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La Vida Simple (Simple Life)
A Maroon Vision on Development

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Abstract

Global practices shaped by colonization and modernity have disrupted humanity's intrinsic connection to nature, resulting in ecological and social crises. Rooted in the colonization of the Americas, colonial inhabitation imposed exploitative relationships with nature and marginalized communities, laying the foundation for the imperial mode of living. Superficial frameworks like green capitalism fail to address this crisis, perpetuating colonial ecocide. In contrast, Afro-Ecuadorian Maroon communities, through *la vida simple* – a philosophy grounded in African traditions and marronage – offer transformative insights for ecological sustainability and climate justice. This worldview emphasizes harmonious coexistence with nature, as Maroon communities adapted to "uninhabitable" spaces and fostered mutual care with their environment. This paper asks: How can the Afro-Ecuadorian concept of *la vida simple* inform contemporary approaches to sustainability and climate justice? By examining *la vida simple* as a counter-hegemonic framework, this study highlights its potential to reshape ecological movements and promote social progress.

Keywords: Afro-Ecuadorians | marronage | decolonial ecology | development

About the author

Nataly Castillo Bennett holds a Bachelor's degree in political science with a specialization in international relations, international political economy, and political theory, a Master's degree in Latin American interdisciplinary studies specializing in development and transformation, and is currently a PhD Candidate at the International Research Training Group "Temporalities of Future" majoring in Sociology. Their dissertation is titled "On Then and Tomorrow: The Return to *Cimarronaje* as Technology of Resistance" at the Freie Universität Berlin.Their research explores the exclusion of Afro-descendant communities in Ecuador's constitutional framework and the loss of ancestral lands. Collaborating closely with Afro-descendant communities, their work highlights development alternatives, Afrofuturism, and political ecology as key areas of interest. Bennett has experience in both public and private sectors, including sustainability management, project management, communication, strategy development, risk analysis, and migration advisory. They have also served in political representation roles for marginalized groups, advocating for Black, Indigenous, and students of colour at FU Berlin.

Contents

1. Introduction

Since 1492, specific ways of inhabiting the Earth have been imposed globally (Ferdinand 2022). These practices, rooted in the foundations of modernity, have significantly shaped today's ecological, social, and political challenges. The European colonization of the Americas marked a pivotal moment in history, giving rise to "colonial inhabitation" (Ferdinand 2022) – antecedent of the "imperial mode of living" (Brand and Wissen 2021) – which continues to influence global systems, power structures, and environmental degradation.

Colonial inhabitation, framed within the Anthropocene, diminishes humanity's intrinsic connection to other living entities on the planet by commodifying nature (Crutzen and Stoermer 2013). This worldview enforces a profound divide between humans and the natural world – a divide that many in modern society struggle to fully comprehend. Even scientists, activists, and self-identified environmental protectors often grapple with reconciling this fragmented perspective (Moore 2015).

As a result, we are confronted with a present characterized by widespread social and ecological degradation and an environmental crisis that threatens the livelihoods of all. Certain actors – whether due to a lack of understanding or a refusal to enact meaningful change – seek refuge in superficial frameworks like environmental sustainability, the Green New Deal, or green capitalism (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2021). These paradigms often exploit the environmental crisis as an opportunity to reshape the inhumane economic system yet ultimately serving those in power and prioritizing capital accumulation over genuine solutions for planetary preservation.

It is within this context that alternative ways of thinking, pedagogies, and worldviews become essential to redirect us toward effective environmental protection. Marronage, as both a worldview and a philosophical practice, is often reduced to mere symbols of resistance tied to the space from slavery, stripping it of its ecological, economic, and political dimensions (Green and Price 1974). Yet marronage represents a political-ecological practice that set the grounds for what we now recognize as environmental preservation.

Since the 16th century, in defiance of colonization, Maroons cultivated an alternative way of living in harmony with nature (Castillo Bennett 2023). Malcolm Ferdinand (2022) describes the forests, swamps, mountains, and other so-called "uninhabitable" spaces that sheltered Maroons as "natural allies" (Castillo Bennett 2023). These environments were instrumental in ensuring the survival of Maroon communities.

Within this alliance, *palenques* emerged as political-territorial entities shaped by the Maroons' adaptation to nature (Castillo Bennett 2023).[1] Instead of altering the environment to suit human needs, they sought to coexist with it, fostering a relationship of mutual care. This approach stood in stark contrast to the ecocide perpetrated by European colonizers (Ferdinand 2022).

From this perspective, the Afro-Ecuadorian concept of *la vida simple* (the simple life) emerges as a philosophy deeply rooted in African traditions (García Salazar and Walsh 2017). It emphasizes the celebration of life through harmonious coexistence with nature. As Grandpa Zenón, an ancestral figure who safeguards Afro-Ecuadorian collective memory, often said, "The life of Black people and the life of nature are inseparably connected" (García Salazar and Walsh 2017: 56). Elders instilled in their communities a profound respect for the land and rivers, teaching that caring for nature is essential to sustaining life.

