
Chapter 8

The Ngóbe of Western Panama

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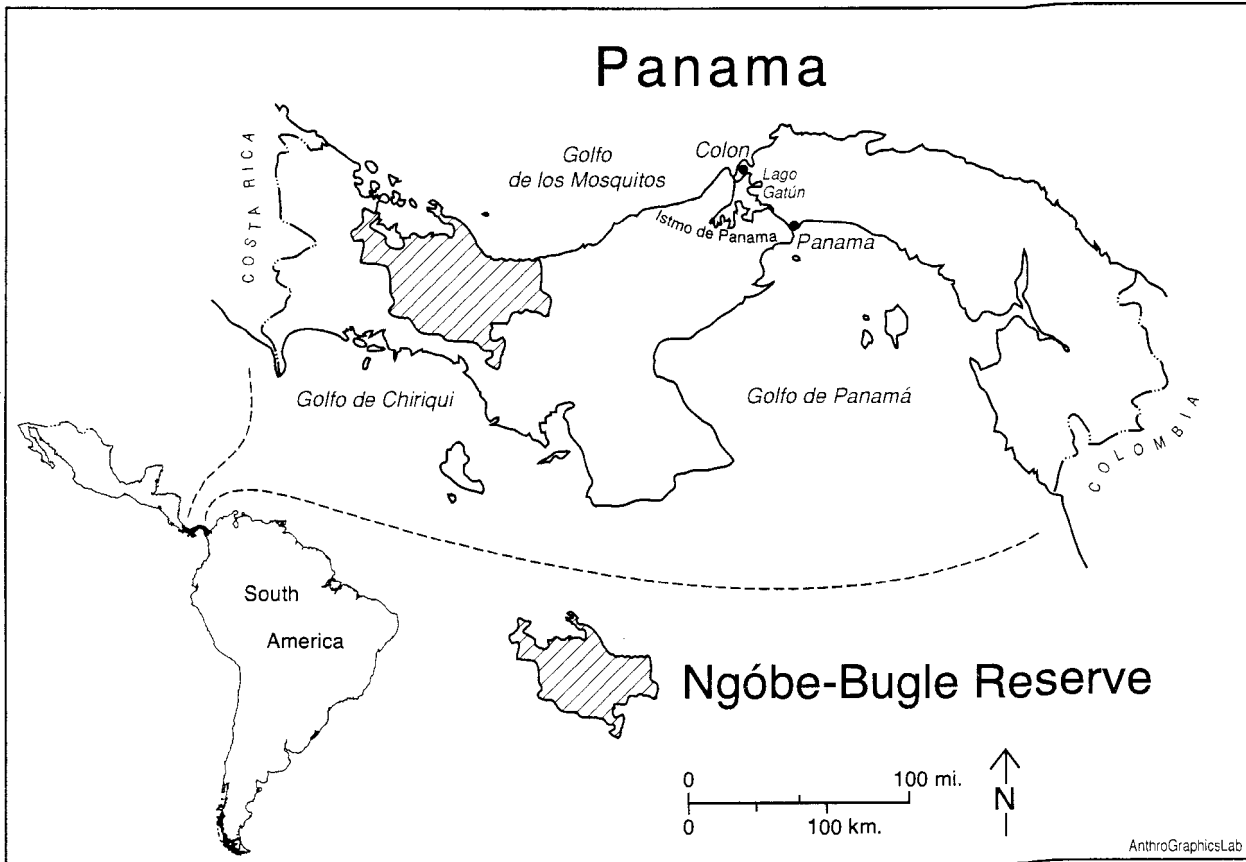
CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The Ngóbe live in the three western provinces of the Republic of Panama: Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas. Unlike in other groups, the Ngóbe way of life is endangered not because their population is declining but because it is increasing. With a population of about 125,000, they are the second largest indigenous group in Central America, outnumbered only by the Maya in Guatemala. The Ngóbe are often referred to as Guaymí by outsiders but call themselves Ngóbe and prefer to be identified by this name, which means “people” in their language. Little is known about their history before the arrival of Europeans in the New World, but they are probably descended from groups who fled from the devastating Spanish conquest of the more accessible and desirable coastal areas of Panama. The Ngóbe are first mentioned as a distinct group in 1682. Early descriptions of their culture and traditions indicate strong cultural continuity over the centuries. Culturally, the Ngóbe are closely related to the Bugle and Teribe populations in Panama and the Cabécar and Bri Bri populations in Costa Rica. All speak languages of the Chibchan language family, which also includes many native languages in northwestern South America.

Even though they have been influenced by the European world for 500 years, since the time of Christopher Columbus, most of the Ngóbe had relatively little contact with the outside world. Early contact led to “mestizoization” or adoption of nontraditional ways among some segments of the population. Descendants of these people have been absorbed into the general (ladino) population of Panama. Contact with the outside world for the more isolated segments of the population was infrequent and sporadic

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well into this century. Because of this isolation and the fact that outsiders had little interest in mountainous, marginal lands, the Ngóbe were left alone to follow their traditional way of life. As a result, they have managed to preserve their language and many of their customs and to maintain a very distinct cultural identity.

The Setting

Today the Ngóbe occupy approximately 2,500 square miles of rugged mountainous territory in western Panama. On the Caribbean side of the isthmus, their lands stretch from the continental divide to the Caribbean Sea. On the Pacific, they are restricted to the mountains. In the past the Ngóbe occupied a far more extensive area which stretched all the way to the Pacific Coast and the Costa Rican border. As time passed, ladino cattle ranchers and coffee growers gradually forced them off the best lands.

There were no roads in Ngóbe territory until the 1970s. Even today very few roads penetrate the Ngóbe homeland; most are little more than rough dirt and gravel tracks. Even with four-wheel-drive vehicles, these roads are frequently impassable during the rainy months. Throughout most of the area occupied by the Ngóbe, travel is possible only on foot or horseback, and some areas are too rugged even for horses.

Because Ngóbe lands are located between eight and nine degrees north of the equator, temperatures are fairly constant throughout the year. Altitude varies from sea level to about 6,000 feet. Near sea level, daytime temperatures are usually above 80°F with high humidity (similar to the southeastern United States in July and August). As altitude increases, average temperatures become cooler; some of the higher areas experience temperatures as low as 55° to 60°F on occasion.

The Caribbean and Pacific sides of the isthmus have different climatic patterns: On the Pacific, there is a distinct dry season that usually begins in early December and extends until April during which virtually no rain falls. On the Caribbean slope, no distinct dry season occurs, but there are occasional periods when it will not rain for a week or possibly two. This dramatic difference in rainfall patterns influences the natural vegetation patterns as well as the crops most commonly cultivated by the Ngóbe.

The terrain throughout the area is very rugged with extremely few areas where the land is flat. The soils are heavily weathered and rather poor in nutrients. When vegetation is disturbed and the soils are exposed to the tropical sun and rain, erosion and leaching of soil nutrients occurs rapidly. If left undisturbed, the natural vegetation of the region is mature tropical forest. However, extensive areas have been cleared for agriculture and pastures, and few areas of mature forest exist today. Large areas are now either grasslands or covered with secondary growth forest.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Ngóbe traditionally meet their subsistence needs by combining slash-and-burn agriculture and the raising of livestock. Major crops include corn, beans, rice, bananas, and root crops such as sweet manioc (tapioca), yams, and New World taro. Root crops are more important on the wetter Caribbean side of the isthmus where corn and beans in particular do not grow as well as they do on the Pacific slopes. On both sides of the isthmus, the Ngóbe also cultivate a wide array of minor crops, including some fruit trees, which add variety to their diet. Cultivation is done with a few basic hand tools including machetes, axes, and metal-tipped digging sticks.

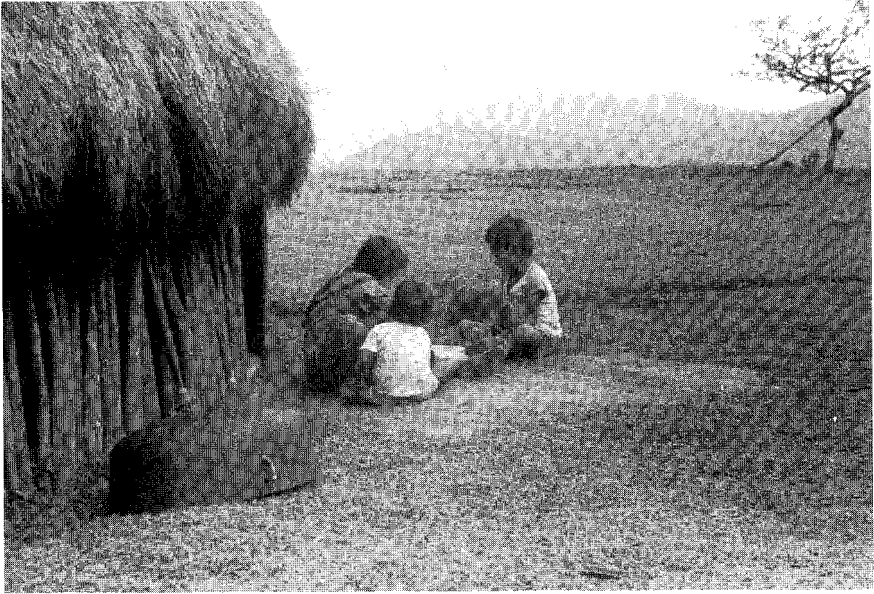
The most important domestic animals are cattle, pigs, and chickens with a few turkeys and ducks for variety. To augment these food supplies, some hunting and fishing as well as the gathering of wild plants is done, but these are secondary activities. Many wild plants, mostly greens, are also eaten, but these make up only a tiny part of the diet. Many wild plants are also used as medicines. Deer and wild pigs are the most important large game animals hunted, but many smaller animals and birds are also taken. Most hunting is done with .22 caliber rifles or shotguns. Because of deforestation and heavy hunting, wild animal populations have declined in recent years, and hunting is of only minor importance today. Fishing is done with dams, nets, weirs, hooks, spears, arrows, and fish poison. The importance of fishing varies greatly from area to area. It is most important along the Caribbean coast and along major rivers, such as the Cricamola in Bocas del Toro and the Fonseca in Chiriquí, and of very minor importance elsewhere in the highlands.

