

A Struggle for Rights:
Reclaiming Indigenous Identity in
Amazonian Ecuador

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Indigenous peoples continue to exist as distinct and viable ethnocultural communities. Individual members of an indigenous ethnic group may adopt the life-style of and assimilate into the dominant society and perhaps even develop an attachment to the cultural identity of the dominant rather than indigenous group. But ethnocultural boundaries are resilient. Indigenous peoples have fought continuously for four centuries for their right to survive as distinct cultural and political communities.¹

The notion of indigenusness has become one of the most significant factors of identification, in both its class and ethnic distinction, in South America in post-colonial history. Emerging from a history of colonization and forced isolation from the greater political structure of states, as in Ecuador, indigenous groups have struggled to maintain their land and their cultural identity, often two overlapping concepts. The oligarchic nature of Latin American governments despite attempts to democratize has proven to be the primary obstacle in the indigenous assertion of rights and the protection of their cultural identity.

A history of failed leadership and ineffective national constitutions has prevented Ecuador from realizing a true democratic state. The corrupt leaders who have presided over this country for centuries have relegated the state to a sub-standard status within the international system, which has frequently resulted in financial crisis for the state. A process of modernization and reform was implemented in the second half of the twentieth century, which allowed for the privatization of industry and the access of international corporations to the resources of the Amazon. The effects of this globalization process have been detrimental to the cultural survival of the indigenous peoples of this region.

The frustration and anger that has developed among this people in response to the actions of the national government has been a significant mobilizing force for the social movement organized by the indigenous population.

Various indigenous groups of Ecuador, irrespective of the differences that exist among them, have organized according to their desire to preserve the land and maintain their native identity. This is particularly characteristic of the Amazon region in which there is a spiritual connection between the indigenous people and their surrounding environment. They have used factors of all-encompassing identification with indigenusness in its broadest sense to organize their movement. This quality of organization can be defined:

The term indigenous people refers to people living in countries which have a population composed of differing ethnic or racial groups who are descendants of the earliest populations living in the area and who do not as a group control the national government of the countries in which they live.²

The indigenous identity is deeply rooted in its communal structures and a strong belief in simplicity that was passed down to them from their elders.

That which makes the indigenous movement for rights unique is best explaining in the differences among the mechanisms for reform, such as legal declarations and the attainment of social rights that have been exercised both at the communal and the international levels. The unique spiritual identification with nature, communal organization, and simplicity of life distinguishes the notion of indigenous identity. Not only have these people struggled for centuries to be permitted to voice their opinions, but

¹ Indigenous Voice in World Politics, Franke Wilmer. London: Sage, 1993, p. 21

² Wilmer, p. 9

also the rhetoric developed by national and international organizations that facilitate this process is often unrepresentative of the true indigenous identity.

Thus, the indigenous dilemma persists in Ecuador, as many of these groups remain outside the political system of the state. The aide of international organizations and the education of effective indigenous leaders in the national and international systems have been important for the political progress of the indigenous peoples within the Ecuadorian system. This, as well as in the indigenous organization and identity, the future of the indigenous situation appears promising and the preservation of the indigenous culture, attainable.

Chapter 1: A History of Colonization

The history of events and practices, as well as the evolution of the political and cultural structures of Ecuador, are marked by instability and a failing struggle to assert democracy. The story of Ecuador's past is one of division and societal unrest, where constant challenges are being made to the existing system. Democracy is popularly considered the most efficient and productive political system for a state. The realization of this ideology in its true definition has been difficult for countries, particularly Latin American countries with a struggling economic status and large gaps in social distinctions, to achieve. Though Ecuador has fought to initiate and develop the process of democratization, it has often resorted to employing the language of democracy instead of truly adopting the qualities that define such a state.

Failed leadership and abuse of power are two critical elements for the historic downfall of many of the government structures in this region. As a result, instability has plagued this region throughout its existence. The overthrowing of Presidents, the sudden and often unconstitutional changes in regime, as well as coups, revolutions, and uprisings are all indicative of the nature of this corrupt system. The concentration of power into the hands of few leaders has been influential in creating a system that abuses those who are not in power and has been an obstacle to this national government on its quest for democracy. Often driven by repeated economic crises and constantly shifting political alliances, the history of the Ecuadorian system has been volatile:

This country's political tradition has been characterized
by instability, autocracy, authoritarianism.³

³ Political Instability in Ecuador, Peter Pyne. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, Institute of Latin America Studies, 1992. p. 1

Thus, the instability that characterizes Ecuador's political system is commonly measured by three aspects; first, the number of constitutions enacted since the achievement of independence, next, the frequency of changes in the occupancy of the Presidential palace, finally, and the variations in composition of ministerial cabinets.⁴

It wasn't until much later in Ecuador's history that minority groups found reasons to assert their claims to rights within the system. The qualities that define democracy, such as equal representation for all peoples and a system of checks and balances for those in control, then became comprehensible to members of this society. Influential leaders seeking reform, such as President Roldos, recognized that the national government was not representative of the qualities that other democratic states possessed. The second half of the twentieth century, then, has been more of a quest for reform and improvement than any other period throughout Ecuador's history. Through the distribution of power, the recognition of the claims of the citizens, and a developing pluralism, the Ecuadorian system can make steps towards achieving a more democratic system.

Ecuador has consistently faced internal division on some level throughout its existence, even during the period when the current Ecuadorian territory was popularly considered part of the Incan Empire. The land was divided between two brothers who inherited the kingdom from their father. Ultimately, the entire Incan Empire was lost to the Spanish colonizers who conquered the land and overthrew the existing regime. The death and disease that followed the European colonizers was inflicted upon the indigenous population. This was significant in weakening the natives and thus forcing them into subordination to the new colonizers, as they could not compete with the

⁴ Pyne, p. 2

strength and numbers of the Europeans. This was just one event that was influential in changing the structure of Latin America, leaving the original landholders to struggle for the land and identity that once belonged to them.

By the end of the Eighteenth century, the native Ecuadorian population began to seek independence from the colonizers, thus beginning a series of ideological transformations in the political system of the country. The identity of the Ecuadorian government was constantly shifting, each time seemingly at the expense of the natives. Independence from the Spanish finally came in 1822. As a result of an effort led by Simon Bolivar, leaving Ecuador to become part of a three-country entity made up on Ecuador, Colombia and Peru, known as Grand Colombia. Although Ecuador eventually seceded from this self-determined region, its own internal identity was still shifting. From military dictators, to Conservative parties, to Liberal campaigns, the leadership of the newly independent country was constantly changing, thus creating a continual feeling of instability.

During the period of 1830-1895, Ecuador experienced 11 different constitutions and in the 23 years prior to 1947, the head of state had changed 27 times, including a change in President four times in one month and six changes in constitution. These 23 years were a time of great chaos and turmoil for the state of Ecuador, creating increasing instability within the system and division within the country according to ideological and political party lines. There have also been 18 different national constitutions from 1830 to the present in Ecuador. Not only were leaders and constitutions always changing, but until recently these leaders were also instituted in an undemocratic fashion:

...Only ten of Ecuador's 91 presidential administrations since independence were freely, constitutionally, and democratically

chosen... These findings demonstrate that this aspect of democracy is a rare and relatively recent phenomenon in Ecuadorian life.⁵

Additionally, problems in the party structure contributed to the proliferation of the national ideology according to political identity, which has since been recognized as one of the most significant causes for political instability and dictatorship.⁶

A strong revolution in 1895 of the people of Ecuador against the state, initiated drastic reforms, most significant of which might be the separation of church and state. The system began to turn away from the strong military intervention in the government and signs of stability became evident. Developing simultaneously in Europe, however, were totalitarian movements in Italy and Germany, which provided examples to Latin American governments of abuse of power and promoted the best interest of the leadership above listening to the people. It was ideological movements such as these that strongly influenced developing nations, like Ecuador, and negatively as it were in this case.

