gubrium and Holstein 1998 in Temple 2001: 388–389). To understand the

migration decision, we can study narratives in the village as a force that actively creates migration flows. Narratives, similar to myths, shed light on the process of migration and the social norms connected to migration (Mand 2006; Temple 2001). Narratives, including migration narratives, can be seen as a framework through which individuals structure their lives – the process of assembling stories defines who a people are. What people do as individuals is constructed through narratives, which play a fundamental role in shaping collective identities. Narratives, like discourses, are produced, controlled, chosen, and organised through many processes and through social institutions in society (Temple 2001; Foucault 1969).

According to Stephens (2014), narratives need to be cohesive, contextualised, and temporal, and they need to possess their own agency. The narrative method moves away from grand representations and offers the possibility to understand at the micro level and to incorporate a diversity of experiences. There is an importance that lies in the 'very value of narrativity as a mode of making sense of reality (whether the factual reality of actual events or the moral, symbolic reality of fiction)' (Stephens 2014: 428). There is also the temporal aspect of narratives. Narratives consider the history, present, and future of a place (Yong 2021; Mand 2016).

There is so much uncertainty in the contemporary world, as Bauman (2000) and Bude (2010) have described, and thus a lot of space for decisions to be influenced by local narratives. The hypothesis that narratives play a crucial role in the decision-making of the young generation in Salasaka may partially explain the reality of a huge percentage of the population choosing to migrate to the United States. There is the question of what the narratives in the village are, how they are created, and how they are then applied by the young generation. Are narratives the primary reason for people migrating? Do reality and practice differ distinctly from what the narratives imply? And do narratives influence what social factors people take into account?

Methodology

To explore the reasons for migrating from Salasaka, it was essential to choose a methodology suited to studying local culture and the specific context of a transnational village. Ethnography with participant observation seemed the best starting point for my fieldwork. Ethnographic research enables an emic understanding of cultures and communities, and its flexibility allows the researcher to focus on topics and issues that gradually emerge during the research process. It also uncovers themes and insights that might otherwise remain inaccessible

(Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 1–20). During my stay, I kept an ethnographic diary and conducted ethnographic interviews. I participated in local events such as community celebrations, cultural festivals, and anniversaries, and I accompanied research participants on trips, walks, errands, and dinners. Interview participants were primarily recruited from English classes, and the interviews were conducted as open-ended dialogues or conversations (Okely 2012: 1–25). The interviews emphasised personal stories and decision-making processes. The interviews were semi-structured, and conversational topics were built on my previous experience at Salasaka and on three online pilot interviews that I conducted before arriving in the village. The selection of my key interview partners was influenced by my previous contacts and extended by my current students and people whom I met during my fieldwork. The interviewees were four women and six men between the ages of 23 and 62.

As a part of the ethnographic interview, I also incorporated the photo-elicitation method by asking participants about pictures of their family and the friends they follow online. The images frequently arose spontaneously during interviews. The visual method of photo-elicitation offers a way to explore migration-related themes and bridge the communication gap between researchers and participants. Photo elicitation based on photographs created by the respondent then supports the subject's authority, in contrast to the classic arrangement in which the researcher has the authority. Photo-elicitation interviews also typically help to evoke specific experiences and emotions a respondent may have (Harper 2002). According to Ndione and Remy (2018), images have the advantage of showing situations and interactions rather than 'universal categories or abstract types' and may also uncover transnational narratives in visual form (Ndione and Remy 2018; Harper 2002). The key interview participants during this part of the research were (names have been changed):

Sammia (29) – the coordinator of an NGO, has a major in economics, and was during my second stay in Salasaka on a Fulbright scholarship in Michigan in the United States.
Edwin (32) – a friend of Sammia, previously worked in a ministry organising cultural events, when the interview was conducted, he was unemployed.
Yarina (62) – mother of Sammia, working in agriculture and helping with an NGO, advocating for teaching English in Salasaka.
Tayel (40) – a teacher of English in the local school, married, had two daughters, and was worried about the political situation.
Rafael (35) – a construction worker, married, 7-year-old daughter, and was considering moving to the United States.