Until the twentieth century, the Ngóbe were predominantly self-sufficient. Their economy was based on sharing, barter, and reciprocity. Some domestic animals and small quantities of crops were sold to obtain the modest amounts of money that were needed to purchase the manufactured items that the Ngóbe had come to depend upon and could not produce, such as metal tools, cooking pots, and cloth. On rare occasions, individuals traveled out of their home area to seek temporary jobs for very short periods of time on cattle ranches and coffee or vegetable farms in order to earn enough cash to purchase desired goods. This was a rare occurrence until this century.

Social and Political Organization

The Ngóbe live in very small villages called *caserios* which seldom include more than five to ten houses. The houses in a *caserio* are occupied by people who are related to one another, either by blood or by marriage. Kin groups, that is, the extended group of relatives, are the organizational basis of Ngóbe society. Kin groups regulate the behavior of their members,

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Ngóbe children, Cerro Mamita, Chiriquí, 1964. Photo by Philip D. Young.

and individuals look to their kin to provide moral, social, and economic support and assistance. Kin groups also control access to land.

Marriages may be polygynous; that is, a man may have more than one wife. Women are not allowed to have more than one husband. The co-wives of a man may be sisters or they may be unrelated. After marriage residence in the village of the husband is preferred; however, residence in the wife's village may occur if land is in short supply in the husband's community. Traditionally, marriage is not simply a union between individuals. It is considered to establish a political and economic alliance between the kin groups of the married couple. Ideally, marriages involved symmetrical exchanges of women between kin groups. That is, a man from one group would marry a woman from another and his group, in turn, would provide a wife, often his sister, to a man in the other group.

Ngóbe oral traditions describe great caciques (chiefs or leaders) of the past who exerted a considerable influence over areas within the Ngóbe territory. This informal influence was based on a man's personal characteristics, such as generosity, wisdom in settling disputes, and prowess in a major ritual called the *krun* in the Ngóbe language or *balseria* in Spanish. Hundreds, even thousands, attended these ritual events, and great prestige was gained by participating in and hosting them. The major activity of the *krun* is a contest in which individuals or teams take turns hurling six-foot-long balsa wood sticks at the calves of an opponent's legs while the op-

ponent dances with his back to the thrower and tries to avoid being hit. Only men engage in the stick throwing, but men, women, and children attend the event which lasts four days.

Early in this century, the Panamanian government imposed a system of appointed officials (*corregidores* or magistrates) who were responsible for keeping the civil registry (recording births and deaths) and acting as judges in disputes. Ngóbe who had learned to read and write Spanish were appointed to these positions. However, many Ngóbe continue to seek out leaders who have earned the respect of the community through traditional means to settle disputes.

Religion and World View

After 500 years of influence by the Catholic Church, a large proportion of the Ngóbe are nominally Catholic, but extremely few practice any Catholic rituals. In a few localized pockets, some Protestant evangelical groups have attracted small numbers of followers, but their influence is not very widespread. Most Ngóbe still retain a number of traditional beliefs and rituals. Good and evil spirits are believed to exist as are a god of lightning and a protector god. The Ngóbe still tell stories of the great culture heroes of the past and often attribute godlike qualities to them. Rituals such as placing burning pieces of termite mound next to crosses on opposite sides of trails leading into communities or individual houses are believed to ward off evil spirits which are thought to cause illness. The crosses appear to be of non-Christian origin and are usually made of a special wood called fragrant cedar. Rituals are also performed to protect houses from lightning strikes. The consumption of cocoa bean paste mixed with hot water during a nightlong vigil is believed to prevent injury by spirits. Some spirits are believed to be capable of disguising themselves as animals in order to ambush unwary travelers along trails at night and cause them to become ill. For this reason, traditional Ngóbe do not like to travel at night. Traditional religious practitioners called *sukias* also attempt to cure illness, make predictions about the future, and interpret dreams based on communications with spirits.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Demographic Trends

An explosive and continuing population increase has been driving many of the changes in Ngóbe society in recent decades. The total Ngóbe population was only 16,161 in 1930; by 1960, it had increased to 35,867; and in 1970, it had grown to 44,794. Even today reliable population figures

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are not available for all of the area occupied by the Ngóbe. However, the census of 1990 put the population at 121,769, which probably is a reasonably accurate figure. Approximately 109,000 live within the territory traditionally occupied by the Ngóbe; the rest live in the towns and cities of Panama. Some reside and work permanently on commercial banana plantations. Others, not included in the census, have moved to Costa Rica seeking lands to farm.

This dramatic population increase has had major implications for the sustainability of the traditional slash-and-burn agricultural system. By 1960 Ngóbe population density was about six people per square kilometer (15 people per square mile) which is believed to be about the maximum density sustainable for slash-and-burn agriculture in tropical areas. Most of their land is not well suited to more intensive forms of cultivation, and land shortages are now common. Individuals and whole groups of kinsmen are increasingly forced to seek alternatives or supplements to subsistence agriculture to feed their families. This usually means greater involvement in wage labor in locations distant from their homes.

Current Events and Conditions

More than ever before in their history, the Ngóbe are being confronted by outside influences. Most notable during the past thirty years are the increasing intrusion of the national political system and the global economic system. The decade of the 1970s was the period in which most of the forces with ongoing and increasing influence began to manifest themselves. Panama's national government under Omar Torrijos initiated a series of efforts ostensibly designed to benefit the indigenous population. However, to date, the Ngóbe have had little or no input into the various projects designed to help them, and some Ngóbe have protested. According to Ngóbe leader Julio Dixón, "We ask national organizations and Panamanian society in general to give us the right to choose our own destiny" (emphasis in original).¹ A well-known Ngóbe female leader expressed similar sentiments: "[W]e do not have the right to express our viewpoints about major community issues. What we have always had are imposed decisions without the slightest consent of those of us who, historically, have lived in these communities."²

During the oil crisis of the late 1970s, an oil pipeline was constructed across the isthmus from the Pacific to the community of Chiriquí Grande on the Caribbean. The pipeline was built to transship oil from Alaska to refineries on the East and Gulf coasts of the United States. A high-quality paved road paralleling the pipeline was constructed. For the first time, the province of Bocas del Toro was connected to Chiriquí Province and the rest of Panama. This road does not go through Ngóbe territory, but it does

make the movement of goods and people into and out of Ngóbe areas far easier than in the past. Trade and travel patterns have been dramatically reoriented throughout Bocas del Toro as a result of the road.

Some access roads have also been extended into traditional Ngóbe territory. Most are relatively rough dirt tracks, but they do allow access by vehicles. One of the most spectacular efforts has been the construction of an access road from the Pacific lowlands to Cerro Colorado in the highlands, the location of a very large low-grade copper deposit. Since 1972 Cerro Colorado has been the site of exploration and test drilling by four different multinational mining companies. To date, a mine has not been developed because of the relatively low international copper prices and ample supplies of ore from mines in other countries. However, the development of a very large-scale open-pit mining operation deep in Ngóbe territory would have tremendous social, economic, and environmental consequences. The Ngóbe are certainly aware of the potential impact. As one Ngóbe spokesperson put it, "This mining project will affect the future of our community and will have negative consequences for the natural environment, the life and the social and political institutions of our community."³

More access roads are being constructed, and with each new road another part of the population is exposed to more influence from the outside. Some Ngóbe are in favor of roads because they supposedly facilitate travel and the movement of goods that they wish to sell. However, the roads are probably of more benefit to the merchants who sell products to the Ngóbe and Panamanian agroindustrial interests that depend on the Ngóbe as a source of low-cost agricultural labor.

Since the 1970s, the Panamanian government has extended its school system into nearly all of Ngóbe territory. Many schools are quite rudimentary but offer greatly improved access to primary education. Prior to the 1970s, some children received a few years of primary education when their parents sent them to live with Latino families in small Panamanian towns bordering Ngóbe territory. The children were treated as servants, but most learned Spanish, and some attended school. The percentage of boys who received any education in this manner was quite small, and it was extremely rare for girls to receive any formal education at all. The extension of the educational system changed this dramatically. Today the vast majority of children, both girls and boys, attend school for at least a few years, and many complete the primary grades. Increasing numbers are continuing on to high school, and a few go to trade schools and universities. This was unheard of a generation ago.

Children learn to speak Spanish in school and develop at least basic literacy skills. Interaction with Latino teachers and the educational curriculum increases familiarity with the Latino world and facilitates easier interaction with it. It also makes the introduction of outside influences easier

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than in the past when geographic and linguistic isolation buffered external influences.

The 1970s also ushered in major changes in political participation at the national level. Prior to 1972 all functionaries connecting the Ngóbe to Panama's political system were appointed by outside authorities. For the first time in 1972 the Ngóbe elected their own representatives to Panama's national assembly. At first scarcely understood, the idea of electing representatives was well established by the end of the decade, and competition for office was keen, in part because elected offices provided attractive salaries. By the end of the 1970s, the Ngóbe were also holding large meetings (called congresses) in their territory which brought together people from the different provinces to discuss matters of common interest. As Ngóbe political sophistication grew, a new level of nontraditional political organization began to emerge. This has been encouraged by the national government which wants to integrate more effectively the Ngóbe into the national polity. Toward this end, the national government has, since the late 1960s, recognized caciques in the three provinces with Ngóbe populations. Historically, the Ngóbe have had no recognized permanent leadership positions. Traditional leadership is found in kinship groups and is informal. Individuals exert influence because of their personal qualities, not because they hold a formal office or position. Modern chiefs and elected leaders are both alien ideas. As one Ngóbe man put it in 1978, "*Cacique* means a different thing to the people. A true *cacique* is one who is born knowing. These new *caciques* are not like that. Many people are waiting for such a man."⁴ While a few are still making up their minds, by 1999, most Ngóbe recognize the provincial caciques as the legitimate authorities.