In much the same way, however, the development of two different ideological movements, Socialism and Communism, encouraged non-bureaucratic members of society to stake claims to their rights that were being violated by an oligarchic political system and push towards a more stable democracy. Ideological shifts on the international level strongly influenced the changes that occurred in Ecuador on a national scale. Later in Ecuador's history, particularly as economic concerns heighten, the system will continue to shift in order to compete within the international system. The international

⁵ Pyne, p.3

⁶ The Challenge to Democratic Reformism in Ecuador, James Levy and Nick D. Mills. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Latin American Institute at the University of New Mexico, 1981. p. 37

model for development simultaneously aides in Ecuador's progress, as indicated by the modernization process that began in the mid-1970s.

The political power of the Ecuadorian government and the decision-making process fell into the hands of a few elite, who did not accurately represent the citizens. The conservative nature of the government is protective of their power and reluctant to distribute it fairly:

Most recent analysts of Ecuadorian affairs agree that Ecuador is a conservative state where the status quo has altered only slowly over the years, and where the forces of continuity have erected powerful barriers against pressures for sweeping change.⁷

The heavy concentration of the power of the state led easily to corruption within the system and leaders found it easy not to take responsibility for the decisions that were not made in the best interest of the people, as not even their position in government was determined by just or moral methods. Furthermore, the gaps between the ethnic and class distinctions became exaggerated and justified the limitation of active political participation of many social groups within the population. By now, the political climate of Ecuador had divided into three parties: Conservatives, Liberals, and Anti-Clerical or Socialist.⁸ Though citizens were excluded from political participation in the past, they continued to refuse participation in these parties. The majority did not believe in these dominant ideologies. The indigenous peoples specifically found it difficult to attach themselves to such political organizations, as they clearly did not represent their native identity.

⁷ Pyne, p. 5

⁸ Problems of Democracy in Latin America. Galo Plaza. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina, 1955. P. 28-29

Eventually, these politically uninvolved citizens, organized and developed the National Civic Democratic Movement, lead by Galo Plaza, who eventually became the President of Ecuador and led the system towards democratic reform. By 1948, a democratic government was implemented in Ecuador, whose strict limits set democratic principles, liberty of speech, respect for the constitution and laws of the republic, and an atmosphere of peace and security and respect for human dignity. President Plaza's goals were to create a more democratic political structure and to increase economic development in order to elevate the standard of living.

The implementation of democracy was necessary to break the negative cycle of instability that has plagued the Ecuadorian system. Often these radical reforms need to be initiated by under-represented members of the community and need to be implemented through drastic action, such as a coup d'état. One of the most important reasons that is cited for the causes which led up to the coup d'état of July 1963 was the tension that existed between twentieth-century needs and sixteenth-century structures⁹. Leaders were too concerned with their status and with maintaining their political power that they took little time to deal with the issues of the state or its people:

My predecessors as presidents, all patriotic and well-meaning usually found themselves dedicating their time, energies, and talents to keeping from being overthrown, and their plans for constructive action had to be postponed in favor of the necessity for survival.¹⁰

Since 1948, the political system in Ecuador has developed its democracy, enabling more citizens' voices to be heard and more rights to be recognized. The concentration of power is now more distributed than it has been in the past. Ecuador has given great

⁹ Anatomy of a Coup d'Etat: Ecuador 1963, Martin C. Needler. Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Comparative Study of Political Systems, 1964. p. 6

attention to the discourse that suggests state democratization. It must be more critically examined to determine whether the same dilemmas that have plagued the system throughout its history, are also those, which today prevent it from realizing a true democratic state.

¹⁰ Plaza, p. 37

Chapter 2: Indigenous Identity

The conquest of the native peoples of Ecuador by the Europeans was significant in establishing the political and social system in the way that it is today. The more primitive lifestyle of the natives, in comparison to the conquerors, helped to define the indigenous people as the “other” and to deem them inferior to the more “civilized” Europeans. Additionally, it is particularly easy for Amazon groups to become increasingly segregated from the broader society than groups from other regions. Their location allows them to develop in a way that is more characteristic of their own culture and less acculturated to the greater political and social schema. The strong connection to the land that is characteristic of the indigenous peoples is central to their belief system and has contributed to their unique cultural development. The benefit of such segregation is that it enables a stronger cultural coherence. Less contact with the national structure requires a lesser degree of forced assimilation. Negatively, however, such segregation also contributes to political isolation and lack of access to the national system, which is needed in order to protect their culture from encroachment.

Because of this regional and consequently cultural isolation, indigenous people often do not have access to a formal education in a state-run institution. Unable to speak the national language of Spanish, the indigenous people integrate less easily within the culture and have difficulty functioning within the political system. The lack of education afforded the indigenous people becomes especially important with the consideration of legal reform. Educating certain indigenous people in the system in order to gain rights within the system from which they have been marginalized, has been an important recent development for the indigenous people.

In order to truly understand the indigenous reality in Ecuador, it is important to first understand the nature of their identity and how that has developed differently from the national identity. There are several factors of identification for the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The most important of these factors are a strong connection to the surrounding natural environment, respect for the resources and its people, and a development which requires a harmonic balance and proceeds in a way that incorporates communitarianism and democracy. The humanistic quality should be integrated into all levels of life according to the indigenous people:

The humanism that we, the indigenous peoples, practice is an integral humanism where man and nature guarantee life in an intimate and harmonic interrelationship. Our integral humanism defends, respects, and affirms the rights of all life as the sustenance of the spirituality, thought and knowledge of the indigenous peoples and nationalities.¹¹

Despite the oppression and exploitation from which the natives have suffered since the period of colonization, the respectful relationship between man and nature is one that remains fundamental to the indigenous understanding of the way in which man and nature can harmoniously combine to form a productive society.

Most indigenous societies are agrarian-collectivist societies, making effective, yet conservative use of the resources of the Amazon environment. These groups have employed the communitarian mode of life, which is based on reciprocity, solidarity, and equality. This way of life is a socio-economic system of a collective character in which all its members actively participate¹². As the importance of equal participation within these communities is recognized as being significant to the indigenous identity, it becomes evident why these peoples have actively sought their own participation within

¹¹ “Political Declaration of Ecuador’s Indigenous Peoples”, <http://conaie.org/conaie4.html>, p. 3

the Ecuadorian political system, from which they have been excluded. The modernization process and the development the country has experienced recently have presented many challenges to the communitarian nature of the indigenous system, through economic and political pressures. The indigenous peoples, however, have adapted and only slightly modified their system, managing to maintain most of the communitarian qualities.

The communal level, which is important to the way indigenous peoples have organized their social movement, remains vital to their livelihood. The communitarian society is an essential aspect of the new multinational nation, which has been proposed by some indigenous organizations, such as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Its proposed bases will be family-personal property, communitarian self-managed property, multinational state property and mixed forms. The successful construction of these concepts as part of the national agenda, in the indigenous opinion, would allow for the society to be harmonized throughout:

The multinational state will be charged with harmonizing these types of “property” with the principle purpose of obtaining the economic, political, cultural, technological and scientific equality of the indigenous peoples and nationalities and other nationalities, guaranteeing the satisfaction of the material and spiritual necessities of all of society, and making possible the development of humanity and the conservation of nature.¹³

The equal participation of all members of society, joined with an effort to fully understand other nationalities and their goals in order to achieve respectful relationships, is necessary in creating a harmonic national environment according to the indigenous understanding.

¹² Ibid, p.3

¹³ Ibid, p.3

The desires for full participation and national harmony are central to the notions of democracy that the indigenous peoples wish to assert into their conception of a new multinational state. The nature of the current national system, although claimed to be democratic by its leaders, is understood to be hypocritical by the indigenous population. The indigenous peoples have their own notions for what constitutes a true democracy:

Our democracy is sustained in the respect for human rights, the individual and collective rights of the peoples, the freedom of thought, respect for beliefs and religiosity, and the peace and social justice practiced by the indigenous peoples and nationalities.¹⁴

They believe it should be founded on a more communitarian understanding and should oppose the colonialist, capitalist, imperialist, and segregationist natures, which have characterized Ecuador's past. From the indigenous perspective, the legal-political, administrative and economic structures have only resulted in oppression and exploitation and they believe that this system needs to be restructured in order to create a more stable and unified Ecuador.