Jordan (23) – a student and a musician, makes and records music and video clips for opportunities and contacts in the music field, wants to stay in Salasaka.
Ariel (27) – a student and the owner of a company called Kausari Film, which broadcasts events in Salasaka and makes interviews, podcasts, and YouTube videos.
Jimena (28) – a tour guide, a student at an economics university, was focused on learning English during my stay in Salasaka, wanted to go to the United States like Sammia did.
Ainara (24) – just finished a programme at a gastronomy school, worked at part-time jobs (on call) in Ambato, and wanted to have her own bakery in Salasaka.
Christian (30) – a university graduate who was able to afford his studies because of the financial support of his family from abroad, programming, posting on Facebook, and making podcasts?].

During the interviews, I spoke with the research participants in Spanish (except Sammia and sometimes Edwin). In Salasaka, the local language is Kichwa, which is used among family members or friends who know it and in more informal conversations, for example, at school. However, everyone knows Spanish, and people who can speak Kitchwa often switch between the two languages depending on the situation and the other people participating in the conversation.

The topic of my research was transparent and openly shared with the interview participants. They often shared information with me because they knew I was interested in this topic. However, sensitivity surrounding the topic of migration necessitated careful navigation of ethical considerations throughout the research process and sometimes imposed limitations on me as a researcher during some conversations or events.

Interviews and diary entries were analysed using thematic analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded according to the codes that emerged and were identified from the data. Some of the main themes within the codes were the American dream, collectivism, job problems, family ties, financial aspects, and cultural identity. I analysed the themes in relation to the broader context of data (interviews, participant observation, and pictures), public statistical data, relevant literature discussing similar cases, and theoretical frameworks. I explored the implications of the findings, considering how the identified themes helped in understanding the phenomenon being studied and addressing the research questions. The data were influenced by the researcher's persona, a young woman.

Through the research, I try to portray the participants as active actors. They were often both my students and my friends, and participation in village life led me to have small, but important, encounters, to learn more about what was

happening in the village, and to be able to personally witness major events. One of the advantages of participating in events in the village, as well as teaching English to locals, was that it also enabled slightly better acceptance by locals (Okely 2012: 1–25; Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 1–20).

An important concept in ethnography is serendipity, which determines the direction of the research on the basis of whom the researcher meets, with whom they talk, and what information is obtained. The people I met depended on[I met was partly determined by] my own personal characteristics, such as age (31 years), gender, and ethnicity. As a researcher, a white European and young woman, a student, and a volunteer, I have a specific position that influenced the course of the research in Salasaka. My position as the researcher, therefore, profoundly influenced the process of ethnographic data collection and the focus of the interviews. My age and my experience working abroad (United States, Spain) seemed to be an advantage and made me a better interlocutor for my interview partners. However, being a 'Gringa' may have excluded some interactions or situations, which would the Indigenous community did not want to share. However, it also produced some interaction based on these cultural and ethnic differences (Okely 2012: 5).

Data analysis

The conceptual framework for my data analysis is social constructivism with an emphasis on observation, dialogue, and stories. The researcher is considered an active co-creator of data, engaging in interpretive processes that generate new meaning. He or she co-creates data through 'thick description'; therefore, all understanding is interpretation. According to the interpretive approach of Clifford Geertz (1973: 5): 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.'

Throughout the coding process, which was my focal analytical tool, I noted that decision-making processes, whether related to economic or systemic issues or to the narrative of the migration dream, were framed by themes of identity, tradition, individual dignity, and collective responsibility to family and community. The specific features of these elements of decision-making processes are therefore the first to be presented in the analytical section. In the second part of this section, I explain the economic reasoning for migration, which in Salasaka was very strong, and the money 'talk' about the differences in earnings in the United States and in Ecuador, and I explain the systemic shift connected with 'There are no jobs' narration. Finally, I describe the migration dream in Salasaka and the most prevalent narrative of the American dream, which was the main migration strategy of Salasakans.

