

Amazonia, Burning Self:
A Jungian Approach to our Ecological Crisis

To the memory of Chico Mendes

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Abstract

The 2019 events concerning the Rain Forest burnings in the Brazilian *Amazonia* shook up the international community and provoked diplomatic tension between Brazil and European countries. The current and other environmental crimes of similar latitude seem to lay on economic options supported by perverse policies based on indigenous populations' dehumanization, colonialism, and will to power. This paper aims to explore the *Weltanschauung* at work in the ignition of the ecological crisis and the potential individuation paths in the face of an even harsher and disintegrated environment waiting for us in the next few years. *Amazonia* is the *Pacha*, a holistic place where ecological consciousness manifests the need for nurturance and development. In contrast, we have the liberal-technocrat mind acting to impose a worldview sponsored by unethical gains at the expense of the Great *Pacha*. How to walk through the individuation path immersed in this chain of environmental destruction? What routes are open to us? These are fundamental questions I will strive to elucidate.

I grew up in Manaus, a metropolis built in the heart of the Amazon Rain Forest. My grandmother spent a good part of her day telling me archetypal stories (mainly indigenous myths) while preparing the meals. These stories were so scary that I grew up afraid of the forest and all the "monsters" that inhabited it in my imagination. If there was any ecological awareness in me, it was the ecology of fear. I was familiar with those almost mythological snakes, scary crocodiles, giant insects. They were part of my surroundings. Nature in the Amazon is not romantic. It is cruel, aggressive, temperamental. Its people are, therefore, quite tenacious and resilient.



Image 1 The female of the anaconda species, also called Sucuri which lives in the Brazilian Amazonia. Photo Rafael de Fraga.

Nature to me was a goddess, and I was very much afraid of the gods. I never thought that one day I would be speaking about nature with so much love and

appreciation. I never thought that all these animals, plants, flowers, insects, stones, rivers were all part of my soul. This realization came much later when I left the Amazon region to live in the United States. It was from an outside perspective that I came closer to my roots, to my Self. This brief reflection aims to bring awareness that being born and raised in the Amazon does not make you an instant advocate for it. Ecological awareness comes most of the time from a spiritual awakening.

Individuals relate to nature in different ways: Either feeling a strong connection with species of living and non-living beings or responding with gratitude for the kinship with animals and plants. I believe that the Earth has rights (Rights of Mother Earth, 2010), and I see it as *La Pachamama*, a living superorganism (a term coined by James Hutton in the 1790s). In Jung's words: "The Earth has a spirit of her own, a beauty of her own" (Jung, 1930, as cited in Sabini, 2016, p. 1).



Image 2 *Los Derechos de la Pachamama (The Rights of Mother Earth)*, Dec 8, 2010

Those feelings and beliefs are political choices that we make daily. They reflect how we live and conduct ourselves with our surroundings. No matter what the connection with nature is, as individuals, we depend on it for daily sustenance and ultimately for survival on this planet. Unfortunately, the natural world has been deeply affected by human economic activities. We are "cleaning" nature while getting increasingly "dirty" as Jung (1984) said: "Matter in the wrong place is dirt. People have got dirty through too much civilization" (p. 142).

The next generations will inherit a world quite different from the environment we were born into ourselves (Attfield, 2018). Throughout many centuries we have been losing entire libraries of living organisms (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/03/2/1_032_04.html). Each lost book, each broken organic system requires adaptation from other species, and some of them are unable to do so. For this reason, I am claiming ecological justice while declaring that the existence of living and non-living beings matters. We must reject the human-interest-only stance, this anthropocentric view where the prevailing thought is that nature exists to serve human beings' interests only.

Chico Mendes, who became an icon during the conflict involving rubber tappers and farmers in the state of Acre in the 1980s, presented a model for extractive development that was a combination of the social and environmental solution.



Image 3 Chico Mendes. ©Divulgação from the page <https://www.wwf.org.br/?37442/Chico-Mendes-nominated-Patron-of-the-Brazilian-Environment>

Chico Mendes was aware of the ecological violence against the environment and social violence against indigenous people and rubber tappers (*Seringueiros*). Both types of violence follow the logic of accumulation through people's domination and natural resources exploitation. (Boff, 2009)

Environmental and Social Justice

The word ecology comes from the Greek *Oikos*, meaning home. It is the study of all living and non-living systems' interrelationships with their environment and each other. Several aspects of ecological thinking interrelate with other sciences and knowledge, and psychology is one of them. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who

coined the term "deep ecology," contrasted two ecology movements: The shallow and the deep. (James, 2015).