This paper seeks to explore how the *vida simple* philosophy offers a counter-hegemonic framework that can inform contemporary approaches to ecological sustainability, climate protection, and social progress. By shedding light on an alternative form of inhabitation – Maroon inhabitation – through the pedagogies, experiences, and ancestral practices of Black/Afro-Ecuadorian communities, this study aims to contribute to the alternatives to development urgently needed within the contemporary political-ecological movement.

2. Colonial Inhabitation: Modernity's Foundation

According to Malcolm Ferdinand, colonial inhabitation refers to a singular perspective on the existence of specific human beings on Earth – namely, the colonizers – and their relationships with nature and other humans, particularly the colonized (Ferdinand 2022). This framework includes principles, foundations, and forms that established the basis for the "imperial mode of living", a concept later developed by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (Brand and Wissen 2021).

The European approach to inhabiting the Earth systematically destroyed, altered, or alienated the plural ways of perceiving life and communing with others (Quijano 2020). It imposed specific principles, forms, and norms to reshape the world according to the desires of a select few. The first principle of colonial inhabitation involves its geographical dimension. It required the establishment of specific spaces designated

1 *Palenques* (or *quilombos*), were settlements founded by maroons who escaped from plantations. These communities were – and continue to be – present throughout the Americas.

for extraction and exploitation while subordinating these locations to a “mainland”, where resources were consumed (Ferdinand 2022).

The second principle is rooted in the exploitation of humans – othered for the purpose of subjugation – and nature. Inhabiting the Americas was not driven by the “maintenance of human life” but rather by the commercial exploitation of its lands. This quest for enrichment provided European colonizers with the rationale “to render these territories inhabitable” under colonial terms (Ferdinand 2022).

The third principle, described by Malcolm Ferdinand as “othercide”, refers to the refusal to coexist or commune with others who lived in ways different from Europeans (Ferdinand 2022). Despite the colonized Other being central to the colonial project, the denial of their plurality and independence was crucial for colonial inhabitation to function. By imposing the imperial mode of living and thinking upon others, colonizers ensured their compliance with the colonial system (Brand and Wissen 2021).

Colonial inhabitation, according to Ferdinand (2022) was built on a foundation of land grabbing, land clearing, and violent domination, institutionalized through systems of private property, plantations, and human exploitation. Land grabbing introduced the concept of private ownership of land-territory − unfamiliar to many Indigenous cultures in the Americas − while land clearing equated inhabitation with deforestation, where the act of felling trees symbolized the beginning of colonial settlement. These practices were accompanied by massacres of Indigenous populations and brutal violence, particularly against Indigenous women, intertwining colonization with gendered oppression (Mies and Shiva 2014; Ferdinand 2022; Voss 2008).

This violent foundation gave rise to the plantation system as the primary form of land use, encompassing cultivated fields, workshops, the master’s house, and enslaved people’s quarters. Plantations not only structured agricultural production but also dictated territorial organization, including ports, roads, and parishes (Ferdinand 2022). Furthermore, colonial inhabitation relied on the mass exploitation of human beings in a hierarchical system where enslaved individuals, excluded from the notion of inhabiting, were reduced to property. Even after the abolition of slavery, systems such as indentured servitude perpetuated this exploitation.

Together, these principles, foundations, and forms reveal how colonial inhabitation merged political domination with ecological destruction, reshaping both human and environmental systems under the broader colonial project (Ferdinand 2022).

3. From Colonial Inhabitation to the Imperial Mode of Living

Colonial inhabitation, as described by Malcom Ferdinand, "refers to a singular conception with regard to the existence of certain being on earth as well as their ways of relating to nature and to non-humans" – a process in which the Earth is re-engineered to serve the interests of colonial powers. A vehicle to perform this domination was the plantation system (Mbembe 2019). The colonial project, driven by the need to extract resources and labour, imposed a singular understanding of human existence and the purpose of the planet, one that continues to shape contemporary ways of life (Quijano 2020). This vision of the world – the colonial worldview – remains embedded in modern social, economic, and ecological practices, shaping both our daily activities and our relationships with each other and the environment (Moraña et al. 2021).

The concept of the "imperial mode of living", coined by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, builds on this legacy, encapsulating the patterns of consumption, production, and lifestyle that persist today (Brand and Wissen 2021). These practices, rooted in the colonial past, are not only central to the lifestyles of the Global North – those former colonizer nations – but have also been adopted as dominant aspirations in urban areas of the Global South (Brand and Wissen 2021). If colonial inhabitation can be seen as the creation of modernity, the imperial mode of living ensures that the structures, ideologies, and inequalities established by European colonial powers endure, shaping global social and economic systems long after formal colonialism ended.