Cultural identity and migration

According to Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar (2023), some people are willing to migrate owing to their cultural heritage. The Salasaka community appeared very traditional, and its cultural identity plays a substantial role in decision-making processes. Two years ago, during my previous volunteer work in Salasaka, I went with Sammia to an event to help Willian make a new poncho. The poncho is a form of traditional clothing worn by men – a black woollen garment with delicate white embroidery. While it is sometimes worn in everyday life, it is always present during traditional events. Making these ponchos, which are now quite expensive, requires a stomping process to create better-quality fabric. Spinning wool into threads was a common daily activity, often seen among elderly women in the village.

In the backyard, when the whole family had gathered, a few men were stomping on the wool to the rhythm of music playing from a speaker. Clothes were hung out to dry; chickens, dogs, and children were running around; women were making lunch over an open fire in a kitchen with bare walls and plucking feathers from chickens. There was a large modern fridge – common in many kitchens in Salasaka – but clothes were still washed by hand outside, as in most Ecuadorian households. We had rice and some meat for lunch. During the meal, we all sat together – about eight of us – and, like anywhere else in the world, we looked at our phones.

In the field, traditional and modern elements coexisted in the same spaces. One of my findings is that the Salasaka people migrate not only in spite of their cultural heritage but also because of it, using modern means (Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar 2023). They need to support their village and its traditions – both economically, through remittances from abroad, and symbolically, through global recognition. One powerful symbol of cultural identity is the act of wearing the poncho, both at home and abroad. Tayel, an English teacher I assisted in the local school, did not view migration as a problem, as long as it did not lead to a loss of identity or family roots. For him, the poncho represented a way of maintaining cultural ties while living outside the community: *'They no longer wear the poncho. They [the majority] tell you not to wear traditional white pants, a shirt, or a poncho. It's like they've transformed into the mestizo culture. The culture is lost.'*

The poncho is worn during public appearances, especially at traditional or political events. One example was a teacher who wore his poncho while teaching. In the local school, wearing a poncho was officially required for teachers, with only occasional exceptions.

Picture 1. **Wearing a poncho at school.** Photo: Author.

Tayel described to me how Western influence had changed traditional life in the village and the way people thought. Rafael said: '*Life was changing in Salasaka, and I believe that people also want to live a little differently*'. People wanted to improve their standard of living – own a car to move around easily, wear both traditional and modern clothes, or have more food and food options. '*Also, there didn't use to be beer in the village, and people didn't wear shoes before.*' (Tayel) The word '*before*' refers to the time shown in a photo chosen by Sammia, depicting her family in traditional clothing and barefoot, part of the custom, with a traditional mud house in the background. Sammia picked this picture, which depicts her cultural roots, describing her grandma as a strong woman. During my research in Salasaka, I observed that there appear to be two main ways in which people can be successful: through cultural heritage (sometimes supported by remittances) or through migration. Migration was only considered detrimental when people did not keep their traditions and language or did not wear their traditional clothing. Sammia expressed it as follows:

Picture 2. **A family in front of a traditional peasant house in Salasaka.** Photo: Samia

It is not important where you are born; it is important to have the capacity and the responsibility towards one's culture, language, and tradition. They can live in different countries. It is really important for intercultural relationships not to forget our origins. The family should be together.

However, tradition is always part of social dynamics, which, in turn, depend on changing social relations and technologies. Two years ago, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were almost no weddings in Salasaka – just one or two, as Willian told me. But during my research, there was a wedding nearly every weekend, often financed by migrants abroad. A modern wedding in Salasaka today typically means a three-day party for the entire village, complete with beer and two bands playing every night. Tayel said: '*Before, weddings were for a few people; they lasted three days, too, but there was just a violin playing*'.

