

Assimilating Otherness: changes and identity conflicts among the Amazonian Indians of eastern Ecuador

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The purpose of this paper is to show, through oral sources, how modernity and globalization are rapidly gaining ground among the indigenous inhabitants of the Ecuadorian Amazon and how this is affecting the identity and conception of reality of these peoples. In this paper, we use the province of Pastaza in Ecuador as a reference, especially the Arajuno Canton during the period from 1990-2010, a recent chronological period that reveals the enormous change undergone by this region in recent times. They have always been depressed parts of eastern Ecuador because of its dense forest and the low strategic and economic value this region has always had. But now, with the new extraction technologies, it is becoming a zone of conflict between multinationals, the state and settlers. On the other hand, thanks to the low interest generated by this place in the past, indigenous groups have been able to keep their cultures and identities almost intact (I say almost because these characteristics are malleable and vulnerable to change as I will now show).

This work was drawn from my research for the TFM (final thesis for the master's), for which I wrote a thesis called, *“Discourses of Identity in the Kichwa Amazonian communities in the Arajuno Canton, province of Pastaza, Ecuador.”* I used orality and certain practices from anthropology to compare identity discourses with everyday reality. That's why, using all the surplus material, I decided to write this article on oral history, which is an extension of my research. The subject is the Kichwa indigenous group, which has certain specific characteristics although in general, its rules can be extrapolated to all the Ecuadorian Amazonian cultures in their relationship with the state apparatus and globalization. On the other hand, it could also be an example of what is happening in all these groups inhabiting the Amazon, which are close to the Andean Sierra or linked by roads, small planes or busy rivers or live in areas where resources are exploited or close to large cities such as Manaus, Leticia or Iquitos, in other words, groups that are more vulnerable to external impact.

I would therefore like to address the problem of the place from the point of view of the territory and the identity crisis that is taking place among the Kichwa (a phenomenon that can also be detected in other Amazonian groups based in Pastaza, such as the Waorani and Shuar).

Out of all the oral files I possess, I have chosen the four I consider most useful for analyzing the issue that concerns us. César Cerda (interview 28/08/2011), an important

member of Pastaza, came from the north to this region where he married Margarita López, a woman with enormous influence in the region because she was the daughter of a great shaman and because she herself is recognized indigenous leader in the province. César's vision is that the example of Kichwa expansion is important to understanding certain aspects of the process. On the other hand, Fernando Delgado (interview 15/08/2011) is an employee of the Central University of Ecuador, who mediates between communities and the latter. His opinion, after years of contact and from a more detached perspective, greatly enriched this work. Eduardo Bolívar (interview 27/07/2011) also offers us the vision of the change of identity among young people because he teaches at a bilingual school (Spanish-Quechua) in the town. Lastly, there is Nelson Rodríguez (interview 12/08/2011), a psychologist who studies the Kichwa worldview, and is affiliated to the Universidad Central del Ecuador, an institution that has a scientific station in protected forest near the city.

Regarding the territory, César says

Most of the people in Arajuno are... from the province of Napo. They are the descendants [...] fifty or sixty years ago, it was a single province, the province of Napo-Pastaza. So the province of Pastaza was only recently created. And Arajuno was restricted to the province of Pastaza. So we are the descendants of the Napo Kichwa. Likewise I am a Kichwa from Napo, my family lives in the Community of San Jorge in Tena.

We can therefore see that Arajuno is a very “young” and almost uninhabited territory. Canelo, Záparo and Waorani indigenous people originally lived here. These original groups were gradually displaced to other areas, due to the arrival of the Kichwa from the Puyo zone, ~~who in turn that~~ -were fleeing from the Spanish conquest. Later, in an attempt to colonize the east, the Spaniards brought in other Kichwa groups, which had already been assimilated, to populate those territories conceived of as “deserts,” inhabited by indomitable “savages”¹. Thus, the Kichwa suffered uprooting and forced migration, subsequently adopting a large part of the customs and cultural heritage of the Amazonian nations. The Kichwa progressively expanded to the east, as is the example of Arajuno, where they mixed with the Canelos, absorbing this ethnic group. They also displaced and assimilated the Záparo, already decimated by the devastating rubber cycle. As César says,

We (the Kichwa) perhaps belonged to the great Zápara nation. The Napo zone and much of Pastaza belonged to the great Zápara nation.