Brand and Wissen argue that the imperial mode of living is not just about material consumption – it is underpinned by the exploitation of labour, resources, and ecological sinks in other parts of the world (Brand and Wissen 2021). For the capitalist system, it is essential that the worldviews promoted by colonial powers, which frame material wealth and economic growth as the ultimate measure of success, are adopted globally. This imposition of values and practices facilitates the exploitation of peripheral regions, where communities and ecosystems are continuously subordinated to the needs of capitalist accumulation. In this way, the imperial mode of living continues to be a tool for maintaining global inequality (Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020).

Some members of the Black/Afro-Ecuadorian community offer powerful reflections on how the imperial mode of living has reshaped their understanding of well-being and community. One individual reflects on the shift in values:

> Today, almost everything we do – both as individuals and as a community – is driven by the pursuit of material things dictated by the power of money. This is the era of modernity, of what comes from outside. That's what defines us now – or rather, what drives us to be. In the past, the value of people was respected;

> now, it's the power of money that commands respect (García Salazar et al. 2010: 56).

This testimony underscores the deep transformation in how value and respect are perceived in these communities – once rooted in collective well-being, now driven by external, materialistic forces.

The imposition of the imperial mode of living is not limited to cultural shifts; it also forces non-Western societies into economic systems that prioritize resource extraction and exploitation (Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020). The example of the African palm oil industry in the Pacific regions of Colombia and Ecuador illustrates how capitalist interests impose a materialistic, consumption-driven way of life on local communities (Martinez 2018; García Salazar et al. 2010). The introduction of such industries typically coincides with the degradation of communal resources, such as the contamination of water and land, and the privatization of what were once commonly available utilities. In northern Esmeraldas, for instance, Afro-Ecuadorian communities can no longer rely on rivers for daily consumption – due to pollution – forcing them to purchase water instead (García Salazar et al. 2010). The expansion of such infrastructure burdens these communities economically, driving many to enter into wage labour, often in the very industries that have caused these disruptions. As one community member observes:

> It is true that many of our cultural traditions are being lost, and this is connected to the death of the rivers and the loss of collective territories. But the loss of our traditions is also tied to the distance we, as teachers, have taken from community life. In the past, during the time of our elders, we were more rooted in rural life. Now, in the time of others, we are more urban (García Salazar et al. 2010: 50).

The imperial mode of living fundamentally reshapes how societies interact with nature. As exemplified in the Afro-Ecuadorian case, the commodification of natural resources and the destruction of collective territories not only undermine traditional ways of life but also integrate communities into global capitalist systems. These changes are not only economic and cultural but also environmental, leading to the erosion of sustainable practices and the deepening of ecological inequalities.

This process, as Brand and Wissen note, involves the hegemony and subjectification characteristic of the imperial mode of living. The imperial mode of living carries with it a set of materialistic ideas about progress, which alter the "everyday rationality" of most of the global population. These ideas are so deeply embedded that they are accepted without question – an unquestioned consent from the governed (Brand and Wissen 2021). Nation-states play a crucial role in maintaining this system, acting as enforcers of the imperial mode of living by framing economic growth as the ultimate goal of progress. This includes those socialist models that continue to base their economic

proposals on resource extraction, such as the case with 21st-century socialism, which, despite its claims to oppose capitalism, remains rooted in similar patterns of exploitation (Carlet and Ferreira 2018).

The values underpinning the imperial mode of living – extraction, commodification, and material accumulation – are not confined to the Global North but have also influenced the Western environmental movement (Brand and Wissen 2021). These values shape how environmentalism is practiced in the West, often guiding it towards solutions that do not challenge the fundamental structures of exploitation. Rather than dismantling these structures, much of the mainstream Western environmental movement, in its current form, frequently seeks to adapt them to environmental concerns, resulting in what is now known as "green capitalism" (Moore 2015). This model attempts to address ecological crises by implementing market-based solutions while leaving the exploitative mechanisms intact. The following section will explore how the imperial mode of living has shaped Western environmentalism and contributed to the rise of green capitalism, a system that continues to prioritize economic growth over environmental justice.

4. Imperial Mode of Living and the Environmental Crisis

We are currently living in the era of "global environmental management", marked by key milestones such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the Rio+20 Conference (2012), and the Paris Agreement (2015) (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010). These events have laid the foundation for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which represent the collective efforts of the so-called "international community" to address a multifaceted crisis rooted in centuries of colonial exploitation (Rashed and Shah 2021). This crisis, perpetuated by what is now termed the "imperial mode of living", reflects a global system built upon unequal resource consumption and unsustainable practices. The proposed solution, advanced by policymakers and scholars alike, is to transition from a growth-oriented development framework toward a sustainable development paradigm (Freitas et al. 2012).