The indigenous culture is based upon a long tradition, created by its elders. It encourages a strong belief in and respect for the surrounding natural environment. The need to preserve their identity promotes this understanding of the human-land relationship, as well as a need to preserve the indigenous languages and the ability to be educated. In all of these aspects of preservation, it is necessary for the indigenous peoples to maintain their dignity:

We aspire to the attainment of a dignified life with a material foundation, which is the land on which we have lived in the manner of our elders; we strive to be humane, with self-respect and love for our own culture.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁵ "Achievements of the Indigenous Movement", <http://conaie.org/conaie3.html>, p. 2

The centrality of nature to the indigenous belief system makes it evident why the exploitation of natural resources, both by the national government and international industries and organizations, has angered the indigenous population and has initiated the struggle for reform within the system. The land is not a means for production for the indigenous people, it is of great importance to their cultural identity and the modernization process of the national government has threatened the native culture with its expansion.

The language of the native population has served as another factor of identification, but also one that has enhanced the marginalizing of these peoples from the national identity and from effective participation within the system. For the indigenous peoples, language is more than just a mechanism of communication. It is vital to their culture.

The native language is especially significant as it relates to the colonization process that occurred in Ecuador, establishing Spanish as the official national language and further repressing the acknowledgment or participation of the indigenous peoples within the broader system. The inability of a majority of the indigenous culture to communicate in the Spanish language has presented an additional obstacle to their political participation. It has debilitated the indigenous social movement, limiting effective leadership only to those who have been educated in both the indigenous system and the national system. Those who are fortunate enough to be in this position are often placed in leadership roles, as they are able to communicate with each of these groups and are effective in seeking reform. The idea of educating Ecuadorians, particularly the

indigenous population, has gained importance recently as the debate over bilingual education has emerged.

In order to combat this language dilemma, indigenous organizations, such as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), have made efforts to implement bilingual education into the national system. They have made it one of the primary elements of their agenda because language is needed for more than just voicing opinions. It is influential in creating an identity for people.

Nationalities develop strong associations based on linguistic similarities. Bilingual education, as defined by the indigenous movement, embodies the struggle over history, nationality, language, and culture that are crucial to the social movement.¹⁶ One of the primary reasons that language is so embedded in cultural identity is because it is necessary for understanding the history of a group. Even those indigenous peoples who have access to formal education are forced to learn a language that is not representative of their people. What is more, they are forced to learn the history of their country and their people through the lens of a language and an identity that was created by colonization, the very process that subordinated them.

The Catholic Church and its missionaries were influential in establishing the efforts for bilingual education programs for the indigenous people. These organizations were successful in creating these programs because they were developed outside of the state apparatus. One example of a bilingual education program was literacy drives, which allowed opportunities for the indigenous movement to mold the direction of the curriculum. The indigenous efforts were directed at encouraging national recognition of

¹⁶ The Making of an Indigeneous Movement, Chad T. Black. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Latin American Institute, 1999. p. 32

the multiple cultures, languages, and identities that exist within their nation, which they believe, should be celebrated not repressed. The literacy drives allowed access to the privilege of education for some indigenous peoples, as well as to promote a consciousness of identity both for the indigenous peoples, as well as the national identity:

The indigenous peoples developed a better control over curricular issues, which determines control over the interpretation of history, and thereby the interpretation of citizenship, participation and national identity. It allows people to more critically view social reality through a process of conscientization.¹⁷

Bilingual education has been important for the progression of the indigenous movement, allowing the indigenous people to integrate into the national system in an effort to increase their rights and status within the state, while preserving their own culture and history.

As with many other aspects of the indigenous movement, however, there are divisions in this mentality. Some indigenous communities, such as the Huaorani of the Amazon basin, suggest that education within the system is not about learning alone. This group maintains that by integrating into the educational system, more than just language and history will be learned:

Among the indigenous groups of Huaorani in the oriente, state education is as much about changing bodily habits and clothing as it is about learning the curriculum. Schooling brings “civilization”, that is a new set of behaviors associated with the modern status of citizenship.¹⁸

It is almost inevitable that through this integration, the indigenous groups will become more civilized and more acculturated to the national identity. Similar to many of the

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 37

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 33

other dilemmas facing the native cultures, however, there will inevitably be a forced trade off of cultural preservation for the protection of their rights.

The lack of language recognition and opportunities for education for indigenous groups has only enhanced the marginalization these people have encountered. In many cases, indigenous peoples remain completely outside the national system and are unable to participate because of the inferior status that has been placed on their culture.

As the processes of modernization and globalization have begun to affect Ecuador, the indigenous peoples have seen more imminent threats to their cultural preservation. The exposure of these groups to international corporations and organizations has made them even more susceptible to forced assimilation, preventing them from maintaining their unique identity. These factors have been significant forces in propelling the organization of the indigenous social movement in reaction to attacks against their identity.

Chapter 3: The Effects of Globalization

The process of colonization was extremely influential in determining the quality of life and ability of indigenous participation within the political structure. The Ecuadorian society was established by Spanish supremacy and labeled the indigenous people as inferior and not worthy of active participation. Even after independence, the way that ethnically indigenous people have struggled to assert the legitimacy of their identity and to protect their culture has been a difficult process. Colonial notions of Spanish superiority still resonate:

It is a myth that the killing of indigenous peoples is an inevitable consequence of ‘modernization’. Modernization, from the perspective of indigenous peoples, is simply an ideology that rationalizes their destruction. Modernizing societies presume the superiority of their way of life and the inferiority of indigenous cultures and peoples. The rhetoric of modernization dehumanizes indigenous peoples.¹⁹

The need for the Ecuadorian government to promote its own goals for the state has often developed at the expense of the indigenous peoples whose culture is spiritually connected to the resources that the country exploits as a means towards progress.

The primary agenda of the Ecuadorian political system has been to democratize, but most importantly to modernize, in order to compete with other states within the international system, which enjoy more privileged positions based on their economic status. The modernization process often entails the privatization of national and international industries, which ultimately exploit resources that the Amazon region of Ecuador provides.

¹⁹ Wilmer, p. xi

The twentieth century in Ecuador has been marked by the continued succession of multiple leaders, governments, and constitutions, which seek to redefine the country as it embarks upon its journey of modernization. While most of Latin America trails other countries in the world with respect to development, as defined by notions of capitalism, Ecuador is determined to reach a plane that justifies its position in the global arena equating it with other countries. The development programs that have been instituted, particularly by Presidents who have served since the 1970s, have sought development through economic progress and inevitably the exploitation of their resources to attain a more export-oriented system in an effort to promote financial growth.

In the more recent times of economic hardship, Ecuador has increasingly shifted its national economic focus to becoming a more export-oriented system. These economic crises are frequent and often come as a result of constant constitutional reforms and financial corruption, which favor unequal distribution of financial resources throughout the country. The indigenous peoples have suffered most significantly from the increased necessity to export natural resources for income:

They try to monopolize in their hands all the resources that in one way or another are also the conquest of our peoples. For example, here in Ecuador what they want is to actually confuse the terms modernization and privatization, that is, to use the label modernization to privatize the state's resources, which are resources that belong to all Ecuadorians.²⁰

In addition, the Ecuadorian government has used the privatization of industry as a mechanism for economic growth and modernization. The exploitation that results from the privatization of industry is especially destructive to the indigenous cultures, whose standard of living as well as spiritual outlook is reliant upon the surrounding natural

²⁰ "Interview with Luis Macas", <http://conaie.org/conaie5.html>, p.2

environment, where these resources are found. This has encouraged both increased political protest throughout the developing country, as well as to provide indigenous groups with reason to organize their communities and to separate from the greater national political structure.