And above all-, they displaced their bitterest enemies, the Waorani, known as “Aucas.” In less than a century, the Kichwa have become lords and masters of the territory, as a

¹Esvertit Cobes, Natalia, *La incipiente provincia: Amazonía y estado ecuatoriano en el siglo XIX*, Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2008.

result of which they now account for 86% of the inhabitants of the Arajuno canton, of which they are the institutional founders.

Given the issues with which this work is concerned, I must point out a number of important aspects mentioned earlier. First, from what I have observed, the Amazonian Kichwa identity is a mixture of rites, myths and customs typical of other nearby ethnic groups, normally their enemies. At the same time, they have an important heritage of Inca and Kichwa culture from the Sierra, which is often reflected in their way of thinking and seeing the world and society. The second is the conflict the Kichwa experience with the neighboring peoples, -since they are regarded as newcomers in the Amazon region; this is how they are conceived of by the Waorani, who were driven into the interior of the region by the Kichwa. In more recent times, the same happened with the Shuar ethnic group from the mountainous jungle areas of Morona Santiago (south of Pastaza), which, in recent decades, have been introduced into this province, and are represented by a couple of communities in Arajuno. The third aspect related to identity, which is of great interest to our analysis, which I mentioned at the beginning, is the fact that the Arajuno community only recently became an independent canton, since it was founded in 1996, as well as the main urban town, meaning that its inhabitants are likely to absorb influences from the “outside”. Since the canton is only fifteen years old, young people who have experienced the change have been come under the sway of these influences, as a result of beginning to use these new technologies and aspiring to Western values, disseminated on the Internet or television. These circumstances have made these young people begin to question their cultural roots and identity, which is rejected by the elderly and adults in the community, in defense of the traditional ways of life, according to the legacy of their ancestors². This has led to an identity crisis crucial for the survival of these cultures, in which the generation gap was obvious and critical, with no prospect of an immediate solution, as borne out by César’s remarks

I ... my family, said: No to the road, no to oil, no to cantonization, we have opposed it. Because people are not ready, we are not prepared to deal with the arrival of a road. How many indigenous people have a hotel, a restaurant serving typical food, a store? What does an indigenous person have? He has nothing. The settlers, the mestizos are there and they have a shop, a mechanic’s, a hardware store, a hotel [...] but indigenous people don’t.

[...] We’re not ready, not yet. But they us caught us unaware. The road, the cantonization. That’s why [...] alcoholism was the first thing they adapted, alcoholism and motorbikes.

So I said, if we make the canton, they are going to cantonize us ... and no sooner said

²Merino, Tito, “Sumak allpa, Sacha Runa Yachay, Sumak Kawsay”, *Historias desde el aula: educación intercultural bilingüe y etnoeducación en Ecuador*, Quito, Abya – Yala, Universidad Politécnica Salesiana Sede Quito, Universidad Politécnica Salesiana, Cuenca campus. 2006.

than done ... I said: Comrades, comrades, when we have a canton, we'll live in a very different community. They will do this (draws a grid to show Arajuno urban planning), see?

| 2 Amazonian iIdentity

I explain that, an identity (Amazonian Kichwa)... seen from the perspective of culture, of the man who lives in the jungle. The identity of the Amazonian man, I would say it is an identity that emerges from the perspective of a clearer freedom movement okay, with less chance of... of –a single, uniform management. And with greater differentiation from indigenous movements... indigenous movements nationwide. I see them as movements that have regarded what is Amazonian as a differentiating factor. And I think that this has allowed them, among other things, to gain access to the power of CONAIE, to the power of... being numerically less significant than the indigenous people of the mountains... but of course, with that possibility of differentiation, identity and claims. I think this has certainly allowed them to play a leading role within the national confederations or federations.