However, the sustainable development paradigm, while ambitious in scope, fails to address critical dynamics necessary for genuine transformation. A glaring issue is its disregard for the stark global inequalities that underpin industrialization. Industrialized societies – largely concentrated in the Global North – continue to consume the majority of resources, while two-thirds of the world's population, primarily in the Global South, remains non-industrialized and dependent on fossil fuels for basic developmental needs (Brand and Wissen 2021). The framework does little to confront the root cause of the ecological crisis: an economic system that prioritizes endless growth, driven by private-sector interests and market profitability (Freitas et al. 2012). Instead of resolving

the crisis, this system exploits it as an opportunity for profit-making, often under the guise of environmental conservation. Carbon trading, for example, epitomizes the commodification of nature, turning ecological processes into financial instruments (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2021).

While critical academic perspectives have shed light on the systemic flaws underlying this crisis, they often fall short of offering concrete alternatives, focusing instead on critiquing the entrenched economic model. Mainstream narratives advocate for economies that superficially incorporate climate protection measures but remain deeply embedded in profit-oriented behaviours that prioritize investment security above ecological or social equity (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2021). Within this framework, agreements like the Paris Agreement are constrained by their alignment with the interests of the private sector. Similarly, the SDGs, framed as a broad agenda for sustainability, position businesses as central actors in addressing global challenges, from limiting global warming to 1.5°C to reducing poverty and combating discrimination (Brand and Wissen 2021).

The European Union has emerged as a key player in advancing the SDGs, implementing mechanisms such as the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG) to enforce compliance across member states. Companies are now required to disclose their ecological, social, and economic impacts, ostensibly aligning their operations with the goals of the Paris Agreement (WTW 2024). However, this reliance on corporate-led innovation underscores a troubling dynamic: the transformation of the SDGs into a capitalist tool for adapting to multiple crises. In this sense, global environmental management may also be termed "*colonial ecology*", as it reflects an ongoing commitment to maintaining the capitalist system by any means necessary – a stark continuation of the extractive logic of colonial inhabitation (Ferdinand 2022).

This colonial ecology, rather than dismantling structures of exploitation, repackages ecological transformation into a marketable framework that reinforces existing inequalities. Despite escalating ecological and social challenges, hegemonic elites persist in sustaining colonial patterns of domination. These elites dictate the terms of ecological transformation to maintain systems of oppression, externalize the costs of exploitation, and commodify nature for financial gain. In doing so, they obscure alternative approaches that could foster more equitable and sustainable futures (Brand and Wissen 2021).

Ultimately, the *imperial mode of living* continues to shape global responses to the environmental crisis. The rhetoric of sustainability, while seemingly progressive, has been co-opted as a tool for maintaining the status quo, preserving the privileges of a global minority at the expense of ecological integrity and social justice (Moore

2015). Genuine solutions to the crisis require a fundamental rethinking of the current economic model, challenging both the colonial underpinnings of development and the unsustainable consumption patterns embedded within the imperial mode of living. Only by addressing these systemic inequities can a truly sustainable and equitable future be envisioned.

5. The Double Fracture of Modernity and the Anthropocene: The Environmental Movement's Main Struggle

The mainstream environmental movement, as it stands today, is built on a foundational separation that deeply influences its effectiveness and scope: the perception of nature as an entity separate from humanity. This dualism stems from the colonial and modern frameworks of thought that have shaped global histories and understandings of existence. By positioning humans as external to nature, the environmental movement not only perpetuates a flawed conceptual framework but also obscures the environmental costs borne disproportionately by certain human populations (Ferdinand 2022). Simultaneously, social justice movements, particularly antiracist and anticolonial struggles, often fail to integrate the environmental crisis into their advocacy, creating a false dichotomy between racial and environmental justice (Whyte 2018). Together, these tendencies form what Ferdinand refers to as the "double fracture of modernity", a divide that fundamentally limits the scope and impact of both environmental and social justice movements.

5.1 A Legacy of Separation

The environmental movement's conceptual roots lie in modernity's "great divide", which established rigid oppositions between nature and culture, environment and society (Ferdinand 2022). This separation placed "Man" above nature, promoting a worldview where human beings could dominate and exploit the natural world without consequence. Colonial systems of thought and practices solidified this divide, not only between humans and nature but also between different categories of humans (Lewis and Maslin 2015). Indigenous, Black, and colonized peoples were often framed as being "closer to nature" in colonial discourses – a categorization used to justify their exploitation and disposability (Plumwood 2002). While modern environmental movements seek to address the vertical hierarchies inherent in this divide – challenging the domination of nature by human systems – they often neglect the horizontal dimensions of injustice embedded within these hierarchies.

This horizontal dimension includes the unequal distribution of environmental harm across racial, gendered, and economic lines. Environmental degradation,

climate change, and ecological collapse are not experienced equally across the globe. Marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, bear the brunt of environmental destruction caused by industrialized nations (Whyte 2018). Yet mainstream environmental discourse frequently speaks as though these communities, their histories, and their struggles are inconsequential to the global ecological crisis. This oversight is not a neutral omission but rather a continuation of colonial patterns of erasure.