The weddings I attended, though very traditional in terms of clothing and music, were much more lavish than those in the past. All of them were also

Picture 3. **Wedding concert. Salasaka 2024.** Photo: Author.

broadcast online, like other cultural events in Salasaka, produced by Ariel's media company. Migrants were seen as heroes thanks to their financial support for traditional celebrations, festivals, and other cultural activities (Mata-Codesal 2014). '*I want to thank my brother, who lives in the US!*' said the mother of one newlywed bride, perhaps a little too passionately, onstage during the final concert of a famous international band that closed the wedding. There has been a shift from traditional to modern, yet what is perceived as 'traditional' is now incorporating modern elements. At the same time, tradition itself is being reshaped into something contemporary. As Gratton (2007: 581) said, 'El sueño americano of the Ecuadorians was a dream about using modern means (such as migration) to realize traditional goals.' The transnational and global spirit of tradition was also frequently articulated in Salasaka's celebrations: '*We greet all the people from Pelileo, Salasaka, Quito, Spain, and Brazil!*' said one of the singers in a band that performed a wedding concert in Salasaka and played traditional Indigenous music.

In addition to customary modes of dress and shared celebratory practices, the cultural identity of the Salasaka community is reinforced by the presence of institutions of social control that persist despite the influence of transnationalism.

Picture 4. **Sharing food during the celebration of Pawkar Raymi. Salasaka 2024.** Photo: Author.

When I asked about Ecuador's worsening political situation, Tayel told me:

> Here in Salasaka, it's a community; it's calm. We are together and united. It is safe here because we have Indigenous justice. When someone does something bad, we come together and punish him. We use nettle *[*a plant*]* to cleanse him. We do that, for example, with boys who steal because they want alcohol or drugs.

Tayel showed me a Facebook video capturing such an event, in which a few boys could be seen in the centre of Salasaka, just in their underwear, surrounded by people. Salasaka culture also responds to new challenges – such as the increasing number of 'abandoned children', those left behind by parents who migrated to the US – by emphasising unity (Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar 2023).

An important materialisation of collective identity is the sharing of food. In Salasaka, food is shared on specific occasions. Individual tables are joined to form a long desk covered with plastic, and people bring products planted in Salasaka. This tradition was practised, for instance, during the celebration of Pawkar Raymi,

held at a school on Teachers' Day. Typically, the food consisted mainly of corn and potatoes brought by community members, though in this case there was also cheese and a few pieces of meat. Everyone is encouraged to eat from the same table, as sharing is the central symbol of this event.

Even migrants in remote destinations are involved in the sharing process. Through video broadcasts, they share significant events and participate in the life of their sociocentric communities, even in the egocentric environment to which they have migrated. According to Dinesh Bhugra:

> collectivist societies prioritize the common good and social harmony over individual interests. Individuals are bound by relationships, which emphasize a common fate. Individuals are encouraged to put other people's and the group's interest before their own. Concession and compromise are essential ingredients in promoting role-based and virtue-based conceptions of justice, and institutions are seen as an extension of the family (2004: 137).

The material conjunction of migration and shared cultural identity in Salasaka is remittances. Migration can be understood as a joint decision made by migrants and some of those who remain behind (Bertoli and Marchetta 2014). Remittances sent from abroad by the migrant community can be categorised as 'collective remittances' – financial support that benefits the entire community and helps sustain its cultural heritage. These are contributions to local celebrations, the local museum, the education of children, and village development. These collective remittances serve as a migrant's symbol of continued connection to cultural identity and reinforce the sense of belonging to both the family and the broader Salasaka community. They also contribute to the fight for Indigenous rights within a system shaped by structural racism and offer protection against Ecuador's unstable economy. In this way, economic contributions from abroad become a form of resistance and resilience. Remittances are often seen as evidence of a migrant's success and can elevate their status to that of a 'good' and important member of the community (Boccagni 2011). Collective remittances create a reciprocal system: one part – the migrant abroad – gains economic capital, which is transferred back to support the community and promote Salasaka culture internationally; the other part – the community that stays – plays an equally important role by maintaining and practising cultural traditions, promoting them locally, and engaging in national politics. Thus, remittances can be understood as a tangible manifestation of the support that migration provides to an Indigenous village in a global economic system.