As Nelson points out in these statements, the various Amazonian cultures have always had an important differentiating element compared to other indigenous nationalities, citing the discourse of isolation that has allowed them to survive away from the shifting currents of history and the defense of nature, in which they are immersed. This has allowed the Amazonian Indians to have greater influence in relation to their numbers (because although Andean Indians have always had organizational power and pressure with regard to their proportionately low numbers, Amazonian indigenous people have a great influence in the large NGOs, international institutions such as the UN and the fight against multinationals).

This identity, carefully preserved by the vicissitudes of fate, has changed at an exponential rate over the past two decades thanks to advances in technology and infrastructure. A struggle has taken place between a bewildering modernity and the organizational preparation and cultural strength referred to by Fernando Pico

Kichwa for me are really extraordinary beings... Although there are problems, the (Kichwa)- try to stay in the jungle, I think-... many of them look after their habitat because they believe it is important to keep the habitat in the best conditions. But unfortunately, poverty and lack of opportunity are driving them into a corner. But not only the Kichwa but also other human groups. In an underdeveloped country with a limited economic matrix but with exuberant natural and human riches. [...] For me, the Kichwa are a group that is still trying to cling to their beliefs, their culture or part of their culture, but they are also unfortunately getting lost over time, with the submission or intrusion of foreign cultures, and expressions that are not intrinsic to them. Unfortunately that is undermining part of their identity and culture. And that's quite dangerous and painful because part of what these peoples are or originally were is being lost.

Identity change process

They value other cultures more than our own Spanish-speaking culture. They say Spanish is more important than Kichwa. And that Kichwa is inferior. They are obviously embarrassed. And as a Kichwa teacher, I say: That is not so, what's ours is ours. [...] When a Gringo comes and speaks English, we applaud him. It's great that he speaks English. But when one of us goes outside the community he is ashamed to speak.

[...] My in-laws, where you live, get up at three or four in the morning. My grandfather used to get up at three in the morning and make all the grandchildren get up. They would gather around, with him in the middle. An hour of advice, then he would put pepper in the eyes, with nettles and a liana. Then at five in the morning, we would go down to the river, to absorb the energies of the river and the stones. It was not a punishment, it was to make them strong.

[...] But now they are issuing new laws, which say it is a form of punishment. That it is abuse; it was not abuse, it was our way of teaching children to coexist with nature. There ~~is~~ are a lot of ~~danger, risks~~ you have to deal ~~with that~~ with. [...] It's different now, now we have to learn how to defend ourselves in the city. These new laws contradict what our customs used to be.

[...] Of course, those who experienced that, it was discipline, we are very respectful towards our parents and elders. We are hardworking and very supportive, generous and that sort of thing. But young people of today do not even give you the time of day.

[...] They value other cultures more, they are on the computer, the Internet, with music, cell phones and all that. That's the most important thing for them. We play Kichwa music, nobody wants to dance, if we organize a "reggaeton" they all turn up.

[...] The other day my son wanted to leave home, become independent, he said. Europeans do it but here, young people who do so end up being gang members, smoking or doing drugs.

Through these statements by Eduardo Bolívar, we see how the new Kichwa generations are gradually abandoning the ancestral practices and visions of this culture, whether deliberately or unconsciously. Given the influence of the mass media, young people perceive some of their own cultural practices as "old-fashioned" and become increasingly dissociated from them. This has a particular effect on traditional education and family life, given the increase in migrations (moving between regions or cities), facilitated by roads. This situation leads young people to move away from the nuclear family, breaking the strong ties that traditionally bound them to their family or community. But it is especially the ancestral view of the reality of the Kichwa world that shows the effects of forgetfulness, neglect and the influence of external agents, as noted above. Young people are abandoning the ritual practices of their ancestors, which is also due to the pragmatism instilled through education, public policies and the media. Having a traditional wedding, practicing daily rituals such as taking *guayusa* or raising children in the old-fashioned way are practices that are being abandoned in the new families formed by the younger generations.