The gradual intrusion of external political models has begun to break down traditional patterns of authority. Disputes, which frequently occur over who has land-use rights, have been increasingly brought before officials appointed by the national government instead of being mediated in the traditional manner by an influential, usually elder, member of the community. The result has been the gradual undermining of traditional leadership and authority.

In 1997 the National Assembly of Panama officially established a Ngóbe *comarca* (reserve) with the passage of Law 10. This was the first time that any government had recognized or acknowledged that the Ngóbe had a legal right to the territory they occupy. Having a reserve has been a long cherished dream of many Ngóbe. A reserve with clearly marked boundaries has been seen as a way of stopping further theft of their lands by outsiders. However, the law establishing the reserve also mandates the creation of an internal political system different from the one that currently exists. The legislation specifies the development of a system that mimics the structure of the national political system. It also requires close coordination with the national system. It will probably be several years before this new system

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will be in place and functioning. However, when put in place, it is very likely that it will further erode traditional patterns of authority and leadership.

Environmental Crisis

Population pressure has created a serious environmental crisis that will probably become more severe in the future. Simply put, the long-term carrying capacity of the land has been exceeded. Land shortages are forcing people to clear and replant land more frequently than is desirable. Since the 1930s, fallow periods between crops have decreased from about twenty-five years to eight and sometimes only six years. With shorter fallow periods, the land is unable to recover its fertility. The result is a vicious circle of declining productivity. As fertility declines, more and more land must be cultivated to obtain the same harvest. As a consequence, the land is used more and more frequently and produces less and less. Many Ngóbe now have insufficient land and must resort to poorly paid wage work on outside farms, ranches, and plantations to earn money to purchase food. This too has become a problem because it is often difficult to find work during the months in which it is most needed.

Food shortages have become chronic for many and are especially severe in the months of June and July, just before the crops are ready to harvest. One Ngóbe expressed himself in a letter,

My brother, this year just past [1995] has been the worst of all the years for the Ngóbe. Almost no one was able to burn [the slash] because the rains fell early. There was much hunger and it continues still. Many have nothing. In general, this is how it is among the Ngóbe. . . . The situation is very difficult. Everything is going up in price and we Ngóbe are in a food crisis.⁵

Many children now suffer from nutritional problems. Many are underweight for their ages because they have experienced extended periods without enough to eat. They also often suffer from illnesses that are, in part, related to poor nutrition.

The need for cash income adds additional environmental stress to the already serious problems caused by the spiraling need to grow more food. A cash income is essential to all Ngóbe households in order to purchase things the people cannot grow or make themselves. Manufactured products, such as machetes and axes, pots and pans, cloth and kerosene for lamps, all must be purchased. Other than wage labor away from home, the only way to obtain money is to produce things that can be sold.

To sell crops or farm animals, precious land resources must be devoted to them, thus increasing pressure on the land. When the population was small, land was relatively abundant and raising cattle for sale was the most

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popular way to earn money. Cattle, as well as chickens, pigs, beans, rice, and corn, can all readily be sold to outside buyers. However, cattle need pastures that cannot then be used for crops. Today the Ngóbe continue to sell these farm animals and crops, and some now also raise coffee and cocoa as cash crops. What they sell today, however, is seldom a real surplus. What they sell at one time of the year may cause them to go hungry later.

Roads into Ngóbe territory have also encouraged more production of crops for sale. Bringing even small loads of crops out to market is slow and laborious if they must be carried or packed out on horses. Roads allow buyers to bring trucks into the areas and transport larger volumes rapidly. This ease of sale stimulates even more overuse of the land. Easy access to markets encourages significant numbers of families to sell a large proportion of a crop immediately after harvest to earn cash to make needed purchases of manufactured goods. This is also the time at which they will receive the lowest prices for their crops because so much is available. Later, just before harvest time when food supplies are running low, the same families often suffer because they cannot afford to buy food. Prices then are at their highest because of shortages in the market.

Sociocultural Crisis

The Ngóbe have been able to maintain their cultural identity and way of life because of the interplay of several factors. The isolation of their homeland has been important. In addition, the way in which they are organized has had an important influence on their interaction with the outside world. Because, until recently, they had no system of political organization above the level of small kin groups, it was impossible for external forces to influence more than a small number of people at a time. Each kin group is essentially politically autonomous, so influences are not readily transmitted from one kin group to another as they could be in systems with more centralized patterns of authority.

Patterns of access to land have also been important. The right to use land is based on kin group membership. An individual's kinship ties defined his rights. Traditionally, the right to use land could be inherited, but land could not be purchased or sold. Thus, it could not be alienated from the kin group, which owned the land collectively. This system of use rights (usufruct) strongly tied individuals to their kin groups and tended to ensure that customs were observed.

Traditionally, individuals and households depended on reciprocity among kin for economic and social security. If harvests were poor, or if a household experienced hardships for some other reason, food could be obtained from kin. The expectation, of course, was that when kin experienced periods of need, assistance would be provided if possible. This worked well when adequate land was available and everyone could plant enough crops

to meet their projected needs. Today land shortages and periodic widespread food shortages are causing a breakdown of this system of reciprocal sharing.

Increasing participation in wage labor also takes time away from agricultural production. Wage work is often most available during periods when the planting or harvesting of subsistence crops needs to be done. The result is that, even in situations where enough land may be available, the need for a cash income can reduce subsistence production. Those who are away working for wages do not plant enough to meet their own subsistence needs let alone provide aid to others who may experience a poor harvest. This puts even more strain on the traditional reciprocal exchange system.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Individual Responses

As the Ngóbe population grew, population densities increased more rapidly in some areas than in others, and individuals responded according to their individual circumstances. Today, virtually all parts of the Ngóbe homeland are experiencing overpopulation and land shortages. Everyone is struggling to grow enough food to meet their needs. At the same time, the need for cash has steadily increased, demanding even more adjustments in economic strategies. These adjustments have taken a variety of forms.

Agricultural Intensification and Production for Markets

The first and most logical way to obtain cash was to produce something for sale. Cattle, pigs, and chickens have been the traditional choice because they can be moved easily and there is a ready market in rural Panama. When land was abundant this was the option selected by most people. It required keeping a few more animals than would normally be raised for consumption, but virtually no change in traditional activities was required.

Raising more food crops than needed for consumption or producing crops specifically for sale has gone hand in hand with raising animals for sale. Corn, beans, and rice all can be readily sold as can coffee and cacao. With increasing land shortages, it has become more difficult to raise animals or crops for sale because the land is needed to grow food for home consumption. However, some Ngóbe regard coffee as a cash crop that will produce enough income to more than offset the lost food production on the land.

Seasonal Wage Labor Migration in Panama and Costa Rica

A few Ngóbe began to obtain money by working for wages on cattle ranches and farms in the nineteenth century. Periods away from home were usually very short, lasting only as long as necessary to earn the money to

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meet immediate needs. During the twentieth century, many more Ngóbe began spending longer periods away from home as the need for money gradually increased. Wage labor has now become the most important source of cash because land shortages make it impossible for many people to meet even their subsistence needs by raising crops and animals, much less produce a saleable surplus. Now they depend on wages to buy some of the food they need as well as manufactured goods. It is unusual today to find a Ngóbe man who has not spent at least some time away from home working for wages. Many now spend several months a year away from home to earn the money they need. Often their wives and children accompany them and work for wages at such tasks as harvesting coffee.

The need to earn money has prompted many to travel long distances from home in search of work. Today large numbers of Ngóbe travel to neighboring Costa Rica to find jobs harvesting coffee. So many are seeking work that not enough jobs can be found in Panama.

Permanent Emigration

Some Ngóbe have dealt with the problem of land shortages and food scarcity by leaving their homeland altogether. Some now work and live permanently on the large banana plantations of western Panama. Others have moved to Panama's cities and towns in search of jobs. Not all have been lucky enough to find work, and some families live in abject poverty in urban slums. These migrants usually maintain contact with their relatives who have remained in their homeland, but over time it is not unusual for such contact to become infrequent or lost altogether. Many migrants eventually abandon their traditional customs, lose their cultural identity, and adopt the ways of Panamanian society. They and their children become part of the Latino world.

Group Responses: Political Organization

Group responses to the problems faced by the Ngóbe are becoming more common. This is most evident with such organizations as Acción Cultural Ngóbe (Ngóbe Cultural Action) and in the congresses that are now held on a regular basis. Acción Cultural Ngóbe publishes a newsletter called Drü. The newsletter provides information and editorials on topics of widespread interest among the Ngóbe people. It also encourages a sense of group identity among the Ngóbe living in their traditional homeland as well as those who now reside in other areas of Panama.

Regional congresses are now being held annually in each of the three provinces straddled by the Ngóbe homeland. These congresses bring together hundreds of people from all over the province to discuss matters of mutual concern. Even larger general congresses are held less frequently, usually every two or three years, which bring together people from all three

provinces. The congresses have facilitated the flow of information between Ngóbe living in different areas and have focused attention on matters of common concern, such as the potential impact of a copper mine and relations with government agencies. They have also served as a source of information about the activities of the national government and international companies that may have an impact on the Ngóbe.

The Ngóbe have also organized to bring their concerns to the attention of the general Panamanian public. In recent years protest marches have been held in major cities, and the Interamerican Highway has been blocked more than once to draw attention to the desire of the Ngóbe for a reserve. These efforts were very successful in attracting the attention of the national news media and may have influenced the national government's decision to pass Law 10 which did create the reserve sought by the Ngóbe for almost thirty years.

The new reserve is still in the process of being organized, and its political structure is still to be developed. It will create a new organizational structure unlike anything in the past. However, even at this stage, there are signs that the reserve will play a very important role in the future of the Ngóbe. Territorial boundaries are being delimited, and the political subdivisions (districts) within the reserve are being reorganized and renamed to reflect a discrete and distinct Ngóbe identity. The reserve will also promote the development of a more centralized and coordinated political system than the Ngóbe have ever had. Only time will tell if this will help the Ngóbe deal more effectively with the Panamanian national government and help them address the problems they face.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Very rapid population growth and increasing influence from outside forces have combined to confront the Ngóbe with challenges unlike those faced in the past. The population has increased rapidly, and subsistence needs can no longer be met with the land available. This has forced greater involvement in wage labor which, in turn, has increased the influence of external forces on the society and weakened traditional economic and social patterns.