As the process of modernization persists throughout Ecuador, privatized industries are allowed increasing control over formerly indigenous regions, making it difficult for the indigenous peoples to survive. In the case of the Pastaza and Huaorani peoples, their lands have been legally transferred, by the national government, for use by international companies. When a foreign company comes into the region they negotiate with the national government, never consulting native peoples. Often this encroachment can have dangerous effects for the indigenous peoples. The invasion upon this region is best exemplified in the case of Texaco, as identified by Luis Macas, leader of CONAIE in his interview with Oswaldo Leon, who occupied the northern Ecuadorian Amazon for more than 20 years. Studies compiled by Harvard University researchers indicate that people are starting to die because all of the rivers where this company operated were contaminated and the children are now the victims of cancer. National leaders claim that this expansion is for the benefit of all Ecuadorians, but for those living in the Texaco-occupied region they received no benefits and have only suffered.²¹

National leaders, such as Mariatequi, have suggested that the erosion of communal land tenure systems, which are characteristic of many indigenous communities, would occur under the pressures of the export-oriented commercial agriculture that the Ecuadorian government attempted to establish²². Thus, the nation-

²¹ Ibid, p. 2

²² Black, p.18

builders of this period began to view the “Indians” as an obstacle to economic modernization and state construction. State-generated policies strengthened and favored the role of the middle class, further distancing the gap that exists between the class distinctions within the national system and preventing the realization of a true democratic structure which allows for equal participation of all classes.

Throughout the period of Marxist popularity in Ecuador, the state labeled rural peoples, such as the indigenous groups and peasants, positioning them as a lower status in global economic structures:

This orientation, discrediting ethnic and cultural identity as a source of resistance, dominated not only anthropological and historical literature, but also the actual relationship between Indians and the nation-state throughout the twentieth century²³.

The capitalist structure that has dominated the twentieth century global economy in the West seeks the reproduction of capital, while the indigenous economies venture for reproduction of life. Inevitably, there exists a disconnect between the national agenda of Ecuador, which has established developmental programs based on modernization and economic expansion and the cultural identity of the Amazonian indigenous peoples, who regard the land and its resources as part of their spiritual identity. As cultural anthropologist, Duara, has suggested, this dilemma has presented the indigenous peoples with what he terms, discourses of dissent. These are unifications of complex combinations of “cultural signifiers”, such as symbols, practices, and narratives that are in both direct relation and opposition to the dominant national discourse. This has provided further justification for the establishment of the social movement of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region.

²³ Black, p. 18

The two most significant modes of economic expansion for Ecuador were the oil and agriculture sectors. As the national government continued on its process of modernization, it allowed for the privatization of such industries. This further permitted the expansion of oil development and additional international encroachment upon the resources of the Amazon and the traditional peoples that inhabit this region. The lack of participation that was permitted for indigenous people within the civil society prevented them from engaging in the decision-making processes that allowed for the privatization of industries. Accion Ecologica, a non-governmental organization which wages national environmental campaigns, commented on this developing problem for the indigenous communities:

Accion Ecologica staff members were quite concerned that privatization would facilitate expansion of oil development in environmentally sensitive areas and indigenous territories, and would put strategic sectors of the national economy into the hands of transnational corporations while weakening the ability of the state to regulate their activities.²⁴

Many international organizations, which have collaborated with the indigenous groups in the national social movements, recognized that the Amazon region is not simply a machine that will continue to produce valuable resources forever. Without the respect for the land that the indigenous cultures uphold, Ecuador will no longer be able to use this region as a means for economic progress. The land and resources of the Amazon region are central to indigenous culture and identity and the exploitation of each of these things has led to the exploitation of the peoples. This has forced the natives to sacrifice themselves for the development of their country, of which they are limited from active participation in the decision-making processes. Thus, the expansion of oil development,

logging, mining, and cash-crop agriculture have been influential in providing the motivation for the indigenous movement against the Ecuadorian government. There was a period when the government would deal with indigenous claims by establishing missionaries to deal with these communities. As the expansion of industry increased and the reaction of the natives grew stronger, the government saw a need to consider this problem more seriously:

Prior to significant petroleum development in the RAE (Ecuador's Amazon Region), the government's policy toward the region's Indians was effectively to delegate their acculturation to missionary groups. More recently, with development of the region's petroleum reserves, official policy has shifted to integration of the native populations into the national society, primarily through agricultural land settlement policies. As a response to these federations, such as COFENIAE, calling for state recognition of native culture, land rights, and resource control.²⁵

The claims of the indigenous peoples are beginning to be recognized.

Lawrence Salmen, in his book entitled, Listen to the People: participant-observer evaluation of development projects, attempts to define what constitutes a successful development project. In his work, Salmen stresses the importance of full cooperation of all affected groups, as well as the appropriate timing for the nation. He suggests:

A development project, to be successful, must come at the right time in the right place and be right for the people for whom it is intended. Too often the view from above, where a project planner or manager sits, fails to comprehend the historical, geographical, and social context of a project that may stand in the way of project objectives.²⁶

²⁴ The Struggle for Accountability: The World Bank, NGOs, and Grassroots Movements, Jonathan A. Fox and L. David Brown. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1998. p. 229

²⁵ Ecuador's Amazon Region: Development Issues and Options, James F. Hicks. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1990. p. 6

²⁶ Listen to the People, Lawrence F. Salmen. New York: By Oxford for the World Bank, 1987. p. 72

While it may be effective in certain circumstances to employ the aid of international organizations, as a means of providing assistance and leverage to indigenous groups who possess little or no power within the national government, it is nevertheless important for these agencies to establish a firm understanding of the indigenous identity and their agenda for social reform. Too often, there are oversights in the desires of the indigenous peoples themselves in favor of the adaptation to a more global perspective and method of development and reform.

Transformation into a global identity, or in many cases Americanization, is not always an effective method for improvement and many times negates the indigenous identity, which is unique and specific to culture. Additionally, the alliances that have been formed on an international scale, whether between multinational oil companies or international development programs, reflect the globalization mentality that threatens the indigenous cultures and the resources of the Amazon region. This mechanism for progress asserts the notion of a global identity, which is antithetical to the indigenous movement. This identity seeks to preserve their cultural identity, with respect to land, language, and spirituality, without being forced to succumb to a more complex way of life that a global identity would require. There has been a contradiction in the way that development programming in its most bureaucratic form is supposed to be carried out and the way that the Ecuadorian government has attempted its development, through the exploitation of land, resources, and traditional peoples. As the World Bank has suggested in its report evaluating Ecuador's Amazon region:

From the perspective of economic programming and evaluation, this definition of sustainable development may be stated as a constrained objective function:

Maximize the present value of the region's contribution to national income, subject to the following constraints:

- (a) preservation of cultural choice for the region's native populations, and
- (b) preservation of the region's biological diversity²⁷ and renewable resources so that the region may contribute significantly to national income over many generations.²⁸

The effects of the modernization and globalization process have had significant effects on specific indigenous cultures, often forcing them to adapt their ways of life in order to compensate for the encroachment of international organizations and privatized industries. For the Quichua, one of the largest native populations existing in Ecuador and surrounding Amazonian regions, the process of population expansion because of industry development in their region has forced them to adapt their culture. The intrusion of foreign people has led to their migration toward the forest region, which is not part of their traditional territory. Additionally, they have been forced to change their forms of production to more commercial practices in order for their peoples to survive:

The modernization process is gradually transforming the Quichua's traditional production forms and land use practices and, in recent years, leading them to take up cattle raising and other forms of commercial agriculture (e.g., coffee and cacao production).²⁹

These changes have had significant effects on their cultural habitats, as well as the structure of their community, ultimately resulting in the destruction of their habitat and the community on which their culture depends. Often these changes have caused controversy among the indigenous population. While many groups see these adaptations

²⁷ The World Bank defines Biological Diversity: (biodiversity) refers to the variety and variability among living organisms and among the ecological systems in which they have occurred. Diversity is identified as the relative number of interacting, ecosystems, taxa, genetic systems, and their abundance within a geographic area

²⁸ Hicks, p.8

as necessary for their culture to survive at all, others interpret these changes as further subordination into the global identity.