Conversely, adults who received a traditional education and the elderly, who are the great defenders of the ancient world view, do not understand nor are they unable to gauge the scope of this problem and the only thing they do is oppose it through hostility. The constant attacks by “traditionalists” on the new generations lead to clashes that divide families. Still, in most cases not knowing what to do and resignation are the most common attitudes. The response of the young is to therefore to rebel even more, coping in the only way they can, in other words, by rejecting traditional cultural practices. This crisis is gradually taking its toll on the Kichwa social structure in Arajuno, taking them along a road with an unknown destiny.

Within the Amazonian indigenous worldview, respect for nature and its power is always present. For the ethnic groups in this region, nature has life, character and personality as if it were a human being. It therefore simultaneously has the traits of a singular and plural entity, since although it provides men with vital resources it can cause them misery and death. From my point of view, this view has been part of their cultural heritage, since the Amazonian indigenous peoples have always been at a “disadvantage” with respect to nature. In other words, subject to its extraordinary force, because in the region they inhabit, everything takes place on a breathtaking scale: in the Amazon, storms cover hundreds of kilometers and their downpours wash away everything indiscriminately: flooding the ground, knocking down trees and destroying villages. An area where the forest, the highest expression of nature, never ends. Where rivers are gigantic and they are all interconnected in an endless web. Where either the smallest animal or a plant which is the largest living specimen of flora or fauna can give us life or death. This ancient vision of the forest, which César regards as the earthly expression of the immense cosmos, is understandable.

Nature, for us, is our mother, ~~for us~~, our home, is our temple of knowledge. Where we live, where we eat, where we obtain energy and shade from nature. We feel part of nature, not the masters of nature.

However, the indigenous people “do not deprive themselves” of anything. Respect for nature becomes relative when a hunter prepares to hunt all the animals he can, whether large or small. A fisherman will fish with his nets as many fish as possible during the day. The more he catches, the greater his social recognition. At times, when certain products proliferate, such as turtle eggs, flying ants, certain birds or fruit, indigenous people try to fully exploit this abundance. This is regarded as a gift of nature; not only does it allow one to feed the community but those who extract its fruits also obtain recognition and social prestige.

Moreover, the introduction and use of technical methods is growing among indigenous people. They hunt with shotguns, fish with dynamite, use vans and motorcycles, canoes with outboard motors and apply chemicals to clean the farms and chainsaws to deforest the territories. This situation has led to the depletion of resources in regions close to

Arajuno, such as the river of the same name, formerly famous for its abundance of turtles and fish and now an almost lifeless riverbed, as César describes.

Sometimes ... the use of new devices has led a community to have nothing. ... Out ... there... following the road to Puyo, there is one that has no trees or anything, now it is a desert. What do they do now? [...] Sometimes a man turns up and tells them: I'll give you a television for that tree. And they give him a very large old tree, from primary forest they say. A tree that can cost three or four thousand dollars. These things happen. [...] That ... that I've also seen. When you hunt a lot, or many people hunting there with shotguns. All the animals flee, like in the river. Before the river was famous for its turtles, now there are none, they ... fished with dynamite, you know. [...] You have to go deep into the forest and maybe find animals, monkeys, jaguars and that sort of thing. [...] That is normal, we can drive cars and we want to. They are fast like motorbikes, young people use them a lot. To take girls for a ride or go quickly to the farm.

Amazonian peoples have maintained a worldview consistent with the limitations nature imposed on them; something that is now changing. Amazonian Indians have increasing power over nature, and they abuse it dreadfully. That is, shielded by that vision of respect for the earth and nature as an integral part of the former, without realizing they are contributing to their decline. Demographic pressure and misuse of technologies in the mistaken belief that they do not harm nature because of their indigenous status is leading to the destruction of large areas inhabited by the ethnic groups themselves³. In almost all cases, it is because they are not aware of the change that is happening within their own societies as well as the lack of interest in standing back to study this problem. Therefore, once the resources in a particular region have been depleted, they move to another one where nature is virtually untouched.