One example of how cultural heritage is supported in a context of job scarcity

Picture 5: P**roduction of a film about Salasaka culture (2024).** Photo: Author.

– through collective remittances – can be seen in Ariel's story. He lives in a house where traditional mud house is connected to modern, European-style house, all of which belonged to Ariel's grandmother. Inside, when I went upstairs, along a wooden staircase and through a hatch, I saw a well-equipped, laid-back IT office with four workstations, each with two large monitors and a laptop. In another room, cameras were set up to take photos of brand-name alcohol. Ariel's brother was drawing a tiger in Photoshop while taking a free online course offered by the Ecuadorian government, all while watching football on his phone. Two other young men, a cousin and a friend, both considered family, were working there as well.

All the equipment belonged to Ariel's uncle, who lives in Switzerland, where he teaches at a film school. He had taught them cinematography – initially to film weddings and community events, but later also to make short films and YouTube sketches showcasing Salasaka culture. This was a clear example of how traditional and modern coexisted: high-tech gear inside a European-style house, next to a traditional mud home owned by a grandmother, with family members

collaborating to preserve and promote their culture through film and business. Ariel worked with his brother and with his uncle. In this photo, the entire family is helping to produce a film depicting Salasaka culture, filmed during the uncle's visit home. The family works together to promote Salasaka culture and run a successful media business.

The Economic, Systemic, and (American) Migration Dream Narrative as Justification for Migration

Money emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned motivations for migration. *'They do it [migrate]for the money. Cause now everything is money anyway.'* (Sammia) The exact numbers, the counting of money, and the wage disparities between Ecuador and the United States were described as pull factors to migrate. As White (2016: 15) states, early formulation of the decision to migrate depends on the relative utility of the current location vs alternatives. Therefore, individuals can choose the destination for migration by counting the differences between what they can earn there and in Ecuador: '*In the United States, it says they earn 20 dollars an hour or 23 or 24 an hour. As a home consultant, the maximum one earns here is 25 dollars a day. It's also 20 to 25 dollars – but for a day.*' (Tayel) Rafael explained his illegal migration and was amazed by how soon it is possible to pay back the loan for migrating: *'To go to the US costs 10,000 dollars or 20,000, and many people have to get loans for that. There are also banks that specialise in these loans. You get to take loans; however, a loan of 20,000 can be paid in just one year.*' (Rafael)

Between the economic justification for migration described in the previous paragraph and the systemic one is the narrative of a lack of jobs. The lack of job opportunities was a common topic of conversation. The phrase '*No hay trabajo*' ('There are no jobs') was frequently used in response to my questions about why people migrate. The following dialogue took place when I was hitchhiking, which is common in the village and costs 25 cents. A pickup truck – typical in Salasaka – was transporting *guanábana* (a local fruit). Inside were a man of middle age and a younger man:

Man: 'Where are you from? From the United States?'
Me: 'No, I'm from the Czech Republic.'
Man: 'So, a different place?'
Man: 'And how's the economy there? Is there work?'
Me: 'In my city, there is. I'm from the capital, Prague. It got more expensive after COVID-19. Prices went up, especially for housing. But there is work.'