5.2 Disconnected Movements

On the other side of this double fracture are social justice movements – antiracist, anticolonial, and feminist struggles – that often fail to incorporate environmental concerns into their frameworks. The division between these movements and environmentalism reflects the colonial origins of modernity, which not only separated humanity from nature but also fragmented knowledge systems. Environmental activists, for instance, may call for the preservation of ecosystems without addressing the racial and colonial violence that underpins the exploitation of those ecosystems (Evans 2017). Conversely, antiracist and anticolonial movements may focus on dismantling structural injustices while overlooking the ways these injustices are tied to ecological exploitation.

This mutual exclusion creates a “sympathy-without-connection” (Ferdinand, 2022), where both movements acknowledge the importance of the other’s struggle but fail to meaningfully integrate them. The result is a fragmented resistance that reinforces the very systems it seeks to dismantle. The environmental crisis is a racial and colonial crisis; it is a product of centuries of extractivism, land dispossession, and ecological destruction driven by imperialist ambitions. To separate racial and environmental justice is to misunderstand the roots of both issues and to forfeit the transformative potential of addressing them together.

5.3 The Colonial Inhabitation and Its Epistemic Violence

This double fracture – between the environmental and the colonial – can be traced back to the epistemic violence of colonial inhabitation. Colonization did not merely dispossess lands; it also imposed a worldview that fragmented existence into binaries: human/nature, culture/environment, colonizer/colonized (Plumwood 2002). This worldview dismissed other modes of inhabiting the Earth, particularly those of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities that understood humanity as an intrinsic part of nature (Gómez-Barris 2017). These epistemologies, which have long recognized the interdependence of social and ecological systems, were systematically marginalized in favour of extractive, exploitative modes of being.

The concept of the Anthropocene, which frames humanity as a geological force shaping the Earth, is itself a product of this colonial framework (Lewis and Maslin 2015). While it highlights the global impact of human activity, it often homogenizes humanity, failing to account for the stark inequalities in who causes and who suffers from environmental destruction. This framing obscures the fact that the Anthropocene is not a universal condition but a deeply uneven one, rooted in the histories of colonization, slavery, and racial capitalism.

5.4 Toward a Plural and Integrated Struggle

Addressing the ecological crisis requires a radical rethinking of the environmental movement's priorities and alliances. To move beyond the double fracture of modernity, environmentalism must integrate the insights of antiracist and anticolonial struggles (Ferdinand 2022). This means acknowledging that historical colonization and contemporary structural racism are central to the destructive ways humanity inhabits the Earth. It also means embracing the epistemologies of those who have been most impacted by these systems – epistemologies that challenge the separation of humans and nature and offer alternative ways of inhabiting the world.

One such alternative is found in the Maroon inhabitation, which will be explored in the following section. Maroon communities, formed by escaped enslaved peoples, represent a mode of existence that bridges the environmental and colonial fractures of modernity. Their practices and worldviews challenge the binaries imposed by colonial systems, offering a vision of justice that is simultaneously ecological and social. By learning from these practices, the environmental movement can begin to heal the fractures that limit its scope and effectiveness, forging a more plural and integrated path forward.

6. Maroon Inhabitation or Maroon Political Ecology

Colonial inhabitation placed the violent dynamics of colonization and slavery at the very heart of modernity (Ferdinand 2022). Understanding this not only illuminates the mechanisms of systemic oppression but also brings into focus the powerful forms of resistance that have shaped our conceptual and practical responses to ecological crises. Maroons, in their fierce resistance to slavery, rejected not only the brutality of forced labour but the foundational structures of colonial inhabitation itself – an order rooted in the exploitation of both human life and the environment under what we now understand as the Anthropocene (Ferdinand 2022). Marronage, then, emerges as one of the most profound movements of resistance, taking shape even as the colonial-capitalist system itself was being constructed.

Marronage signifies a radical and direct challenge to the colonial-capitalist order. The knowledge, practices, and philosophies developed by Maroons provide an alternative model of inhabiting the Earth – one that contests the extractivist and exploitative paradigms that have shaped modernity (Castillo Bennett 2023). Latin America, often referred to as the laboratory of modernity, became the site where these counter-modern ways of being came to flourish. Through their unique forms of habitation, Maroons not only issued early warnings about the destructive tendencies of the capitalist system but also offered crucial insights into alternative ways of living that avoid both ecocide and genocide (Green and Price 1974). Their legacy offers a compelling blueprint for sustainable living, one that exists outside the violent structures of modernity, rooted instead in balance and reciprocity with nature.