These movements reveal our way of thinking of what it means to be on this planet. The shallow kind is anthropocentric, elitist, and focused on the people of developed countries. By contrast, the deep kind considers all species' interdependence and all people living on this planet where all have the "equal right to live and blossom." Naess called it a "biospheric egalitarianism," meaning that we are all nature and entitled to live our way of life. According to deep ecology, the causes of the Earth's deficit lie in the type of society we currently have and the type of psychological attitude that prevails, which is based not only on modern thinking but also on ancestral times (Attfield, 2018; Boff, 2009; James, 2015).

Environmental Ecology

There are other currents of ecological thinking; one is the "environmental ecology" – a biology branch that studies the interactions among organisms and their environment. The environmental ecology's main preoccupation is preserving the environment and its several organic and inorganic systems, aiming at the ecological balance. This ecological thought appears in the activism pro-clean, green, and renewable energy. Nevertheless, this ecological thinking separates human beings, and all that human thought produces from nature and has political and economic implications (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012). Environmental ecology has a solid scientific basis and is mainly corrective. It requires an innovative political attitude that demands an economy based on less polluting technologies to contain the current industrial project's voracious advance, based on pathological consumption.

Social Ecology

Social ecology, on the other hand, considers human beings and integral society parts of nature. According to this ecological thinking, social injustice is environmental injustice (Boff, 2009). We are currently facing several crises as humankind. The COVID-19 pandemic came to exacerbate the already established global economic problem we have been handling for more than ten years. We still face a crisis in the energy sector, one of the consequences of the normalization of pathological consumption. There is also a social, educational, moral, spiritual, and ecological crisis going on concurrently. In all these crises listed here, we can find archetypal coloniality. Aníbal Quijano coined the term coloniality to convey the idea of an ongoing pattern of the colonial thinking of the XVI century based on four domains of human experience: "(1) **economic**: the appropriation of land, exploitation of labor, and control of finance; (2) the **political**: control of authority; (3) the **civic**: control of gender and sexuality; (4) the **epistemic** and the **subjective/personal**: control of knowledge and subjectivity" (Mignolo, 2005, p. 11).

Coloniality is a force behind the current environmental crisis. Still, I would instead place the economic domain of coloniality in second place, bringing the political realm to the pole position since the financial system is regulated politically in developed governmental powers.

Integral Ecology

An integral ecology is another critical ecological thinking that sees a strong bond between humans and other living and non-living systems: We are the Earth, along with other living and non-living beings (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009). Jung expressed some of his thoughts on nature that are in tune with the integral view of ecology. These are Jung's words: "My Self is not confined to my body. It extends into all the things I have made and all the things around me. Without these things, I would not be myself; I would not be a human being. Everything surrounding me is part of me". (Jung, 1977, p. 202).

We are now living the loss of the type of connectivity described in Jung's words, which has done substantial harm to our inner ecology. This lack of connection is only imaginary. Under integral ecology perspective, the Earth and human beings are considered a single entity. The human being is *La Pachamama*. Integral ecology calls attention to the importance of a worldview that aims to awaken in human beings the awareness of their actions and the respective consequences in the solution of environmental problems or the promotion of even more severe crises.

Amazonia, Burning Self

The Amazon rainforest is burning at an unprecedented speed (Goodman & Giles, 2020), and along with it, our chances of individuation. We are also burning inwardly in a frantic search for something more in the closet, a little more pleasure in the mouth, the last model of the year, that is, our eyes increasingly turned outward. The individuation process requires the recognition that we are nature and that when we destroy it, we also destroy a part of ourselves. The environmental emergency we face is also the result of an

ethical crisis. This crisis is also cultural, psychological, and spiritual. The belief that "eternal" life and the kingdom of God "is not of this world" built a mentality that exploits the riches of this world since everything has become somewhat banal, fleeting, as this planet is not our final destination. And if there is no belief in a spiritual world, there is the certainty that we only have one life and we must make the most of it, hence Frank Sinatra's mantra: "You only live once."