Man: 'And what about construction?'
Me: 'Hmm, I think it's good. We have a lot of people from Ukraine working in construction, partly because of the war.'
Me: 'Do you work in construction?'
Man: 'No, I used to, but now I have a plantation for *guanábanas*. I ask for my son. I guess it's bad with work all over the world, right?'
Me: 'Yeah, I think after COVID-19, it got worse everywhere. Businesses don't have as much money, and there are fewer jobs.'
Man: 'Do you want to take my son to your country?'
Me: 'Rather not.' *(laughing)*

The conversation above illustrates the desperation some parents feel and their hope for a better future for their children abroad. According to the local narrative, jobs were scarce, and those who had steady work were considered 'lucky'. While my friends in Salasaka had jobs, they often expressed concern about whether those jobs would be enough to support a family in the future. Most informants agreed that while it was possible to survive day-to-day in the village, saving enough to buy a house was nearly impossible without financial support from migration. Even low-paying jobs in cities like New York or Paris ensured a higher income than what could be earned in Salasaka (Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar 2023; Jokisch 2002: 523–524).

The systemic rationale is primarily the structure of jobs. In Salasaka, there were three main options for employment: (i) agriculture (also Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar 2023), a slowly dying field because of hard work, lack of payment, and recently also lack of water; (ii) construction, a field in which people migrated the most because of the opportunities in the United States and the difference in wages between the two countries; and (iii) other fields such as selling Indigenous products or working in a nearby city as a cook, messenger, or tour guide, in a bank or a ministry, or in politics. The choice to work in agriculture was the most common one among the parents and grandparents of my peers, and it was the only income source (Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar 2023). However, as Lamino Jaramillo and Boren-Alpízar (2023: 882) describe, 'the agricultural system changes have transformed Indigenous youth's farming perceptions by considering agriculture antiquated, unprofitable, and a poor way of living'. Working in agriculture was not only 'very hard work', as Willan described it, but it also did not provide enough earnings to support one's family, as prices were rising. As Yarina mentioned, in the case of guinea pigs, it is no longer profitable. Yarina noted, for example, that it is no longer profitable to raise guinea pigs/it is no longer profitable to run a guinea pig farm]. The environmental crisis was

also a concern, as there was a problem with a lack of water in the village, another reason to migrate. '*It doesn't rain, there is no water. Before, there was water in the rivers, and it rained. The agriculture is getting worse, that's why a lot of people go away/abroad and are gone.*' (Yarina)

In Salasaka, it is hard for the young generation to find a job that matches their qualifications. '*There are many people who have studied, have completed a degree, or have a university degree, but there is no work. No work. For that reason they go.*' (Tayel) Looking for a job and submitting a CV seemed like an everyday task in Salasaka. During my stay in Salasaka, Edwin, for example, was looking for suitable employment. Previously, he was very excited about working for the government, earning a very good salary, and being his own boss. However, the politics have changed; the strong support for the Indigenous minority declined, and they let him go:

> *Right now, I do not have much to do, and it is a little bit boring. I take care of the animals, clean the bar [he owns a bar in Salasaka], and meet my family. Before [in his previous job], it was stressful. I had to go to Quito. I was traveling a lot and working on weekends or in the evenings, but I liked it. It was good, tiring but good.* (Edwin)

Now he was going to Ambato (1 hour), Quito (3 hours), or even Tena (6 hours away) to submit his CV and documents. '*Work is work. It does not matter if it is in Quito.*' (Edwin)

Comparing remittances, wages, and living standards abroad, especially in the United States, with the hardships of daily life in Salasaka, leads locals to narrate that everything is easy in emigration. As one of my students said: '*I want to go to the US because everything there is beautiful and big.*' According to Sammia, with rich migration experience, everything was easy in the United States, from food to being able to do everything by pushing a button. As Bude and Dürrschmidt (2010: 485–487) note, the '*age of migration dreams*' makes the possibility of migration always present as time and space become more fluid. Migration in Salasaka was a common part of people's lives; therefore, the migration narrative was present in everyday life. '*Let's go to the US*!', said one man as a joke in a taxi when returning from the Salasaka museum in Ambato. '*Have you been to the United States?*', asked the children, surprised and excited. '*Do you know Washington? My dad is in Washington. He works there in construction. And do you know [name of city]?*' '*Maybe it went to Spain*', said my student from a younger group about a card with the number 12 that we could not find. The teacher wrote on the board as an example of the future tense: '*If my mother travels to Spain, she*