6.1 Fleeing the Plantation and the Slave Ship's Hold: Maroons' First Allies

The Maroon communities did not merely escape slavery – they reimagined the very concept of habitation, creating new modes of existence that defied colonial expectations. After fleeing the plantations, Maroons sought refuge in natural habitats deemed by European colonizers as 'inaccessible" or "uninhabitable" (Ferdinand 2022). These spaces, however, became their sanctuaries and first allies. Maroons fled to the mountains of Martinique, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic; the swamps of Brazil and Louisiana, and the dense jungles of Esmeraldas in Ecuador (Ferdinand 2022). In these spaces, the Maroons did not merely survive – they reshaped their lives to centring respect as a value to co-habit with other humans and nature.

The land itself became an active participant in their resistance. These environments – once disregarded by colonizers – were embraced by the Maroons as protective spaces, providing resources and shelter. In the case of Ecuador's Esmeraldas, the dense jungles became an integral part of their strategy of survival and resistance (Castillo Bennett 2023). Here, the figure of the Mother Mountain emerged – a symbol of reverence for the land and its sustaining forces. The Maroons' respect for Mother Mountain was not merely spiritual; it formed the basis of their everyday ecological practices, where the land was seen as both protector and provider (García Salazar et al. 2010).

The Maroons' inhabitation of these spaces was not a retreat from civilization, but rather a profound rethinking of what it means to inhabit the Earth. In their establishment of *palenques* – autonomous settlements – they rejected the exploitative colonial systems of land use and social organization, forging communities based on cooperation, mutual aid, and care (Castillo Bennett 2023). The Maroons' political ecology emerged from

these relationships, grounded in a worldview that honoured the Earth's natural cycles and rhythms, rather than exploiting them (Ferdinand 2022).

The lessons of Maroon inhabitation provide critical insight into how we can cultivate ways of living that honour and protect the Earth rather than exploiting it. Their ecological wisdom was not just about survival in an oppressive world but about building a new way of being in relation to the natural world – one that challenges the extractivist paradigms of colonial modernity and offers an alternative vision for the future. Through Maroon inhabitation, we glimpse the possibility of a future that is not bound to the destructive forces of capitalism and colonialism but is instead rooted in mutual respect, care, and ecological justice.

7. Maroon Inhabitation: A Retelling of the First *Palenques* in Esmeraldas, Ecuador

7.1 The Arrival of the Maroons and the Establishment of *Palenques*

The arrival of Africans in Esmeraldas dates back to 1553, when a Spanish slave ship bound for Peru became stranded along the Ecuadorian coast (García Salazar and Walsh 2017). Oral histories recount that enslaved Africans escaped the wreckage and established the first *palenque* in the dense forests of Esmeraldas (Castillo Bennett 2023). Led by Alonso de Illescas, a former slave born in Cape Verde, the Maroons began organizing their lives around the principles of autonomy and collective survival. Illescas, drawing on his experiences as a captive and his familiarity with Spanish strategies, negotiated alliances with Indigenous groups in the region (Gracia 2019).

From these alliances, the Maroons learned to navigate their new environment. Indigenous communities taught them how to identify edible plants, fish the local rivers, and farm the fertile lands. In return, the Maroons shared their knowledge of defence, community governance, and resistance (García Salazar and Walsh 2017). By the mid-16th century, the *palenques* had evolved into self-sufficient settlements that challenged colonial dominance. These settlements, known within the Black-Afro-Ecuadorian community as "the Maroon *palenques*" and referred to by colonial authorities as the "Zambo Republic," became symbols of resistance and cultural resilience (Walsh and García Salazar 2015).

7.2 Afro-Indigenous Solidarity

The relationship between Maroons and Indigenous communities represented a profound act of defiance against colonial rule. This Afro-Indigenous alliance disrupted the colonial power structure, as it united two oppressed groups in a shared struggle for freedom. Together, they fought off Spanish incursions, maintained control over their territories, and created a new cultural identity that blended African and Indigenous traditions (Castillo Bennett 2023).

Colonial authorities viewed this alliance as a threat and sought to dismantle it through manipulation and violence. Despite these efforts, the Maroons and Indigenous peoples continued to support one another. The *palenques* became spaces of cultural exchange, where both groups shared knowledge, resources, and spiritual practices. For instance, Indigenous craftspeople provided Maroons with tools and household items, while Maroons offered food and assistance in return. This relationship was not merely transactional; it was grounded in mutual respect and solidarity (Castillo Bennett 2023).

7.3 Guardians of the Land: Maroons as Environmental Stewards

For the Maroons, nature was more than a backdrop to their struggle – it was a partner in their fight for survival and freedom. The dense forests of Esmeraldas provided refuge from colonial forces, while rivers and fertile lands sustained their communities. The Maroons' relationship with nature was informed by ancestral African traditions, which emphasized harmony with the environment. These traditions were further enriched by Indigenous ecological knowledge (Castillo Bennett 2023).

The Maroons viewed the land as sacred, a living entity that demanded respect and care. This belief translated into sustainable practices such as rotational farming, careful resource management, and the cultivation of diverse crops to ensure ecological balance (García Salazar and Walsh 2017). These practices not only sustained their communities but also protected the biodiversity of Esmeraldas. Oral histories describe the Maroons' reverence for nature as an "unwritten law", a mandate from their ancestors to preserve the land for future generations (Walsh and García Salazar 2015).