Now, allow me to introduce a type of ecological thinking that comes from an indigenous nation in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon. They self-name *Huni Kuĩ* but are also known as *Kaxinawá*. For them, life is a continuous transformation that takes place right here. Despite the belief that beings originated from the voice and the will of a transcendent being, once here, we are the planet Earth itself in its most diverse manifestations. Therefore, for the *Kaxinawá* there is no promise of eternal life outside this world, but the assurance that life on this planet will go through different shapes, be they human, animal or vegetable forms. For the *Kaxinawá* we are still going through a process of continuous creation, birth, and transformation.



Image 4 *Huni Ku (Kaxinawá) Children – Photo David Tesinsky, 2019.*

Psychological Questions to Elucidate

How to walk through the individuation path immersed in this chain of environmental destruction? What routes are open to us?

Individuation is a process to which relatedness is a must. "The Self is relatedness," said Jung in 1935. Our inner ecology can only work with emotional integration, and for that, we need to relate not only to one another but also to all that surrounds us. In this moment of an environmental emergency, we face four challenges: climate, nature, food production, and individuation. The individuation process happens from the bottom up: No one can individuate with an empty belly. No one can individuate without a decent shelter. No one can individuate without clean water. No one can individuate without a stable climate. No one can individuate without feeling love for oneself and others.

We are indeed facing a biodiversity crisis: Up to 1 million species are at risk of annihilation, many within decades. We are also facing a diversity crisis everywhere. I am not only speaking about race but also about ideas. We forgot how to relate to others whose thinking is not a mirror of our mind. Finally, the attitude that leads to dominating classes, oppressing people, and discriminating against people is the same that leads to exploiting nature. Thus, it is not enough to go to the streets and fight to preserve the Amazon Rain Forest and continue a paternalistic political approach that only causes dependency and misery on other countries.

The Amazon region is the largest cattle ranching territory in the world. The beef industry is responsible for at least 80% of the Amazon Rainforest destruction. Since the 1960s, the Brazilian Amazonia has been suffering from fires, which had a boom in the 70s. Since then, Amazonia has been an international "concern" and the stage for several

foreign businesses playing leading roles in this tragic drama that we are living (Tollefson, 2013).

Brazil must respond to all these environmental crimes happening in our geographical territory. But this country should not be the only one to blame. Canada, the U.N., and the U.S. companies help promote the beef industry in Brazil, leading to the violation of most indigenous populations' human rights, something that those countries so strongly condemn (Recinos, 2019). This globally integrated neoliberalism is deeply anti-ecological. This system promotes the exploitation of the planet. From this system, the deterioration of the quality of life in all its aspects originates, including the psychological element.

We are sick within as much as our environment is unhealthy. Just as there is an external ecology, there is also an internal ecology. Violence and aggression against nature have done substantial harm to our mental health. By lovingly embracing *La Pachamama*, we may counter the perverse logic of capitalism. Here are some examples of how to do it.

***Águas do Cerrado* – Cerrado Waters**

The project "*Águas do Cerrado*" [Cerrado Waters] began in 2014 in a region near the Federal District of Brasilia and lasted two years. There were two basins at risk due to the accelerated urbanization process, and this Permaculture project aimed to recover these areas and promote the sustainable use of water. Petrobras sponsored the work. It included the revegetation of degraded areas associated with watercourses and the promotion of water resources' rational use in public schools and rural communities, implementing, replicating, and spreading permaculture social technologies.

Permaculture

Permaculture emerged in the 1970s in Australia as an alternative to the accelerated degradation of natural resources. Permaculture began with some aboriginal practices concerning the environment. They related to nature-inspired resources, including methods that were systematized and adapted to modern technologies. One of Permaculture's principles is integration rather than segregation. Its ethics have three pillars: care for the planet, care for people, and distribution of surpluses (which means not accumulating and generating waste).

Agroforestry

Another vital alternative to the food production problem is the implementation of agroforestry systems. These systems combine food production with environmental conservation. Agroforestry mimics the rhythm and logic of nature, but of course, they are not in line with the accelerated and anti-ecological output of the current model of agribusiness.

Alternative Psychotherapy Practices

Human beings' reintegration into the inner and outer nature also depends on a change in our psychotherapists' practice. The clinic needs to get out of the four walls. If this is not possible, an ecological approach needs to enter the clinic through practices that promote environmental awareness and reconnection with Mother Earth and with the shamanic force that inhabits each one of us. May this ecological crisis call for returning to our roots because we are trees as we are the Earth.



Image 5 An aerial view of a natural lake fed by a spring in the Amazon River basin near Manaus, September 30, 2010. Ivan Canabrava / Reuters

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