At the same time that population pressure is increasing the need to participate in Panama's national economy, more external influences are penetrating the previously isolated homeland of the Ngóbe. Access roads are connecting them to outside markets and facilitating travel in and out of the region. The extension of the Panamanian school system into the area has facilitated the introduction of influences from the outside but also has enhanced the abilities of the Ngóbe to meet the challenges of interaction with the outside world.

The recently established Ngóbe-Bugle reserve holds out both promise and

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threat to the Ngóbe. The legal recognition of the right of the Ngóbe to their homeland is a significant milestone in their long and often difficult struggle to determine their own destiny. The reserve assures rights to the land and prohibits the usurpation of land by Latinos, a common occurrence in the past. At the same time, the reserve could threaten traditional social and political patterns because it requires the Ngóbe to develop a political structure that parallels the Panamanian national system and is quite unlike their traditional system. It is difficult to predict how much this will alter the traditional system.

One view of the future for the Ngóbe in a rapidly changing world would be that they are doomed to become more and more like the general Latino population of Panama and eventually lose their cultural identity. This has happened to many other native populations. However, we should remember that, during 500 years of contact with the outside world, the Ngóbe have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resiliency and have maintained their distinctive cultural identity and way of life. They have been resourceful survivors. As they move into their sixth century of interaction with the outside world, new challenges will have to be faced and changes will occur. Our optimistic view is that the Ngóbe will survive as a culturally unique and distinct people.

Questions

1. Why can population growth be considered a major cause of many of the problems faced by the Ngóbe today? How have the Ngóbe addressed their population problem? In what other ways might they address it?
2. How might improved access to education influence the Ngóbe in the future? Would literacy in their own language (in addition to Spanish) be useful to them?
3. What factors do you think have helped the Ngóbe to maintain their cultural identity despite 500 years of political domination? Do you think their culture is now in danger of disappearing?
4. How has involvement in a cash economy influenced the Ngóbe? How are changes in the global economy likely to affect them?
5. Why are new forms of political organization developing in Ngóbe society? What kinds of changes are they likely to cause? Do you think changes in their political organization will help the Ngóbe solve their problems?

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, data and statistical information presented in this chapter come from the following sources: Philip D. Young, *Ngawbe: Tradition and Change Among the Western Guaymí of Panama*, Illinois Studies in Anthropology no. 7 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Philip D. Young and John R. Bort, "Ngawbe," in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, vol. 8, pp. 194–199 (Boston: G. K.

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Hall, 1995); Philip Young and John Bort, "Ngóbe Adaptive Responses to Globalization in Panama," in *Globalization and the Rural Poor in Latin America*, ed. William M. Loker, 111–36. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

1. César Picon, Jesús Q. Alemancia, and Ileana Gilcher, eds. *Pueblos Indígenas de Panama* (Panama: Edotora Sibauste, S.A., 1998), 256.

2. *Ibid.*, 253.

3. Letter sent to Philip Young (and many others) from a Ngóbe spokesperson dated August 26, 1996, and signed "Secretary of International Affairs, Ngóbe-Bugle General Congress.

4. Philip Young, field notes, 1978.

5. Letter from a Ngóbe friend to Philip Young, dated February 9, 1996.

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WWW Sites

Ngóbe-Buglé Rural Community Development Project
<http://www.fidamerica.cl/ngobe.htm>.

(This site is currently available in Spanish only.)

A few colored photos of Ngóbe life

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~pyoung/ngpict.htm>

Organizations

Acción Cultural Ngóbe (ACUN)

Apartado 1149, Zona 9A, Panamá

Republica de Panamá

Tele. (5076) 267–3777

Chapter 9

The Kuna of Panama

James Howe

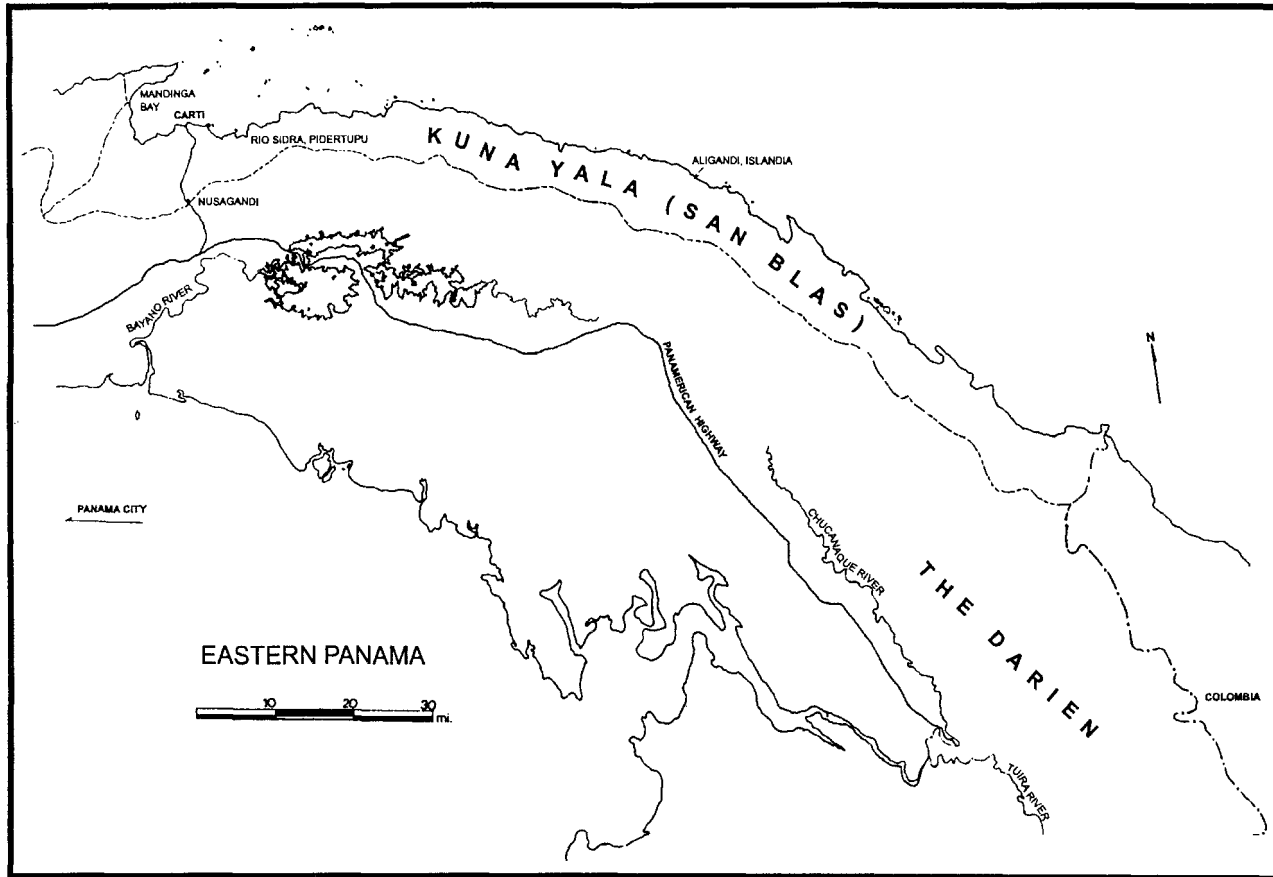
CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

Today, a few thousand Kuna can be found in eastern Panama in the valleys of the Bayano, Chucunaque, and Tuira rivers, as well as nearby in Colombia. However, the greatest number, more than 34,000, live on the north-eastern coast of Panama, on a great arc between the Colombian border and Mandinga Bay or the Gulf of San Blas, some 130 miles to the west.¹ The Panamanian government in 1938 designated this region, known traditionally to outsiders as the Coast of San Blas, as an autonomous territorial reserve or *comarca* (the Comarca of San Blas). In the early 1980s the reserve was officially renamed Kuna Yala.

Of the forty-nine villages in Kuna Yala, only eleven are located on the mainland. The remaining thirty-eight villages are situated on coral islands lying anywhere from a few yards to several miles offshore. The typical island village is filled from one side to another with large thatch-roofed wooden houses inhabited by extended families. The little space left is used for trees, kitchen gardens, narrow streets, a basketball court, two large halls dedicated respectively to village meetings and the celebration of female puberty, a school or schools, and in some cases one or two small churches. Since little can be grown on the island, people return to the mainland each day to farm, cut firewood, and (except for villages that now have aqueducts) fetch water.

The Kuna have existed as a distinct indigenous group for at least 400 years. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, outlying settlements on the eastern edge of the Spanish colony in Panama suffered fierce attacks from Indians whom the Spaniards called Bugue-Bugues. The eastern half



The Kuna of Panama

of the Isthmus of Panama, known as the Darién, had once been heavily populated, but the initial Spanish conquest had destroyed the indigenous chiefdoms and entirely depopulated the whole eastern region. In the following century, the so-called Bugue-Bugues, today known as the Kuna, had apparently begun migrating back onto the isthmus and repopulating the region. Their attacks signaled the beginning of 200 years of conflict.

Panama, where the Atlantic and Pacific are separated by only a few land miles, the crossing point for silver bound from Peru to Spain, was a region of great strategic importance, attracting freebooters and military forces from Spain's European enemies. The Kuna, who often allied themselves with pirates, were repeatedly missionized and partly subdued by Spanish authorities, only to break free again. These struggles culminated in the late eighteenth century with a campaign to conquer or exterminate the rebel Indians, which probably would have succeeded had not its high costs persuaded colonial authorities to abandon the effort.

After Latin America achieved independence in the early nineteenth century, outside powers abruptly lost interest in the region, leaving the Kuna, their numbers seriously diminished, to lick their wounds. Already concentrated mostly in the northern half of the Darién, the Kuna began in the nineteenth century to settle on the northern shore, known as the Coast of San Blas, and then on small inshore islands where they could escape snakes, mosquitoes, and endemic disease. Throughout the century, the Kuna maintained mostly peaceful relations with coastal trading vessels and Colombian authorities in Bogotá but kept themselves largely independent of outside control.