Witnesses of memory often contrast the Maroons' time with the present, describing "*el ayer*" (the past) as a time of rational resource management and "*el ahora*" (the present) as a period of environmental disorder (García Salazar et al. 2010). This perspective highlights how Maroon practices of conservation and stewardship remain relevant today, particularly as Afro-Ecuadorian communities continue to fight for their ancestral territories against the encroachments of modern development.

7.4 Resistance and Resilience

For over a century, the Maroon *palenques* resisted colonial incursions. These fortified settlements became bastions of freedom, where Maroons and Indigenous allies defended their autonomy. However, colonial forces eventually succeeded in weakening the Afro-Indigenous alliance (García Salazar and Walsh 2017). By the mid-17th century, Spanish authorities had constructed roads and infrastructure that facilitated greater control over the region. The division and pacification of Esmeraldas marked the end of Black leadership in the *palenques*, but the legacy of these communities lived on (Castillo Bennett 2023).

The *palenques* remain a powerful symbol of resistance and environmental stewardship. They remind us that the Maroons were not only fighters for freedom but also caretakers of the land. Their practices and philosophies continue to inspire contemporary Afro-Ecuadorian communities in their struggle to preserve their ancestral territories and assert their rights.

7.5 Lessons from the *Palenques*

The history of the Maroon *palenques* in Esmeraldas is a story of courage, creativity, and connection. It teaches us that freedom is not just the absence of oppression but the presence of autonomy, community, and respect for the natural world. The Maroons' ability to forge alliances, build self-sustaining communities, and protect their environment demonstrates the power of resilience in the face of adversity.

Today, the descendants of the Maroons continue to honour this legacy. As guardians of their ancestral lands, they fight against exploitation and environmental degradation, drawing on the wisdom of their ancestors (Walsh and García Salazar 2015). The story of the Maroon *palenques* is not just a chapter in history – it is a living narrative that continues to shape the identity and aspirations of Afro-Ecuadorian communities.

8. *La Vida Simple* (Simple Life), A Counter Hegemonic Practice that Informs Maroon Inhabitation

Maroon inhabitation was deeply rooted in the Maroon way of thinking, a worldview that did not originate in the Americas but was carried across the Atlantic by the enslaved from their ancestral homelands. This way of thinking, shaped by the rich cultural and spiritual traditions of Africa, formed the foundation for Maroon inhabitation in the Americas (Ferdinand 2022). It was further enriched by indigenous cosmovisions, philosophies, and practices encountered in their new environments. One such philosophy, developed

by the Maroons who settled in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, is known as *La Vida Simple* (The Simple Life) (García Salazar and Walsh 2017).

The philosophy of *la vida simple* is inherently anti-capitalist, rejecting the commodification of land and labour. It posits that true progress is not measured by the accumulation of material wealth but by the achievement of balance – between humans and nature, and among members of the community. In Esmeraldas, Ecuador, this philosophy guided the Maroon communities in their fight to protect their territories, maintain their cultural identity, and establish a sustainable mode of living that stood in direct opposition to colonial paradigms (Castillo Bennett 2023).

8.1 Core Elements of *La Vida Simple*

Collective Ownership of Land and Resources

The Maroons viewed land not as a commodity to be bought, sold, or exploited, but as a communal resource essential for the well-being of all. Ancestral territories were seen as sacred spaces, passed down through generations to preserve their cultural and physical existence. This principle ensured that no individual could hoard resources for personal gain (Castillo Bennett 2023). As Grandpa Zenón emphasized, “no person in the community could appropriate more resources than needed to live a full life”(García Salazar y Walsh McDonald 2017).[2]

Harmony with Nature

Nature was regarded as a living, spiritual entity – a source of life that demanded respect and stewardship. Maroons practiced sustainable resource management, guided by ancestral knowledge, and refrained from overexploitation. Rivers, mountains, and mangroves were considered sacred, integral to the community’s survival. This worldview starkly contrasted with colonial practices of deforestation, land clearing, and resource extraction (García Salazar et al. 2010).

Rejection of Wage Labour and Materialism

In Maroon communities, labour was not equated with servitude or wage work, which were seen as extensions of the slavery system. Instead, work was integrated into the collective needs of the community. Resources were shared, and families could rely on the land to provide for their basic necessities. This approach rejected the colonial

2 Grandpa Zenón is an ancestral figure of the Afro-Ecuadorian community in Esmeraldas. His teachings have been passed down through generations and were most recently compiled by the late Juan García Salazar in his pedagogical writings. Grandpa Zenón represents the elders of the community collectively and should not be understood solely as a cisgender male. This figure embodies ancestors across the entire gender spectrum.

emphasis on economic productivity and material accumulation as markers of progress (García Salazar et al. 2010).