For some indigenous communities, their understanding of the modernization process and the effects of globalization early on, have allowed them to make necessary changes to permit certain adaptations according to global ideals, but to resist complete subordination by protecting themselves from these outside influences:

Culturally, there are some communities that are isolated from or have resisted outside influences, while others have assimilated the customs, language, and other traits of the national society.³⁰

For the Shuar and Achuar groups, this method of transformation has been effective for survival. These two groups are Jivaroan speakers and occupy the south central region of the Amazon. There is a great socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity between these two groups, as they thrive subsistence activities. The Shuar Federation is one of the oldest indigenous organizations in the Ecuadorian Amazon and has been internationally recognized for successful bilingual radio schools and publishing programs and has been at the forefront of the national Indian movement in Ecuador. Much of their success can be attributed to their willingness to succumb initially to international invasion, but to retain a consciousness that has allowed to resist further subordination and to maintain their own way of life. Nevertheless, they have been criticized by some of the extreme indigenous organizations for the concessions they have made to adopt a more global identity.

The Cofan group has been the most affected by oil exploration and land settlement. These activities have significantly reduced the territory they once claimed as

²⁹ Ibid, p. 31

³⁰ Ibid, p. 32

their own and there is a crucial threat to their survival as a distinct cultural and ethnic group. The Shuar territory is currently occupied by roads, oil storage facilities, and settlers' families, which were not formerly a part of their community. While they have been able to maintain some of their cultural practices, desperate circumstances have forced them to seek additional income through the sale of timber, wildlife reserves, and handicrafts. Now, they are dependent upon external markets and are forced to over-exploit their forest habitat in order to survive. Pressures placed upon this indigenous culture, have forced them to create an identity that is different from the one passed down by elders. Their culture is almost extinct:

As a result of outside contacts and pressures, the Cofan have suffered a process of social disorganization, rapid acculturation, and near cultural extinction.³¹

The globalization process has weakened their culture and seriously threatened their survival. In instances such as this, it becomes evident that the modernization and globalization processes have real effects and if actions are not taken to end such harsh treatment of natural resources and the people who inhabit the regions surrounding them, the rapid extinction of each is inevitable.

The effects of globalization have been one of, if not the most, influential factors of mobilization among the indigenous peoples in their social movement for reform. The imminent threat of their extinction, as well as the destructive consequences that this process has on the people and land of the Amazon provides a sufficient reason for the indigenous people to take action. Their ability to voice anger and frustration might be limited by the closed structure of the national government, but the indigenous community, at large, has adapted its culture to include various methods of organization.

These organizing and mobilizing efforts are essential as the native peoples of Ecuador seek reform to the current system and reestablish their rights within the national structure.

³¹ Ibid, p. 33

Chapter 4: Organizing the Indigenous Movement

Despite the marginalization, discrimination, oppression and exclusion to which we have been subjected by the dominant sectors that control political, economic, and military power, we, the indigenous peoples and nationalities, have succeeded in recuperating the political space usurped in 1492 in order to question and expose the social injustice and economic exploitation, the inefficient and decrepit legal-political and administrative system, as well as the anti-democratic character of state power and its institutions.³²

There is an inherent contradiction in Ecuador's national agenda and that of the indigenous people, whose desire for self-determination is often threatening to the "nationhood" of the political systems. The indigenous people seek recognition of their land and their culture and wish to attain rights that will empower them to protect the land of the Amazon and its resources from the inevitable exploitation that results from the modernizing process. The agenda of the indigenous struggle is characterized by:

Some of the agenda's most pressing demands are the following: reestablishing dialogue as a way to obtain consensus, the building of a pluri-national state, a reconciliation through intra-cultural awareness and social and cultural diversity, and the expansion and deepening of democracy, equality and social justice.³³

Indigenous dignity, then, is evident throughout the movement, as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) suggests, the central goal of the indigenous movement is the fight for land: having a material base such as land is fundamental for living a dignified life, no matter to which group one belongs. Assault on their land and territory is an attack on the dignity of their culture and their quest to

³² "Political Declaration of Ecuador's Indigenous Peoples", Fourth Congress of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). December 15-18, 1993. <http://conaie.org/conaie4.html>

³³ Ethnopolitics of Ecuador, Melina Selverston-Scher. Miami, Florida: North-South Center, 2001. p. xiii

strengthen the recognition of their identity within the nation. The Ecuadorian political structure is reflective of the identity of the nation-builders, the elite class. Social movements in Latin America, then, are thusly situated as alternative discourses that develop out of the context of the crisis of developmentalism and modernity that have patterned the nation-building process throughout the region. According to Escobar, the development discourse has been significant in the “third world”. The reaction of the indigenous population has been to organize a movement that would implement pluralism, encouraging the recognition of indigenous identity.

The history of colonization that exists in Latin America has been the largest contributor to the identification of the indigenous movement of the Amazon. Those who control the nation have situated the indigenous peoples as a social group whose distinct qualities justify their repression and their position outside the national political arena because they present an obstacle to the absolute power of the leadership. This identity has also justified their subordinate position as political actors, broadening the gap between classes and limiting the participation of indigenous peoples in the national government. History is an important concept for self-identification and in determining the boundaries, which define both an ethnic and a political group and nations, are often a product of colonization.

The process of self-determination for indigenous peoples in Latin America has been a struggle to maintain a separate identity. For Ecuador, the history of colonization was significant in determining the “us versus them” mentality that pervades most social movements and identity formation processes. The lines of distinction that have separated the indigenous population from the broader society have enhanced their ability to develop

the “us” mentality, as well as to develop significant reasons for their own self-determination. This has become one of the primary focuses of the indigenous movement:

We, the indigenous peoples and nationalities that live in the current Ecuadorian territory, subjected to and dominated by the uni-national bourgeois state and the hegemonic imperialist states, propose the establishment of the right of self-determination of nationalities and its exercise through their active and direct participation in political, economic, and cultural life, in the process of transformation and consolidation of nationalities and the construction of the new multinational nation.

Self-determination is the right of the nationalities to freely choose and exercise their own political system and model of socio-economic development in a territory fully defined in the context of the new multinational nation.³⁴

The notion of the “other” is extremely influential in the organization of indigenous groups, as it helps to identify those who comprise such organizations and what that means in relation to who and what they oppose.

Distinctions, such as language and the treatment of the Amazon land as a spiritual symbol and not as a commodity have encouraged indigenous organization. These distinctions developed as a result of colonialism, where indigenous groups were forced to face notions of the other, when confronted by the colonizers. This strengthened their own identity in recognizing that which they do not represent. Factors of identification, such as indigenusness, allow a contestation mentality to develop, which is significant in the development of social movements:

The moments of contestation provide opportunities to redefine the notion of citizenship and national identity through negotiation of particular locations of alternate identity. Identities based on gender, race, ethnicity, and class provide multiple discourses of contestation that have often challenged and changed the imagined

³⁴ Indigenous Peoples and International Organizations. Lydia van de Fliert. Great Britain: Spokesman, 1994. p. 182-183

nation by redefining the inward and outward enclosures of citizenship and national identity.³⁵

This reflects on Duara's discourse of dissent, which he suggests contributes to factors of unification within the movement. The colonization process in Ecuador was influential in defining the notion of "otherness" for the indigenous peoples. While it prevented them from developing simultaneously with the broader national identity, it helped to reaffirm notions of indigenusness and has become especially important, as the movement for recognition and reform among the indigenous peoples has developed.