This benign neglect ended abruptly in 1903, when Panama achieved independence from Colombia, and the United States began construction of the Panama Canal. For about a decade, however, the new and impoverished nation, lacking the resources to control the San Blas Coast effectively, approached the Indians primarily through Catholic missionaries. In 1915, finally ready to act on its own, the government established an administrative headquarters on the coast, authorized a colony with mines and banana plantations, and placed schools and police detachments in four Kuna villages. The presence of non-Indians, who had been coming into the area in pursuit of sea turtles and wild forest products such as ivory nut and latex, was encouraged in the area.

Then, in 1919, the government initiated a program to "civilize" the Kuna. The government's first action was to prohibit female puberty ceremonies, as well as the nose rings and bead bindings worn by Kuna women. Later all of women's dress, and eventually Kuna culture as a whole, was suppressed. After six years of resistance within the national political system, the Kuna finally rebelled and killed a number of the policemen who were oppressing them. The United States, which in that era reserved the right to intervene in major disturbances in Panama, brokered a peace settlement

between the Kuna and the national government that guaranteed the Indians the right to their own culture. In the 1930s the Kuna and the government hammered out further agreements protecting indigenous land rights. Thus, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, the time period covered in this chapter, the Kuna had, without exaggeration, accumulated 400 years of experience in resisting threats to their physical and cultural survival.

The Setting

The Kuna Yala Indigenous Reserve (the Comarca of San Blas) is characterized by diverse ecological zones. The reserve ranges in elevation from sea level to about 1,000 meters (3,000 feet) and receives from 2,500 to 3,500 millimeters (100 to 140 inches) of precipitation annually. The average annual temperature is approximately 24°C (75°F). According to the widely accepted classification scheme of L. R. Holdridge, the area encompasses three life zones: low-lying wetlands, very wet tropical forest, and wet premontane forest.²

The reserve is characterized by a diverse array of marine and terrestrial ecosystems. These include coral reefs, mangroves, lagoons, gallery and evergreen hardwood forests, and agricultural fields. Many species of endangered fauna also live within the reserve including several species of felines, crocodilians, and marine turtles, as well as the giant anteater, harpy eagle, and Baird's tapir. In addition, the reserve functions as a resting place for many species of migratory birds.³

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Kuna have, for a very long time, produced for both their own subsistence needs and the world market. They feed themselves through slash-and-burn agriculture, based on a staple of bananas and plantains, supplemented by manioc, corn, rice, and other crops. The Kuna meet their protein needs with fish from the sea, caught mostly on hook and line. Game animals, lobsters, sea turtles, conch, and freshwater fish are eaten only occasionally.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Kuna have sold several million coconuts a year, the product of palms planted on much of the coast and uninhabited islands. Throughout the twentieth century, coconuts have provided the income needed to buy steel tools, kerosene, cloth, and other manufactured items. However, a series of coconut blights, combined with shifts in the world market, have drastically cut production and increased Kuna reliance on other sources of income.

A few miles inland a low mountain range runs parallel to the coast. Dozens of small rivers and streams, only a few miles long but fed by heavy rains from April to December, run down from the mountains and enter the

The Kuna of Panama

throughout eastern Panama, they threatened the viability of the Kuna reserve's ecosystem as well as its territorial integrity.

During the same years, other intruders appeared in the east. Afro-Colombians infiltrated the valleys closest to the national border in search of gold and natural products of the forest. Drug smugglers, following a traditional contraband route down the San Blas Coast to the port of Colón, further destabilized the region.

In the 1990s, new and even more dangerous intrusions occurred, as guerrilla war and social unrest in Colombia spilled over into adjacent parts of Panama. The largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which had begun keeping camps in the Darién forests, was followed by right-wing paramilitaries, and even by apparently apolitical but well-armed "unknowns." The Panamanian national police, too weak to drive out the intruders, have so far mostly left them alone, and to date the situation remains tense.

Tourism

As a tourist attraction, Kuna Yala has many virtues: beautiful "desert" islands, excellent diving, a comfortable climate from January to April, an exotic and colorful indigenous culture, friendly people, outstanding artisanry, and a deep-water bay at its western end. Tourism, which began in the 1920s with occasional outings by boat from the Canal Zone, has become much more significant since the 1960s. Large cruise ships visit western Kuna Yala throughout the dry season, day trippers fly in by light plane, and smaller numbers of visitors stay for a night or two at a handful of inns and small hotels. So far only a few Kuna make money from guiding or accommodating visitors, but tourism is welcomed for the sake of selling *molas*.

Tourism, however, is a mixed blessing (see chapter 5). The Kuna worry about the influence of outsiders who dress in skimpy clothing or act inappropriately by local standards, and they regret that profits from tourism go to outsiders. Most of all, they fear that non-Indian interests, if they established themselves in Kuna Yala, could threaten Kuna autonomy and control of their own territory.

Even the commerce in *molas* has its negative side, in particular for the women who sew them. At one time, tourist guides tried to keep prices down, telling their clients not to pay more than a certain amount. Although prices have risen sharply in recent decades, the cost of materials is still high, and a good *mola* panel requires at least a week of intensive work to sew. Except in the primary tourist zone of Mandinga and Carti in western San Blas, women usually have to sell to Kuna middlemen. In some villages, they barter *molas* for goods with shop owners. In the international market, foreign traders take by far the largest share of the profit.



Kuna spectators at a commemoration of their 1925 rebellion. Courtesy of James Howe.

National law offers the Kuna some control over tourism and other activities by outsiders. The legislation recognizing Kuna self-governance (Law 16 of 1953) mandates that non-Kuna may not alienate land in the *comarca* without the approval in two successive sessions of its governing body, the Kuna General Congress, a council of village chiefs and delegates. The three elected leaders of Kuna Yala, who are called caciques or *sagla dummagan* (great chiefs), have no right to act in such matters without the consent of the General Congress, although outsiders often expect them to do so.

In the late 1960s these legal strictures were put to the test when two American entrepreneurs, Thomas Moody and W. D. Barton, obtained permission from the three caciques to explore sites for possible resorts. Both found suitable spots—Moody, an uninhabited island in western San Blas called Pidertupu; Barton, an island farther east which he renamed Islandia. Both men rented the islands from their Kuna owners, and both constructed small beach cabaña resorts. Neither obtained the required permission from the Kuna General Congress, which by 1969 was issuing formal objections to their presence. The General Congress, however, had no administrative or enforcement capabilities, and in this matter the government would not act on its behalf.

Moody developed good relations with the nearest Kuna community, Río Sidra, which received various favors as well as fees for cargo and tourists landing at the village airstrip. Barton, in contrast, ended up in heated dis-

The Kuna of Panama

putes with his neighbor, Ailigandi, about alleged breaches of promise and offenses to Kuna sensibilities. Local men twice burned down parts of Islandia, and in 1974 the government finally ejected Barton.

By this time, a much greater crisis was brewing involving the government itself. The Instituto Panameño de Turismo (IPAT), founded in 1960, was given an expanded role soon after the 1968 military coup that brought General Omar Torrijos to power. In the early 1970s, as part of a master scheme to foment tourism in four regions of Panama, IPAT and its outside consultants devised a plan for a grandiose hotel of 686 rooms (twice the size of the largest hotel in Panama City), with casino, tennis courts, pool, beach, and marina, all to be built on an artificial island in western San Blas, as well as workers' quarters and an airfield capable of accommodating small jets nearby on the mainland.

In 1973 IPAT began a campaign to persuade the Kuna to accept the project, presenting it to several successive sessions of the Kuna General Congress, which usually meets every six months. The three caciques signed a document authorizing a feasibility study, though the head of IPAT publicly promised not to proceed with construction without the assent of the full General Congress. The three Kuna representatives to a national council of representatives, newly created in 1972, strongly supported the project, and rumors circulated that they were being paid by IPAT.

Opposition was slow to develop, but over a series of General Congress sessions doubts began to be voiced. Then, in early 1974, after the leaders of the village closest to the proposed site of the project began to take in its full scope, in particular the impact of the airport on their own airstrip and coconut groves, a mob confronted a party of surveyors who landed there and forcibly prevented them from deplaning. In the wake of the incident, IPAT revised its plans, reducing the size of the project and calling for implementation in stages. Nonetheless, in September 1975, the General Congress revoked permission for the feasibility study. The ultimate resolution of the crisis almost destroyed the Kuna reserve.

In the aftermath of this episode, the General Congress turned its attention back to Moody. Despite repeated resolutions denouncing his presence, Moody was protected by high-ranking government figures, including Manuel Noriega, who was then on the rise but not yet head of state. Finally, in June 1981, after Kuna authorities personally visited Moody to warn him of threats to his safety, a party of young men raided Pidertupu, slightly wounded Moody, and attempted unsuccessfully to burn the rain-soaked cabañas, after which the government finally evicted him. The Kuna had again countered a serious threat, though again, at great cost.

Although crises of this magnitude have not erupted again, serious difficulties concerning tourism recur periodically. During the 1990s, several small resorts were authorized, on the grounds that Kuna individuals held major interests in their ownership. Later, however, Indian lawyers deter-

mined that these Kuna were merely acting as fronts for non-Indian interests. Disputes concerning another resort called Iskartup have dragged on for almost a decade. Most ominously, during the mid-1990s, Panamanian entrepreneurs with strong government connections developed a plan to build a resort a few yards beyond the western limits of the reserve, where they could exploit the touristic possibilities of Kuna Yala without obtaining Kuna permission.

Government Threats to Kuna Yala

The government of Panama deals with the Kuna through a great variety of officials and agencies, including an appointed governor or *intendente* (who since 1980 has always been a Kuna), three Kuna legislators in a national legislative assembly, the three district representatives mentioned above, a Kuna judge and prosecutor, agents of the national police, school-teachers, paramedics in village clinics, and the representatives of various ministries and agencies. Political parties, which were suppressed in 1968, returned in the 1970s. For major issues concerning Kuna Yala as a whole, however, the government deals with the Kuna General Congress.