will have a good job.' Alternatively, migration was also visible in objects, such as a scarf bearing an American flag that one of the children wore daily because it was a scarf sent by his father, who works in the United States in construction. As Tayel stated, there was a dream among the students that was pretty simple: to have money, a car, and a house. Mata-Codesal (2014) describes the creation of a migration dream through people's imaginaries in contrast with a lack of improvement within their village. People in Salasaka migrated to improve their lives amidst the complicated economic situation they find themselves in.

However, the Salasakans did not want to improve their lives by changing their location; through migration, they wanted to better their lives in Ecuador for the future. It was not about the American dream; the main goal was to earn money abroad, a substantial amount, and come back to a dream life in Salasaka. In other words, people were just postponing their better lives in Salasaka, which they could have after migration. The migration dream did not encompass a vision of arriving in the United States and living there; it was more about working hard abroad, saving money, and returning to settle in the village (Mata-Codesal 2014). As Gratton (2007: 581) has said: *'"El sueno americano" of the Ecuadorians was a dream about using modern means (such as migration) to realize traditional goals.'*

One of my students, Jimena, a friend of Sammia and a tour guide, was planning to migrate. She wanted to do the same thing as Sammia and apply for the Fulbright programme, which was why she was so interested in learning English. Her plan was to earn money in the United States for a house in Salasaka even though she did not like the United States or the life there, which she knew from visiting New York for a conference for Indigenous people: *'For me, it is different because I live in a community. The US is not for me. There is a lot of noise, infrastructure, and people. And now, it is probably much more.'* (Jimena) Still, she wanted to go to the United States for the money, for a house, and for capital for a business in Salasaka. As Mata-Codesal (2014) observes, land ownership is of great importance in Ecuador and even more so in Indigenous rural villages. Owning a house promises stability in the given economic and political environment. It also offers the promise of a good life in a village of origin, a dream for many I talked with.

There was the known model of going to the United States to earn money for five or ten years, become rich, and then come home. According to an OPI survey, more than 70% of migrants planned to stay five years or less, depending on their fortunes abroad and the economic situation in Ecuador (Jokisch and Pribilski 2002). *'Even though you have the lowest job in the US, you still earn more in the US. And you can just pay for a place and food. And support your family back at home',* said one of the students wanting to migrate to the United States. His

plan was to work there in a mechanic shop and then return home to open his own business. Many more examples could be cited showing that the narrative of the American dream is frequently about improving one's own and one's family's conditions in Salasaka, where potential migrants situate their future.

The Duality of Collectivism and Individualism

The economic, systemic, and American dream justifications for migration are univocally convincing that migration abroad makes sense and can bring migrants individual benefits and satisfaction. However, openly articulated individual incentives for migration are interwoven with a shared narrative of collective identity, tradition, and responsibility. The migration dream is thus narrated as one of the few ways to sustain the villagers' cultural identity. Through the act of migration, the villagers of Salasaka believe that they can maintain support for Salasaka's cultural heritage and cohesion. Part of the support is collective remittances, specially aimed at supporting the collective affairs of the village. The migration narratives in Salasaka are forcing the villagers to migrate out of a collective perception of the need to maintain and save the prosperity of their families and the village's cultural heritage.