The political structure limits the participation of indigenous groups in decision-making processes, despite the country's attempts for democracy. It also limits pluralism, which permits political interests to be heard within the larger governmental structure. After centuries of oppression and exploitation, the indigenous peoples have a strong desire to construct a plurinational state that tolerates diversity among the many different social groups in their society.³⁶ Indigenous groups have taken advantage of the opening in the system created by the state's failure for democracy, and have organized in opposition, beginning at the community level, which is characteristic of the organization of their culture. Ironically, they do this in order to create a system that follows through on its promises of the adoption of democratic qualities.

The indigenous movement begins with the community, promoting a common identity as each organization's unifying characteristic. Some degree of unification of indigenous peoples, despite the internal diversities of each group, was essential in forming a solidified movement that required the strength of many groups in order to advance their common cause:

³⁵ "The Political Declaration of Ecuador's Indigenous Peoples", <http://conae.org/conae4.html>

The first task is to create an internally and functionally solid social front, constant in its ideological position based fundamentally on the strategic unity of our peoples.³⁷

The cohesion of the indigenous movement because of these factors of common identification has been important for the success of the movement in opposition to the government, which limits the rights of these people to maintain their culture and suppresses their ability to voice their opinion within the national government. These two factors of identity are interdependent for the indigenous peoples of Ecuador. The unique culture and its connection to the land, which the national government wishes to exploit, limit the political participation of the indigenous peoples.

Contemporary theories regarding new social movements have recognized the development of a strong collective identity as an effective mechanism for the movement of an opposition group. The presentation of a unified front in any social movement is necessary in order to establish its legitimacy, so that those in control might recognize the need for reform more easily. The centering of identity as the focus of a social movement is influential for the indigenous movement as people struggle to assert themselves within the system and to establish a more real definition of democracy, as well as their autonomy. Social movement theorists, Escobar and Alvarez suggest that there are three axes of new social movements which engage hegemonic political structures: identity, struggle, and democracy.³⁸ The indigenous movement in Ecuador should employ these features in order to develop a unified front to their social movement, which will help to establish legitimacy in the national government.

³⁶Black, p.8

³⁷ Selverston-Scher, p. xvi

³⁸Black, p. 5-6

The definition of goals becomes essential to any social movement. The cause, which is based on the notion of the “other” and land protection, works simultaneously for the indigenous peoples and becomes inherent in its supporters, the indigenous peoples themselves. Melina Selverston-Scher suggests that the indigenous movement has three primary goals:

“-State policies, specifically how to carry out state reforms

-National policies, example- debate over Plan Colombia

-Indigenous issues, the case of the Indigenous Fund, a specific topic of the indigenous peoples.³⁹

There are at least three major indigenous organizations in Ecuador whose effective organization has allowed them to achieve significant reform within the system. They maintain clearly stated objectives for their movement and have been able to accomplish what may have once seemed like lofty goals. In 1982, the Second Congress of CONFENIAE developed their own objectives, which included: the petition for legal title to land and resources through governmental and institutional means, the insistence on bilingual education, as a means to preserve indigenous language and culture, the protection of traditional medicine, and the fortification and unification of indigenous organizations, autonomous from political and sectarian religious influences.⁴⁰ The Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Pastaza (OPIP) is another such organization, whose objectives include: the legal recognition of the traditional territories of the Quichua, Shuar, and Achuar nations, and an amendment to the first article of the

³⁹ Selverston-Scher, p. xvi

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 24

constitution, to proclaim Ecuador as a multi-national, multi-cultural nation⁴¹. Technically speaking, the agendas of these and other distinct organizations may be different, but the overarching goals, examined on a macro level, are common to all indigenous peoples, primarily including the preservation of land and culture. The increased unity and organizational strength among the Indians, the international focus on ecological destruction of the Amazon and as a result of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas, on indigenous issues in general, and a new political climate created by the most recent national elections, are all factors that have strengthened the Indians' position in the recent past.

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador is the largest indigenous organization, encompassing the broadest variation of indigenous communities, as well as maintaining the most influential position in creating reform within the government. The uprisings that have been implemented by this organization have been successful because they were able to force many of the institutions and functions of the state to shut down, as they asserted their claims for reform. In the past, this group has successfully closed down roads and transportation systems, as well as refused to provide produce to stores located in more modernized regions. In his experience with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, David Rothschild, director of Amazon Alliance, suggests that this group has proven more successful than many other indigenous groups who seek to reclaim their rights because of their ability to function more like an independent government than like a non-governmental organization (NGO). Since the 1960s, the process of indigenous organizing has existed in Ecuador and has been electing communal and regional leaders for national representation. These leaders

⁴¹ http://abyayala.nativeweb.org/ecador/quichua_am/apr92_6.html

make the decisions for their people and have been successful in attaining enough power to debilitate the government in circumstances of necessary indigenous uprisings in order to assert their rights.

Several other reasons have been cited by theorists regarding the success of CONAIE as an influential mechanism in the indigenous movement. The willingness of CONAIE to work cohesively with the class-based organizations and directly with the national government contributed to their successful uprising in 1990 and has characterized this group as both unified and willing to confront the issues. In addition, the early contacts this organization made with the national government allowed for the assertion of their legitimacy over other organizations whose efforts for reform might never reach this level. Finally, this organization employed the mutual support of both ethnic and class movements in order to enhance the public opinion of CONAIE, which only further served to legitimize the uprising they led in 1990. CONAIE has been successful because they have used factors of indigenous identification in order to establish a strong effort for the movement. They have overcome, however, the obstacles of heavy concentration on the diversity of indigenous cultures and have engaged more substantial efforts to reform the broader political system:

CONAIE's focus was on the concept of plurinationality, going beyond recognition of the diversity of cultures and languages within Ecuador to a redefinition of the very nature of national, democratic participation.⁴²

This would allow equal participation of all of these groups, despite their internal, cultural differences.

⁴² Black, p. 30

Thus, the levels on which indigenous organizations seek to reclaim their rights are not easily accessible to such groups who lack a strong sense of identity and some leveraging quality that allows such organizations to gain legitimacy within the national political structure. This remains difficult, however, as the nation-building that Ecuador strongly promotes requires indigenous groups, in particular, to sacrifice their ethnic identity in order to benefit from the greater political and economic progress that might be made by the state as a whole, within the international system. Thus, the pressures placed on the indigenous groups by privatized industries and international organizations have often resulted in the splintering of the entire movement. While some groups have resisted the acculturation into the national system, others have succumbed to pressures. Such differences have weakened the overarching identity of the movement. Not only has the conflict of agendas between the national system and the indigenous movement existed, but an additional fracturing among the indigenous groups in the movement has also limited the progress of this political process.

The indigenous people have used their ethnic identity as a means of “cultural resistance”, establishing it as an essential characteristic of the political mobilization process. This political mobilization has become a means for representation within the political system of Ecuador. The group ideology of the indigenous people is essentially formed on cultural identity, which diverted the focus of the socialist ideology and its focus on class-related similarities among groups and its attempted influence over this group, to a commonality that was formed because of cultural values and a shared political aim. This idea is evident in the agenda of CONAIE, which places land, culture, and national identity at the center of its cultural claims and provides an alternative concept of

the nation, separating this social movement from others.⁴³ These factors of cultural identification were significant in initiating the Indian uprising of 1990, led by CONAIE.

Initially, this uprising was developed, beginning in the 1970s, in reaction to Marxist integrationist leadership, repression of traditional leftist organizations, and increasing pressures placed on the indigenous communities through Ecuador's heightened position in the capitalist world-economy.⁴⁴ Threatened by the idea of cultural disintegration and forced assimilation into the national identity, this uprising was first based primarily upon ethnic and cultural claims, rather than purely economic demands. By May 28, 1990, 200 Ecuadorians had occupied the Santo Domingo cathedral in Quito, the nation's capital. With the collaborative efforts of other similar organizations, such as ECUARUNARI and CONFENAIE, the indigenous reactionaries managed to take over the church, construct road blocks, and restrict the food supply to more modernized regions, demonstrating the dependence on the rural economy, that which the indigenous population provides. By the first few days of June, the Ecuadorian government made contact with the indigenous leadership and had initiated high-level negotiations, in which CONAIE brought seventy-two priority land conflicts and sixteen demands for national structural reform to the discussion.