The Panamanian government, which has established a better record in dealing with its indigenous citizens than have many of its counterparts in Latin America, provides a number of important benefits and services to the Kuna. At the same time, as sponsor of many public and private projects and the body that can most authoritatively demand access to indigenous lands, the government itself has presented some of the gravest threats to Kuna autonomy. Like many other countries, Panama has favored a top-down model of development based on large-scale projects capable of bringing in revenue but also of harming local populations. Government functionaries give lip service to indigenous veto rights but clearly expect native leaders to say yes when asked, and they show little patience for Kuna democratic procedures. As a result, the General Congress and the government have repeatedly ended up locked in struggle.

In addition to the hotel project discussed above, official initiatives since the late 1960s have included two projects that would have led to conflict had they not been abandoned for other reasons, one a proposed oil pipeline with a terminus in western Kuna Yala, the other a sea-level canal to be excavated with nuclear bombs. On two occasions, one in the 1980s and the other in the 1990s, the government insisted on building a military base in eastern Kuna Yala. In the first instance the Kuna refused, leading to a protracted standoff. In the second, which concerned a naval base intended for interdicting drug shipments, the government wished to build at a protected site several miles into Kuna Yala, which would give its vessels extra time to meet incursions into Panamanian territory. The General Congress

The Kuna of Panama

insisted, however, that the base be built on the border. The question has yet to be resolved.

Mining and oil drilling present special difficulties because the laws of Panama (and almost every other Latin American country) assign subsurface rights to the national government. In theory, therefore, the Kuna cannot exclude concessions made in their territory, though in practice it would be hard to establish mines without their consent. In the mid-1990s, the government granted mining concessions in a number of regions of Panama, including concessions for gold and other minerals encompassing three-quarters of the surface area of Kuna Yala. The Kuna vowed to oppose any mining, by force if necessary, and to date the concessions have not been implemented.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

The Kuna have responded to threats and problems in a variety of ways, public and private. Among the most significant are a cooperative organized for the production and marketing of *molas*, a project to protect the threatened borders of the Kuna reserve, and the efforts of the Kuna General Congress to defend indigenous territory.

The *Mola* Cooperative

Males dominate Kuna politics, and it is usually the men who have organized against threats to cultural survival, with one very significant exception. In the late 1960s, when a number of Peace Corps volunteers were working with the Kuna, one of their projects, which was initially supposed to teach women how to make baby clothes, was reorganized to produce and market *molas*. The project soon had branches on eight islands as well as a retail store in Panama City.

In 1971, when the government of Omar Torrijos expelled the Peace Corps from Panama, the *mola* cooperative faced a severe crisis and a sharp drop in membership. The remaining members, however, began to rebuild the project on their own, and in 1974 they secured official recognition as a handicrafts cooperative. In 1978 a grant of \$30,000 from the Inter-American Foundation made it possible to organize new programs and workshops, and by 1985 the cooperative had grown to include seventeen branches and 1,500 members. Today, in addition to an elected leadership, the organization has professional managers based at a store and headquarters in Panama City, as well as its own website.

The *mola* co-op assists its members in a number of ways. It buys materials in bulk at favorable rates. It secures a better-than-average return to producers for their work, approximately 75 percent of the purchase price,

and it is now increasingly marketing *mola* work abroad. Although the co-operative represents less than a quarter of Kuna *mola* producers and *mola* production, it has had a wide impact on gender roles throughout Kuna Yala, making it possible for women to travel and conduct business without male supervision, to choose their leadership from among their own female membership, to communicate useful information and raise consciousness in workshops and meetings, and to gain a voice in the Kuna General Congress. Thirty years after its inception, the co-op continues to thrive and grow.

The PEMASKY Project

In the early 1970s, when peasant colonists began to threaten Kuna Yala, a young man named Guillermo Archibold began to travel to the spot in western Kuna Yala where the newly made dirt road crossed into the *comarca*. To establish a Kuna presence at the border and find a way to make productive use of the surrounding land, Archibold and other volunteers began to clear forest and plant crops. A Kuna labor organization, the Asociación de Empleados Kunas (AEK), contributed \$70,000 and official sponsorship. Their efforts, however, only served to demonstrate that traditional Kuna agriculture would not work on mountain peaks.

In 1982 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which had financed the road, awarded a grant to the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE) in Costa Rica to help the Kuna create a plan for a large forest reserve, which would involve ecotourism, environmental education, cooperation with visiting scientists, and status as a biosphere reserve. In 1983, having secured primary funding from the Inter-American Foundation, Archibold and his collaborators formally launched El Proyecto de Estudio para el Manejo de Areas Silvestres de Kuna Yala (Project to Study Forest Areas of Kuna Yala), or PEMASKY. With further grants, including an unsolicited award from the MacArthur Foundation, total funding eventually passed a million dollars.

The project was off to an encouraging start. In addition to securing offices in Panama City, PEMASKY built a large camp with dormitory buildings at a spot called Nusagandi, where the road enters the reserve. Scientists conducted baseline studies of the surrounding forest in conjunction with Kuna staff, who also undertook technical training of various sorts. During the mid-1980s, the project hosted visits at Nusagandi from numerous scientists, journalists, and development specialists, many of whom published glowing reports holding PEMASKY up as a model for cooperation between indigenous groups and environmental organizations.

Ironically, by this time, the project was already on the verge of collapse. PEMASKY had simply grown too fast, outstripping the managerial expertise of the Kuna staff. The model used for the management plan was in-

The Kuna of Panama

appropriate for a society in which traditional agriculturalists and medicinalists knew a great deal more about the natural environment than did young men with school learning, and neither staff nor outside advisors had thought ahead sufficiently about the implementation stage and the fresh funding it would require. As it turned out, the plan was never completed, and when the initial funds ran out and foreign advisors withdrew, the project faded away.

The end of PEMASKY as a viable organization, however, and its failure to meet its most ambitious goals concealed significant successes. Between 1985 and 1987, teams of volunteers came up from the coast to work with surveyors. They cut a boundary trail, which eventually extended for more than 150 kilometers (93 miles), and the project staff managed, without violence, to dislodge all of the colonists already within the reserve. Surveying and trail cutting continued through the 1990s up to the present.

In the field of environmental education, staffers and their associates produced a coloring book called *Anmar Napguana Mimmigana* (We the children of mother earth), as well as a thoughtful volume on environmental issues for Kuna adults, *Plantas y animales en la vida del pueblo kuna* (now available in English translation, *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna*, edited by Ventocilla, Herrera, and Nuñey). Numerous presentations by PEMASKY staff to the General Congress and local village gatherings greatly raised environmental consciousness among the Kuna as a whole, building on their traditional devotion to Great Mother.

Finally, a number of Kuna nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), several of them staffed by PEMASKY veterans, have appeared since the project's demise. These include Napguana (the Earth); Fundación Dobbo Yala; Koskun Kalu; Fundación Osiskun, dedicated to the marine environment; DESOSKY, concerned with sustainable development; and an umbrella organization called IDIKY. PEMASKY itself, which continues today on a reduced scale, has given birth to many vigorous children.

The General Congress as Defender of Kuna Yala

The Kuna say that more than anything else, it is their General Congress that should *yar bin urwe*, "fight for the land." As a thoroughly democratic body, composed of several hundred delegates from forty-nine constituent villages, the Kuna General Congress discusses important current issues, especially those dealing with Kuna autonomy and the preservation of their territory. If danger threatens, it is the General Congress that should forge a consensus and lead the resistance.

The General Congress, however, meets except for extraordinary sessions only twice a year, each time for three days. In the interim between meetings it has no means to enforce its decisions nor any permanent officers other than a general secretary. As a deliberative body, it has often been slow or

inconsistent or divided among different opinions. Because the General Congress and the Kuna as a whole fear giving too much power or independence to their three caciques, they keep them on a tight leash, which limits their capacity for good as well as evil. As a result, efforts to counter outside threats have as often as not been time consuming, wasteful, and divisive.

This was certainly true in the case discussed above in which the government attempted to force a hotel project on Kuna Yala. After Kuna opinion turned decisively against the project, ominous newspaper articles appeared insisting that the hotel would be built regardless. The General Congress cancelled permission for the project feasibility study in 1975, and in March 1976 it voted to repudiate the three Kuna representatives on the national body of district representatives, who were widely perceived as sellouts. The representatives, however, managed to separate the elderly caciques from a delegation sent to the government, and within a few weeks the *comarca* had been partitioned into three districts, each one headed by one representative and one cacique, a move that effectively ended Kuna autonomy. A few days later, the General Congress elected a new set of caciques, whom the government refused to recognize. It was not until 1977 that intense negotiations yielded a compromise by which the partition was rescinded and the new caciques-elect were named as successors to the old caciques, who soon retired.

Just as the Kuna were beginning to recover from this debacle, in 1981, the attack on Moody's resort Pidertupu occurred. The people of the nearest village, although warned in advance that his cabañas would be burned, were very upset that Moody himself had been hurt, and they mistakenly shot and killed an out-of-uniform Kuna national guardsman sent to the site of the incident. Bad feelings between the home communities of those involved in the shooting persisted for years.

The General Congress now has administrative offices in the city, but it still lacks a real staff or enforcement powers, and it struggles to reach consensus on major issues. The Kuna have for two decades been rewriting the constitution and enabling law of the *comarca*, but the national legislative assembly has yet to ratify the changes.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Problems of other sorts also concern the Kuna. They worry about uncontrolled social change, both on the islands and in the city; about a lessening commitment to agriculture and traditional institutions; and about the damage they themselves are doing to the natural environment through activities such as commercial lobster fishing. They have often been distracted from these concerns, however, by the endless struggle to preserve Kuna Yala from appropriation or exploitation by outsiders. Thus, although the

The Kuna of Panama

Kuna have so far countered all major threats to their land and autonomy, they continue to pay a high price.