Cultural and Spiritual Practices

The Maroons maintained a strong connection to their African heritage, infusing their way of life with ancestral wisdom, music, agricultural techniques, and healing practices. These cultural expressions not only preserved their identity but also reinforced the communal bonds necessary for continuity of the Vida Simple philosophy (Castillo Bennett 2023).

8.2 Colonial vs. Maroon Inhabitation, based on *La Vida Simple* Philosophy

Malcolm Ferdinand's framework visualizes the principles, foundations, and forms of colonial inhabitation in relation to land, non-humans, and other humans (Ferdinand 2022: 35). Below is a summary of these characteristics (Table 1):

Table 1. Characteristics of Colonial Inhabitation

	Principles	Foundations	Forms
Relationship to the land	Geographical and ontological dependence	Land grabbing	Private ownership of the land
Relationship with non-humans	Exploitation of non-humans	Land clearing/deforestation	Plantations
Relationship to other humans	Othercide	Massacre of the Amerindians and domination of women	Servitude and enslavement

Source: elaborated by the author based on Ferdinand (2022).

Using this framework, I elaborated a comparative table that highlights how *la vida simple* counters each principle, foundation, and form of colonial inhabitation. It presents a direct response to the imperial mode of living and modernity's hold over Maroon communities (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Maroon Inhabitation based on *La Vida Simple*

	Principles	Foundations	Forms
Relationship to the land	Ancestral territories as the primary space for life	Land appropriation as freedom from enslavement	Collective ownership of land
Relationship with living beings other than human	Consumption based on basic needs; no exploitation dynamic	Building infrastructure without altering biodiversity	Communes
Relationship to other humans	Intercultural cohabitation	Mutual respect and exchange	Collaboration

Source: elaborated by the author based on Ferdinand (2022).

8.3 The Counter-Hegemonic Nature of *La Vida Simple*

La vida simple was more than a survival strategy; it was a form of ideological resistance to colonial domination. Colonial systems prioritized profit over people, reduced nature to a mere resource, and dismantled communal structures. In contrast, *la vida simple* offered an alternative vision – one that rejected individualism and extractivism in favour of community and responsible management of natural resources. By declaring their territories as "territories of collective possession" (García Salazar et al. 2010), Maroon communities resisted external threats from colonial governments and later the Ecuadorian state. These territories became strongholds of autonomy, allowing Maroons to maintain cultural practices, sustain their communities, and counter capitalist modes of development imposed upon them. *La vida simple* continues to inspire a counter-hegemonic approach to inhabitation, offering valuable insights for sustainability and resistance against modern forms of exploitation and environmental degradation.

9. Conclusion: Lessons from *La Vida Simple* Today

The philosophy of *la vida simple* holds profound relevance in contemporary discussions on sustainability and environmental justice. In a world grappling with the consequences of climate change, environmental degradation, and systemic inequality, the Maroon perspective offers an invaluable blueprint for coexistence. Rooted in a worldview that

emphasizes sufficiency over excess, collaboration over competition, and reverence for land over exploitation, *la vida simple* challenges the foundational assumptions of modern development paradigms. It transcends being merely a way of life for the Maroons, positioning itself as a critique of colonial and capitalist systems that have shaped modern societies and their exploitative relationships with nature.

At its core, *la vida simple* fosters a relationship of mutual respect between humans and the non-human world, offering a vision of sustainability that is deeply intertwined with social justice. This philosophy underscores that the well-being of people is inseparable from the health of the environment, urging us to reconsider our relationship with nature as a living entity rather than a resource to be commodified.

Beyond its historical significance, *la vida simple* creates a framework that moves away from the anthropocentric narratives of the Anthropocene and addresses the "colonial double fracture": the alienation of humans from nature and the subjugation of marginalized peoples under colonial systems. By decentring humanity as the sole agent of solutions and recognizing the agency of nature, *la vida simple* aligns with other philosophies such as *sumak kawsay* and *vivir sabroso*, which envision alternative paths for humanity's relationship with the Earth (Acosta 2013). These paradigms celebrate plurality, promote intercultural respect, and emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings.

In this light, *la vida simple* offers critical insights for the environmental justice movement, guiding it away from "green capitalism" and toward a decolonial ecology (Ferdinand 2022). This decolonial perspective prioritizes the collective well-being of all inhabitants of the planet – not just a privileged few. It challenges the dominant systems of exploitation and extraction by reimagining progress as the harmonious balance between human societies and the ecosystems that sustain them.

Ultimately, *la vida simple* is not just a call to return to ancestral wisdom but an invitation to rethink our shared future. It encourages humanity to step away from the destructive cycles of consumption and inequality, envisioning a world where life itself – human, living beings other than humans, and ecological – flourishes in harmony. This philosophy serves as both a critique of our present and a compass for building a more just, equitable, and sustainable future.

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