This uprising initiated by CONAIE was extremely significant to the indigenous movement, as not only did it ignite a wave of indigenous organizing, but it also demonstrated the effectiveness of non-violent resistance. This uprising gave power and legitimacy to the indigenous movement by proving that they possessed the will and the organizational capabilities to debilitate the government, even if only temporarily, as well

⁴³ Black, p. 3

⁴⁴ Black, p. 1

as to trigger a reaction from a previously unresponsive government in order to implement change. The position of the indigenous movement within the context of the broader society began to change:

The process brought indigenous organizational efforts from a reactionary position, in defense of land, to a pro-active position in which the movement sought to contest dominant understandings of Ecuadorian nationality, formed on the dual discourse of development and mestizaje.⁴⁵

Because of events such as these, the recognition of indigenous identity and the need to reform the leadership and the national constitution in order preserve and protect the culture and environment of the Amazon region began to move to the forefront of the Ecuadorian national agenda. Although there remains much progress to be made, such significant events as uprisings can be significant in implementing change and progress and propel the indigenous movement even further.

Organizations, such as CONAIE and others have been successful in reforming the Ecuadorian system in their favor, but this is not characteristic of all groups who seek mobilization. Often, the aide of stronger, more influential international organizations is needed in order to help these indigenous groups establish legitimacy within the national government and to attain resources to which they might not otherwise have access. The involvement of international organizations in the indigenous movement has allowed the identities of various indigenous organizations to gain support in their cause, as well as access to resources that are difficult to attain within the Latin American political system. In many cases, this has provided leverage to the movement against the government:

At the same time that Latin America struggles to consolidate democracy, the increased presence of international organizations, regional integration, transnational social movements, and global

⁴⁵ Black, p. 38

markets in the region complicates the process. International and sub-national forces have fused into transnational social movements: human rights, environmental, and feminist alliances have raised consciousness, lobbied international organizations, and changed states policies throughout the Americas.⁴⁶

The size and strength of such organizations can be intimidating to the national government, which fear it might be rejected from the equal participation it seeks on the international level.

In addition, the notion of “acting globally” has become a significant ideology driving the indigenous movement. It has allowed grassroots organizations to gain leverage through international resources, thus increasing their influence within the political system. Many international organizations contribute positively to the indigenous movement because a strong association with identity formation is an inherent attribute of such organizations, much like the indigenous communities. International organizations, such as those which deal with human rights and land protection, suggest that self-determination is a crucial method of empowerment and autonomy and permits effective management of resources, political participation, and control of cultural change because a strong sense of identity makes the mission of such an organization more effective. The state, in contrast, often views self-determination by indigenous groups as a threat to the autonomy of the state, and as a limiting factor to the democratization process.

The presence, however, of international organizations also complicates the democratization process within countries such as Ecuador, which is the very characteristic of the system that permits an indigenous voice at all. The shortcoming attached to the involvement by transnational organization is that they often lack the “local

⁴⁶ Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America, Donna Lee Van Cott. New York: St. Martin's, 1994. p. 29

knowledge” to interpret human rights violations that are so deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic factors, which are essential elements to land struggles or civil conflicts. It is difficult for such organizations to understand the claims of the indigenous people on a deeper level because they cannot experience the cultural qualities, such as language and the spiritual commitment to the surrounding environment, which are ingrained only in the indigenous identity. Nevertheless, transnational groups provide an alternative approach by which indigenous groups might gain access to the state in order to assert their claims of self-determination and protection of their human rights. Indigenous peoples might break through the barriers of the system by applying pressure from above, through the help of international organizations, and below the structure, with the indigenous movement itself. This would allow a means by which these groups might increase the opportunity for constitutional and legislative reforms, which favor the indigenous cause.

By “acting globally”, crusaders of social movements, such as the indigenous groups of Ecuador, have developed a means by which they have a greater control over the national political structure and decision-making process which affects them. Undeniably, however, the involvement of international actors presents a contradiction in terms of democracy for the Ecuadorian system. The government seeks to employ the discourse of democracy so long as it can continue to exploit the resources and the peoples that allow them to modernize and experience economic growth. As the indigenous movement pursues the notion of global action, the illegitimacy and corruption of the Ecuadorian government is revealed to the international community. Their continued reluctance to allow equal participation for the indigenous people weakens the democracy. The

heightened international awareness of this, however, provides strength to the indigenous movement.

Chapter 5: Mechanisms for Reform

The concept of “acting globally” exemplifies just one of the mechanisms that have been and can be employed by the indigenous movement to gain access into the political systems of their country. Although increased political participation is essential for the assertion of identity for the indigenous people within the broader system, the active pursuit of legitimate rights is realized through legal reform. The indigenous movement has explored many methods by which rights of cultural maintenance and land and property might be protected. Documents ranging from the declarations of international organizations, such as the United Nations who represent natives of many ethnicities, to those documents drafted by the Ecuadorian indigenous peoples themselves, all serve to propel the social movements to attain more rights. The differences in the legal rhetoric that exists between these two mechanisms is great and must be considered for both the advancements and the obstacles that each presents to the progress of the indigenous assertion of rights. The role of each in the constitutions of the state, especially in the case of Ecuador, however, is more important because of the national attachment to their own rule of law.

Indigenous activism has challenged international politics through its claims to rights of sovereignty and by affirming that indigenous identity and development should not be subjected to the political and economic systems of nation-states, which have modeled their system after the Europeans. The distinct indigenous nations are conscious of their own identity, as well as their shared culture and history, and believe that they should be able to develop in a way that is consistent with their own traditions. Thus, they

need and deserve the rights within the international system to do so. The indigenous movement has made progress in reclaiming the rights to the territory and resources that they were denied during colonization. Ecuador, specifically, is one South American country where indigenous activism has been an influential factor in creating constitutional reform, as seen through the efforts of organizations such as CONAIE. Changes made to the constitution that incorporate the need to protect the environment, which is closely linked to indigenous communities, is an effective mechanism for securing the rights that indigenous peoples seek in their movement. Consequently, it has been one of the primary focuses of groups who currently fall under this umbrella.

Indigenous declarations, drafted by separate and distinct ethnically indigenous groups, have been one of the mechanisms engaged by the peoples of the Amazon region. These documents are distinct because of the rhetoric throughout, which appeals most significantly to the spiritual connection that joins the indigenous peoples with the land and resources that surround them. These declarations can be better recognized by their poetic quality, which describes the land for its beauty and simplicity, rather than for its legal terminology. The KARI-OCA declaration is one such document that has been adopted by indigenous groups:

WE THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, walk to the future in the footprints of our ancestors. From the smallest to the largest living being, from the four directions, from the air, the land and the mountains, the creator has placed us, the indigenous peoples upon our Mother the Earth, the footprints of our ancestors are permanently etched upon the lands of our peoples.
We, the indigenous peoples, maintain our inherent rights to self-determination, we have always had the right to decide our own forms of government, to use our own laws, to raise and educate our children, to our own cultural identity without interference.
We continue to maintain our rights as peoples despite centuries of deprivation, assimilation and genocide.

We maintain our inalienable rights to our lands and territories. To all our resources- above and below- and to our waters. We assert our ongoing responsibility to pass these onto the future generations. We cannot be removed from our lands. We, the indigenous peoples, are connected by the circle of life to our lands and environments. We, the indigenous peoples, walk to the future in the footprints of our ancestors.⁴⁷

Although these documents are significant for the way they treat indigenous identity, they have not proven to be the most effective approach for legal reform within the international system. Often, such documents contribute to the notions of indigenous inferiority, which has plagued this system's mentality since the colonial period. The primary concern of indigenous declarations does not lie with sophisticated rhetoric, but rather with discourse that is truly representative of their beliefs and goals. It becomes evident, however, through the examination of such declarations, that there is a spiritual connection between the indigenous people and the land that surrounds them.