Questions

1. How should a country like Panama balance the needs of its indigenous peoples with those of other segments of the national population?
2. What does it mean for a group like the Kuna to recognize that the national government is the legitimate authority in the country, is the greatest potential source of help, and yet is also the organization with the most power to do harm?
3. Control of their own territory is both the greatest strength of the Kuna and their point of greatest vulnerability. How does this paradox influence their efforts to defend themselves?
4. The manufacturing and sale of *molas* to tourists have provided important and necessary income to the Kuna. Has this “commodification of culture” helped sustain or destroy Kuna cultural identity?
5. The Kuna have attempted to control the development of tourism in their reserve in order to ensure that they enjoy the economic benefits of tourism. To what extent have they been able to do so? Do you think that the expansion of tourism within the reserve is a threat to Kuna cultural identity.

NOTES

1. Government of Panama, *Censos Nacionales de Panama, Censo de 1990* (Panama City: Government of Panama, 1990).
2. Brian Houseal, Craig MacFarland, Guillermo Archibold, and Aurelio Chiari, “Indigenous Cultures and Protected Areas in Central America,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (February 1985): 10–20.
3. Ibid.
4. Government of Panama, *Censos Nacionales de Panama, Censo de 1990*.

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- Salvador, Mari Lyn, ed. *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995.
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- Ventocilla, Jorge, Heraclio Herrera, and Valerio Nuñez, eds. *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.
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Endangered Peoples of Latin America

Two Kuna-published magazines, *Abisua* and *Onmaked*, are available only in Panama.

Film

The Spirit of Kuna Yala, an interesting film by Andrew Young and Susan Todd, is carried by distributors for school showing.

WWW Sites

Kuna General Congress

<http://www.peoplink.org/partners/pa/id/kuna-eng.htm>

Mola Cooperative

<http://www.peoplink.org/products/pa/cm/global.htm>

Chapter 10

The Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala

James Loucky

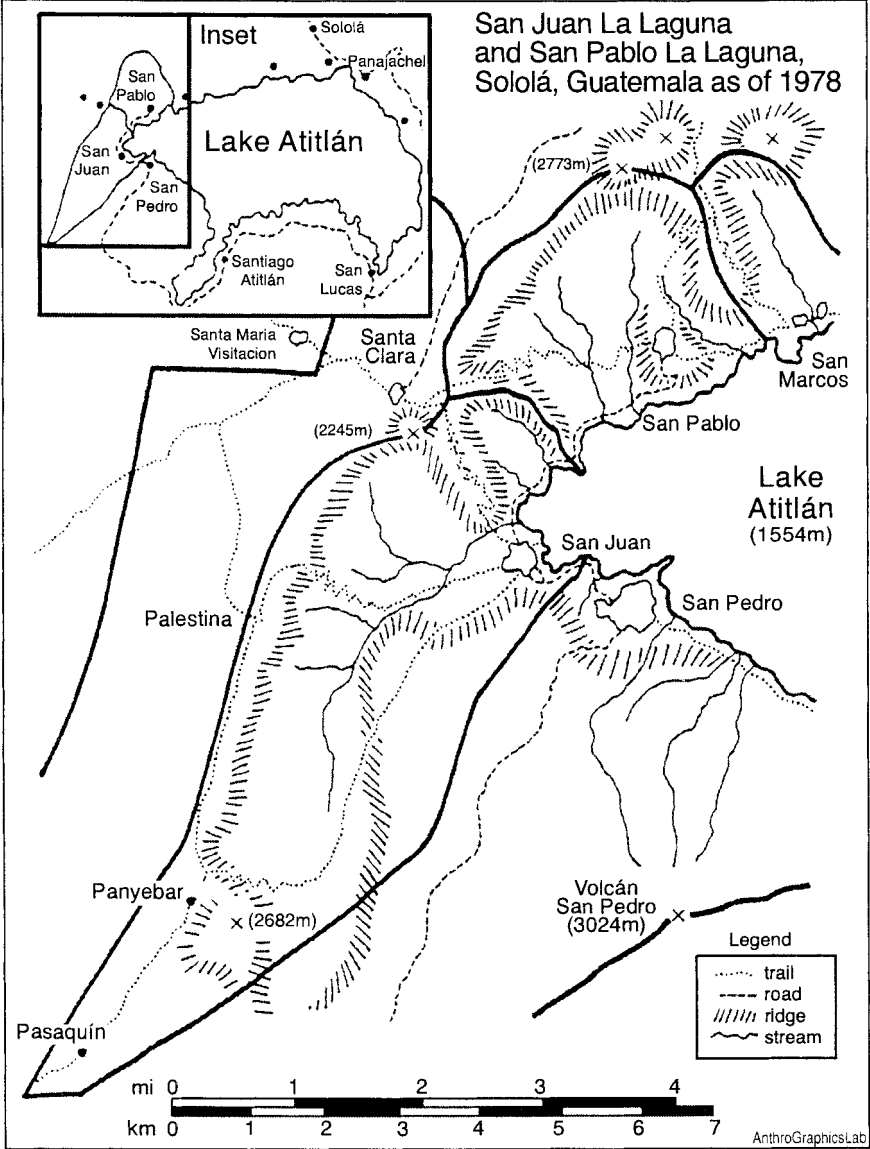
To us it's all rock. We don't have time to just gaze at it.
—Elderly Tz'utujil man to author at the top of a trail
overlooking Lake Atitlán¹

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The name Maya evokes images of ancient cities, long abandoned and overgrown by jungle. Yet today there are 7.5 million Maya living in Guatemala, southern Mexico, and Belize, as well as in a growing diaspora across North America. With nearly thirty distinct language groups, the Maya together represent the second largest indigenous population in the Americas. They have also faced some of the worst conditions of poverty and exploitation in the hemisphere. Yet the Maya have demonstrated tremendous tenacity in the face of encroachment and repeated cycles of conquest that continue to this day. They also maintain strong cultural cohesion despite considerable linguistic heterogeneity. Their close connection to the land, shared subsistence base, and deeply ingrained and encompassing world view help explain the remarkable endurance of the Maya.

About 60% of Guatemala's 11 million inhabitants are Maya. Most are concentrated in the western highlands, a mountainous region that has been inhabited for several thousand years. Corn (maize) and other subsistence crops domesticated in the Mesoamerican region continue to be cultivated using centuries-old technologies and indigenous knowledge. Many Maya also engage in a variety of nonagricultural activities and wage labor, and today increasing numbers have migrated to cities and north to the United States.



The Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala

Situated on the western shores of Lake Atitlán, in the central highland area of Guatemala, are the Tz'utujil Maya ("tz' " is pronounced much like the "ts" in the contraction "it's"; "jil" is similar to a soft pronunciation of the word "heal"). They call themselves *vinuk* (the people), and their name refers to the "flower of the maize plant." While neither the most populous of Mayan groups nor occupying the largest extent of land, the Tz'utujil people have experienced most of the major demographic, economic, and political changes that have affected other Mayan groups. Thus, they represent a good case for understanding the contemporary pressures on, and responses of, the Mayan population as a whole.

The Setting

Whereas the lowlands were the epic setting for the classic Mayan civilization, most of the contemporary Mayan population is found in the highlands. Extending from Chiapas, Mexico, to present-day Guatemala City, this mountainous region contains hundreds of settlements ranging from tiny dispersed hamlets to concentrated villages and towns linked by a network of trails and roads, mostly unpaved. Often there are only a few nonindigenous residents, most of whom are teachers and government personnel. Fertile volcanic soils cover some of the area, and the natural vegetation is mainly oak-pine forest and chaparral. However, virtually all arable land has been converted to subsistence and export crops, and steep terrain and overuse of the land have led to serious environmental degradation. Combined with varied timing and levels of precipitation, conditions for most of the highland Maya today are characterized by agricultural uncertainty and periodic scarcity of food and other crucial resources.

Intermediate between the Pacific coastal plain and higher elevations lies an ancient volcanic basin holding magnificent Lake Atitlán. Ringed by volcanoes and one mile in elevation, the lake has long been a major tourist destination. Promoted as a "land of eternal springtime," the Atitlán region has moderate temperatures throughout the year. Cycles of life are governed primarily by cyclical rainy and dry seasons. As throughout the highlands, vertical ecology and micro-geographic diversity result in a wide spectrum of economic and cultural variation in a relatively small area. The lake itself is a principal source of water for irrigation, fishing, and transportation by small launches and canoes to other lakeside communities.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The highland Maya have long relied on rainfall farming of corn, beans, and root and vine cultigens, usually combined in fields referred to as *milpa*. In years past, fields were left fallow for sufficient time to allow regeneration of soil fertility. Where there are sources of water, such as springs and

streams as well as along lakeshores, small irrigated garden plots (*tablones*) allow more intensive growing of vegetables and nontraditional cash crops. Increasingly milpa has been converted to the cultivation of coffee, which is destined for distant markets. The Maya also have a long history of producing nonagricultural goods, including textiles, wood and fiber products, and mats, for both domestic use and sale. The extensive marketing system of highland Guatemala is known internationally.

Tz'utujil communities remain focused on the land, despite their location on the shores of the lake. Corn is grown on hillsides that have been cleared and planted using machetes, hoes, and digging sticks. Many Tz'utujil have planted coffee or invested considerable labor in building and maintaining irrigated terraces and raised plots, with the goal of earning more money from cash crops than from the corn that could be grown on the same land. Households with little or no land engage in craft production as well as in local day labor and seasonal wage labor. In addition, a host of household maintenance activities are conducted, including collecting firewood, cooking, and socializing children. Attending to these activities is critical for the success of agricultural and money-producing pursuits.

Social and Political Organization

The household, the principal social and economic unit of the Maya, operates on the basis of cooperation between sexes and among generations. Division of male and female labor corresponds roughly to work done in the field and work done in and near the home. Nonetheless, there is a considerable overlap of gender roles, particularly in times of need. Tz'utujil children are socialized early to the necessity of work, and they begin performing simple tasks such as errands and the care of younger siblings from the age of four or five. They learn that their contributions help meet tangible needs, and they are effectively socialized to accept the values of responsibility and interdependence which help ensure family integrity.