However, I would also like to say that there are notable exceptions; some ethnic groups, especially those living in national parks, are aware of the aforementioned problems and are beginning to adapt to them. They are proud beachheads for the implementation of new economic systems that respect nature.

From my point of view, the Kichwa Arajuno-like other ethnic groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon are undergoing a profound crisis that covers different fields, as I have just noted. First of all, the conflict is internal: changes are happening within them due to generational differences. The rejection of traditional life, dissatisfaction and the search for new paths is taking root in the mindset of the new Kichwa families. It is a problem that has been exacerbated by the lack of intergenerational dialogue. Second, the crisis the Kichwa are experiencing as a people, the population explosion and the use of new technologies in everyday life is leading the situation to a point that sooner or later will

³Alexandre Surrallés, *Entre derecho y realidad: antropología y territorios indígenas amazónicos en un futuro próximo*, FLACSO, Quito 2005.

be unsustainable and totally incompatible with the traditional view of respect for the nature.

I would like to stress the fact that this situation is always more pronounced among indigenous people in greater contact with urban areas than among those who are not. The rurality/urbanity dichotomy is profound because those who live in areas far from urban centers, however small they may be, still maintain their practices within a traditional spatial framework remote from these dilemmas. This is an important caveat; in rural areas, traditionalism is taking precedence, but not strongly enough to prevail.

Identity, lifestyle and respect for nature have been lost as a result of the penetration of colonization. The presence of political groups. Due to the presence of the type of education that has been imposed for over one hundred and eighty years since the start of republican life. An educational model that is far removed from our reality has been imposed. One that has always devalued and fleeced our culture. Say look, everything that is ours is forbidden, everything that is ours is negative, everything about us is ... not possible. And everything foreign is good. That has changed a lot in indigenous cultures ... in the Kichwa people. Many communities, many families, many people have stopped being themselves ... in order to assimilate other cultures. For example, living, for them, progress means having. In other words, living ... means having square houses, selling wood, destroying nature, just for money. So many families have embraced this concept. They have lost their connection with nature. This has been totally lost in today's youth. (Young people) have this conception.

As we see from César's final remarks, cultural stagnation is obvious, and the situation of the Ecuadorian Amazonian indigenous peoples will impose the implementation of a theoretical and organizational framework, in which guidelines are set and new strategies designed. These problems underlie Ecuadorian Amazonian societies, less visibly than other issues that attract the media. The worst thing is that they continue to be there and are attacking the essence of the peoples inhabiting the Amazon.

It would therefore appear that the Amazonian identity needs to be reinvented. In this respect, ethnic leadership should boost the dynamism between the peoples of this region of Ecuador, saving them from the abyss into which the loss of identity and cultural stagnation will lead them. In the long term, the ongoing crisis they are undergoing could lead to the fall of the pillars of Amazon identity.

Comments:

~~Congratulations. The article is interesting. Although it offers nothing new from a methodological perspective, it is well written and the issue it explores, and the sources it cites are suitable for W & S journal's target audience. However, from our perspective we believe that the text could be improved with a few small changes.~~

~~It needs a brief description of the state of the art of the issue, that includes a paper on the issue, apart from Esvertit, as a context for an audience unfamiliar with the subject.~~

~~If there is no monographs on the Kichwa, there should be references to other groups that might be comparable, as suggested in the text.~~

~~-The main thesis, the Kichwa identity crisis, is well reflected in the text. However the testimonies that take up almost a page are too self-evident, since there are no explanations referring to the thesis to be defended, or showing the interpretation the author is attempting to provide, in order to effectively reveal the crisis. We sincerely believe that inserting a few lines between the testimonials would be very positive for the text; alternatively, the fragments considered most significant could be selected.~~

~~Please make sure the text submitted follows the style guidelines to facilitate publication.~~