The seemingly opposing forces of individualism and collectivism become intertwined through migration. Rather than existing in conflict, collective and individualistic motivations create a complex framework for decision-making. Interestingly, the village is not unambiguously responding to 'Western influence', which is frowned upon in the village, by attacking, resisting, excluding, or confronting it. Instead, the main narrative subtly integrates Western ideas, as people make them their own. Outwardly, the community appears to resist 'attacking' Western influences (as described by locals), portraying them as forces that disrupt traditional ways. Western values selectively serve collective aspirations rather than undermining them, while the collective ethos of the community, emphasizing interconnectedness, mutual support, and cultural preservation, remains central.

Migration becomes a mechanism, providing a pathway for individuals to engage with the global economy, pursue opportunities abroad, and interact with Western ideas, all while reinforcing their commitment to the community. The cultural framework of the community supports and legitimises individual aspirations, framing them as contributions to the collective narrative rather than deviations from it. Migration is framed as a strategy to contribute to the collective good, whether through remittances, symbolic support, or the maintenance of cultural practices abroad. Achievements abroad are reinvested into the village and thereby strengthen the collective identity.

Conclusion and Discussion

The migration of Salasaka is reinforced by the collectivist ethos of the village, supporting its cultural continuity and survival in a globalised economy. Migration reflects a hybrid model in which traditional values are reimagined and sustained through engagement with global forces. The collective ethos subtly shifts, often without the community's explicit recognition, while simultaneously there is criticism of Western individualistic ways of life, which are perceived as disruptive. The primary outcome is a strategy that upholds the 'collective good' and, in this case, sustains cultural identity and heritage, which holds both social and economic significance for the village. Migrants are therefore not driven just by the desire to escape economic hardship but by the complex interplay of collective responsibilities. Individual aspirations are integrated into a collective strategy, just as migration itself is. Migration narratives 'salaries are low' (economic justification), 'there are no (suitable) jobs' (systemic justification), and 'in the US, everything is easier' (the American dream) reveal the interplay between collective and individual migration strategies in the village as a response to perceived hardships. They are a socially and culturally constructed response to globalisation, wherein migration is positioned as a means of improving the situation and, in turn, enhancing and preserving cultural identity. Similarly, exposure to Western lifestyles – whether through returned migrants, remittances, or mediated images – introduces a vision of a higher standard of living that is both a collective aspiration and a source of individual motivation.

Until recently, Salasaka was an endogamous village. However, transnationalism has now provided its residents with a high level of awareness about the outside world, as they maintain family and community ties in the US, Latin America (e.g. Brazil, Argentina), and Europe (e.g. Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, England). This knowledge helps the community navigate new challenges associated with globalisation. Migrants return with new resources and perspectives, which are reinvested in the village, transforming its collective identity and shaping strategies to address local issues in a globalised world. Migration, as one such strategy, helps secure the village's position within the globalised world through collective effort. It becomes a crucial means of ensuring the village's prosperity and future, enabling it to combat inequality and the fear of losing its cultural identity through collectively approved measures.

Traditional values and modern economic aspirations coexist as a duality in migration narratives, influencing the decision-making of young people. Migration, in this sense, becomes a mechanism for negotiating this duality in a globalised environment, reinforcing the enduring strength of collective identity and the

adaptive potential of cultural values in the face of global economic and social change. The Salasaka community exemplifies the adaptive potential of cultural values, demonstrating how traditional societies can navigate and thrive in a globalised world by strategically integrating external influences into their own frameworks and making themselves valuable within a new capitalistic economy.

Migration becomes a mechanism that enables individuals to navigate collective responsibilities while redefining what it means to sustain cultural identity and economic viability in a changing globalised world. In this sense, migration serves as a bridge between past and future, tradition and modernity, collective responsibility and individual aspiration – a dynamic and collective response to the complexities of globalisation that sustains cultural identity and values while ensuring long-term survival.

Data in this research were collected in an Ecuadorian village. They therefore capture the perspective of the locals and the emigrants who interact with the village. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that there are expatriates who do not contribute to the village and have withdrawn from the solidaristic collective network of transnationalism or are minimally involved in its maintenance.

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