The appeal to international organizations for the preservation of the rights of indigenous peoples is important to the movement for the leveraging factor they provide over the governments of the Amazon region. International organizations have been helpful in rectifying the problem of political exclusion of which indigenous peoples have suffered since the colonial period, using their power in the international system to influence the Amazonian governments to recognize the claims of the indigenous movement. This has been an important mechanism in the reclaiming of indigenous rights:

Indigenous activists appeal directly to international organizations, addressing international and domestic political and legal arenas in order to gain recognition of their international status, to lay claim to the right to participate in the political processes of the world community, and thereby to end five centuries of exclusion.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Indigenous Peoples and International Organizations, Lydia van de Fliert. Nottingham, England: Russell Limited, 1994. p. 182-183

⁴⁸ Wilmer, p. 1

In a conversation with David Rothschild, Director of the Amazon Alliance for the preservation of indigenous and traditional peoples of the Amazon Basin, he suggested that often, international organizations are reluctant to become involved with reforming national laws. These laws are much more important to the political systems of countries, such as Ecuador, than are international laws. The reformation of national laws provides an additional challenge to the indigenous movement. Additionally, indigenous groups have recognized that the national courts in the Americas are far more accessible than the international courts, such as that of the International Court of Justice, sponsored by the United Nations. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the methods for reform in international organizations and those of indigenous organizations.

The declarations that have been drafted regarding issues of indigenous cultural preservation, however, do not include the same rhetoric and identification with the land and culture that the indigenous documents incorporate. Rather, these documents speak about the collective themes of the protection of indigenous rights on an international scale and the right of all peoples to self-determination. The United Nations is one of the most influential organizations in the protection of indigenous peoples, forming a working group for indigenous rights in 1982 and drafting declarations for their protection. The legal rhetoric of such documents presents broader themes of identification and is not specific to the indigenous movement of the Amazon region:

The indigenous towns have the right to control their lands, territories, and resources and to maintain their way of traditional life. This understanding of the security in the enjoyment of the methods of subsistence. The indigenous towns have the right to be protected against all action or form of conduct that could result in the destruction or degradation of their territories,

including the land, air, water, blue sky, the plants, and other resources.⁴⁹

The lack of specific indigenous identification in these types of declarations is often a deterrent factor in the appeal of international organizations for the indigenous peoples. The indigenous movement has been successful in asserting its identity and right to legal protection within the state. It has also effectively employed the involvement of international organizations as a leveraging power of influence over South American governments and their position within the international system. Much of the progress, however, in the indigenous dilemma is reliant upon the ability to reform the national constitutions.

The movement against the national government of Ecuador has been more successful, largely due to the successful organization of CONAIE. In his experience with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, Rothschild suggests that this group has proven more successful than many other indigenous groups who seek to reclaim their rights because of their ability to function more like an independent government than like a non-governmental organization. Since the 1960s, the process of indigenous organizing has existed in Ecuador and they have been electing communal and regional leaders for national representation. These leaders make the decisions for their people and have been effective in attaining enough power to debilitate the government in circumstances of necessary indigenous uprisings in order to assert their rights.

This organization has gained enough power, largely due to the size of the organization and the position of the land they control, to force the government to shut down all roads and access-ways to the capital city of Quito. They use these methods in

⁴⁹ “Los Derechos de los Pueblos Indigenas en el Sistema Internacional”, Fergus Mackay Lima, 1999

times when the indigenous peoples wish to assert their claims against the government. In my time in Quito, I witnessed such uprisings in which the bus and other transportation systems within the city stopped functioning. Because of this power, the government is forced to listen and needs to respond by making legal reforms that would protect the indigenous people. This Ecuadorian organization has been successful with this type of structure, functioning like a separate government rather than an NGO, because they seek long-term representation and recognize this as an effective means for achieving such a goal. Rather than trying to function within a closed system, as their government, they employed non-violent secession in order to function like their own government and this has proven to be effective.

Another mechanism of legal reform that is currently recognized as an effective alternative is one, which challenges the history of indigenous exclusion from the educational system of the state. Indigenous groups have been delegating representatives from the indigenous communities to be educated within the system of the state. At the same time, however, they work to maintain their indigenous identity by keeping up with the traditions and exercising the native language. Thus, this representative becomes a mechanism by which a member of the indigenous community can function within the system of the state but actively pursues the preservation of indigenous identity at the national level. This method has become more effective as the pluralist nature of the Latin American system has developed along with its quest to democratize. This mechanism has proven to be successful and will perhaps become a more popular method for the future of the indigenous pursuit of legal reform as Latin American democratization begins to develop more as a true democracy than just mere semantics.

Conclusion

It is true that the conditions in Ecuador today could not be more propitious to initiate a process of significant transformation: unprecedented revenues from petroleum provide the state with a promising resource base for reform, the government is led by a new generation of men who have a profound awareness of the country's past and of its present problems, the administration is staffed by a corps of able men and women freed from the sterile conflicts that once dominated the rhetoric (if not the reality) of national politics, and the economy has a potential for diversification that could provide a base for independent development.⁵⁰

After centuries of being plagued by ineffective democracy, corrupt leadership, and financial crisis, it seems that Ecuador truly is on a path to expansion and recovery. Through the transformation of its previous state to the more recent conditions, particularly since 1981, Ecuador has made significant progress in creating a more stable democracy. In creating economic growth, and by implementing legal reform that would resolve the disorganization of the people and the land of the state, Ecuador has improved its system to become more egalitarian. Despite its progress, the qualities that the Ecuadorian government claims to possess exist more resolutely in its rhetoric than it does in reality. This is especially true for the reality of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region. A threat to their cultural survival and the preservation of the land, which they have inhabited for centuries and have passed down by their elders, perpetuates.

The organization of a social movement by the indigenous peoples, after many significant factors encouraged mobilization, has been an effective and productive attempt to establish their legitimacy within the national structure of the state and to stake a claim to rights that they have been denied since the colonial period. After spending extended

periods of time outside of the political arena of this region, the conditions have at last become so destructive to the indigenous identity that they have made efforts to reform the system which keeps them subordinate. Most significant in their goals are the need for reestablishment of land rights, as a protective measure against intruding international corporations, and a mechanism, which allows for their participation within the national decision-making body.

After thorough examination of the indigenous dilemma in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the obstacles that plague the native struggle for identity, significant progress can be made to improve this dilemma through the employment of a certain kind of international organization. The Amazon Alliance for the preservation of the indigenous and traditional peoples of the Amazon Basin is made up of international, environmental, human rights, and development organizations, as well as indigenous peoples themselves. They all share a common goal to end further destruction to the Amazon region, as well as establish effective means for preserving indigenous cultures. The steering council of this organization is not only comprised of the most influential members of these large, international organizations, but is also unique in that indigenous leaders themselves serve on this committee. This structure utilizes the mechanism for reform stated earlier, which educates an indigenous person in both systems so they might effectively communicate with each group and encourage them to work together to ameliorate the situation for the natives.

This type of organization, not only emphasizes the community-based mentality that is central to the indigenous identity, but it also acknowledges the importance of full and equal representation. These organizations are willing to use their time and their

⁵⁰ Levy and Mills, p. 1

resources to help the indigenous situation. Unlike other international organizations, it is also not seeking to make improvements that employ methods typical of their own culture. By allowing for equal representation of the indigenous peoples themselves, they promote the preservation of indigenous culture and make certain that their desires are heard and their rights, recognized.

With all of the attempts currently being made to improve the situation of the indigenous people of Ecuador, it is difficult to speak for this unique culture and decide what will be the most effective for them. Many of the mechanisms for reform that exist are very general and are unwilling to truly understand the nature of the indigenous identity in a way that would make certain that these qualities are preserved throughout their quest for rights within the national system. At this point, this multi-tiered, multi-representational, equal participation system is the most effective method that has been encountered.

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