Most Tz'utujil live in nuclear families composed of husband, wife, and children, although three-generation extended families are common until a couple inherits or acquires a house site and land which enable them to establish a separate household. Marriage usually occurs within the village. Villages themselves were traditionally governed by a civil-religious hierarchy known as the *cofradía*, made up of men serving year-long positions chosen on the basis of community respect.

Religion and World View

Maya have long believed that physical locations, animals, and natural phenomena have spirits associated with them, which can be accessed through shamans and which are sometimes observable to other people,

The Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala



Tz'utujil Mayan children returning from helping in the fields. Courtesy of James Loucky.

particularly at dusk or at night. Individuals are also thought to have animal guardian spirits. Traditional healers, midwives, and diviners are still largely revered. Currently, religious beliefs are an integrated mix of Mayan and Christian elements. Most religious ceremonies are tied to the Catholic saints' calendar, although the connection may be only nominal for many participants. *Cofradías* persist in some communities; in others, the most important religious leaders are Catholic priests or Protestant pastors.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Don't you understand that we're poor? Hurry up. I'm working. I'm thirsty, too.

—Tz'utujil mother encouraging son to finish making a fiber bag for sale²

Demographic Trends

The invasion of the Mayan homeland by the Spaniards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ushered in tremendous upheaval and death. The population was decimated by violence and disease, including smallpox, measles, and influenza. The demographic collapse of the Tz'utujil was typical. The population had declined nearly 90% by 1780, and only recently

did the number of Tz'utujil regain its preconquest level. Today there are over 70,000 Tz'utujil in five lakeside towns as well as in the mountains to the west and on the Pacific coastal plain to the south. With the falling of mortality rates, population growth has been explosive, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although infant and child deaths are still common, there has been a gradual decrease in mortality associated with a wider understanding of risk factors and slowly improving health services. A growing awareness of higher child survival, accompanied by a shift out of agriculture, where child labor is particularly valuable, is beginning to be reflected in smaller family sizes.

Heritage of Conquest

Many Mayan customs and institutions were attacked or destroyed during and after the Spanish conquest. Combined with the "great dying," the Spanish instituted the *encomienda* system which provided huge land grants to friends of the Spanish crown, along with rights to the labor of the native residents. Previously scattered populations were concentrated into settlements to ensure easier control of labor and potential unrest. Conversion to Christianity was often ruthlessly enforced. A profound racial and cultural division separating Maya from Spaniard began to be engendered during the pervasive ethnic and genetic mixing that occurred during and following the conquest. Those of mixed descent are known in Guatemala, as elsewhere throughout Central America, as *ladinos*. While oftentimes poor, *ladinos* nonetheless have continued to enjoy greater economic privileges and higher status in the social hierarchy that emerged.

The Maya hardly benefited from Guatemala's independence from Spain in the 1820s. Instead, conditions generally worsened as Indian autonomy and resources were eroded further. Privileged Hispanicized citizens (*ladinos*) moved into Mayan territories to occupy positions of political authority and economic power. Even the so-called liberal reforms of the late nineteenth century were damaging since they enabled a series of despotic governments simultaneously to abolish communal lands (local level lands managed by Mayan communities) and to impose harsh edicts that ensured forced labor from the Mayan highlands to the coffee plantations spreading across wrested Indian lands. Among the most notorious were the so-called vagrancy laws which required Indian males to perform between 100 and 150 days of unpaid labor a year. Some of these laws were not abolished until the 1940s. Similarly destructive was the introduction of distilled alcohol, particularly cane liquor (*aguardiente*), which became an unfortunate avenue of relief or oblivion for many Maya despondent over the conditions of turmoil and suffering. Loans, alcohol, and "company stores" were among the means by which ladino overseers and store owners entrapped many Maya in the vicious cycle of debt servitude.

Current Events and Conditions

Recent developments involving the Maya of highland Guatemala are closely associated with the progressive loss of land, which undermined agriculture as a secure means of livelihood while at the same time fueling further conflict, culminating in a thirty-year civil war that has only recently subsided. Indigenous farmers did what they could to oppose the accumulation of land, wealth, and power by the growing non-Indian elite. However, their passive and active resistance was usually no match for the violence of plantation owners and their private armies, the outright occupation of communal lands, the defrauding and falsification of titles, the abuse by local ladino authorities, and the forced sale of remaining fields as children went hungry and died. The average size of landholdings declined throughout the twentieth century, and Guatemala today has one of the most extreme divisions of wealth in all of Latin America. While 1% of the population controls about 65% of the land, over 40% of the rural population is now completely landless.

To cope with the shortage of land and money, the Tz'utujil have intensified their agricultural and other forms of labor. As landholdings shrank and agricultural yields declined, local land conflicts festered between neighbors as well as between towns. Growing internal divisions of wealth have also exacerbated factionalism, much of it expressed in terms of religious differences. Decreasing ability to meet basic needs locally has also resulted in more permanent displacement. Many Tz'utujil youth have headed to towns, particularly Guatemala City, which has mushroomed in size with the influx of rural migrants. They work in a variety of factory jobs, including in export-processing plants known as *maquiladoras*, similar to those that have been set up on the U.S.–Mexico border and elsewhere throughout Latin America. Some strive to continue their education and training; others engage in a variety of informal sector work such as street vending and day labor. Whether in village or city, however, most Tz'utujil Maya remain at the lower levels of a long-standing racial and economic hierarchy.

Inequality and subordination are thus the two most fundamental and unchanging realities characterizing Maya history to the present day. However, as conditions worsened, their awareness of the roots of impoverishment grew. While laboring on plantations, people found themselves working alongside poor from other communities. Following reforms within the Catholic Church, beginning in the 1960s, priests and other religious personnel embraced liberation theology which, concerned with social inequality, promoted social justice among the poor and the oppressed. Growing media exposure also introduced news of other struggles, including the successful revolution in nearby Nicaragua. At the same time, increasing

tourism increased contact with people from Europe and the United States who were wealthier and enjoyed far more civil and human rights.

During the 1970s, efforts to achieve greater social and economic gains peaceably included community-based campaigns for potable water, better health facilities, and land reform. As more Mayan youth completed school, they sought access to teaching, health, and municipal positions previously monopolized by ladinos. Tragically, this political opening was short lived. Determined to maintain the status quo of extensive landholdings and associated power, and fearing indigenous activism, the ruling elite became further entrenched. Military force was used to intimidate and repress. Ostensibly this was directed against a growing guerilla movement composed of Maya and non-Maya who, frustrated by the assassinations of anyone working publicly for political change, had come to see no alternative but underground organization and even armed struggle. As the military repression grew, it became more indiscriminate. By the early 1980s, massive scorched-earth campaigns, in which whole villages and adjacent agricultural lands were destroyed; widespread torture; and disappearances had left between 150,000 and 200,000 dead. The vast majority of victims were Mayan civilians. Hundreds of villages were annihilated, and hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children fled to the mountains or cities, into Mexico, and as far away as the United States and Canada. An institutionalization of military control in the highlands followed, including requirements for all Indian males to serve in civil patrols, highway checkpoints, and relocations of "subversive" groups into closely monitored "model" villages.

In the Tz'utujil region, the message voiced by those opposed to the succession of military governments resonated with most, given local experience with social and economic injustice. Some people gave moral or tangible support to the revolutionary group operating in the nearby mountains. Many others, however, felt caught in the middle. Little good came from the government, but there was also uncertainty about the motives and prognosis for the guerillas, who included urban ladino leaders who perceived the Mayan culture as an anachronistic impediment to a proletarian revolution. Regardless, the Guatemalan army regarded this as a largely subversive region, and all Tz'utujil communities were targeted to some degree. In the largest town, Santiago Atitlán, several hundred people were "disappeared" (kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the military and paramilitary death squads) over a ten-year period. In the next largest community, San Padre la Lagoon, a death squad operated with impunity for several years. Everywhere people were fearful and suspicious. A gradual calm returned by the 1990s, marked by the successful removal of troops from Santiago Atitlán following a massacre of thirteen civilians by soldiers in 1990. Strong local insistence on the right to be left alone corresponded to growing indigenous political leverage at the national level and strong international

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pressure for peace. A peace accord between the government and the guerilla forces was finally signed in 1996.

Environmental Crisis

The combination of population growth throughout the highlands and the wide disparity in landholdings has had profound ecological effects. Farmers who have small landholdings have been compelled to change their farming systems significantly. They have reduced the length of the fallow period and overtilled fields, leading to declines in soil fertility and greater erosion. Along with this has come growing dependence on costly chemical fertilizers to keep shrinking plots of land viable. With the decline in the number of people who can still depend on subsistence farming to meet their food needs, the economies of virtually all communities have become reliant on alternative crops for export as well as on nonagricultural economic alternatives and trade. Nonsustainable cropping techniques and toxic pesticides are often associated with these recently introduced crops.

Growing population pressure is also visible in extensive deforestation. Wood remains the principal fuel for cooking and heat. In addition to firewood cutting, both legal and illegal timbering have denuded many slopes. One result is a significant loss of habitat for indigenous wildlife. For example, the national symbol, the iridescent green and red quetzal bird, is highly endangered as a result of the widespread destruction of the last remaining cloud forests in which they live.

The Atitlán basin is a microcosm for seeing many of the environmental problems that persist throughout the highlands. Fragmentation of landholdings has increased pressure to boost productivity through the application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. To generate maximal income, much land has been converted to producing crops for export, most notably coffee. Once self-sufficient in the production of food for home consumption, all Tz'utujil communities must now buy corn (the most important household food staple) that is produced outside their communities. The annual harvest for most households today is sufficient to meet family nutritional needs for only four or five months. Erosion and deforestation are evident especially at higher elevations. Rising populations and an increase in the use of imported products have greatly increased pollution, particularly of solid waste. Where household waste and garbage traditionally has been taken to the fields to act as a natural fertilizer, today the prevalence of manufactured products has resulted in the widespread scattering of plastic and other nonbiodegradable waste.

Picturesque Lake Atitlán is also far less pristine than it appears. The water quality has declined with the runoff of agricultural effluents and human waste, which only rarely is confined to sewage facilities. The water level has declined rapidly in recent years, presumably in part from overuse

through the widespread adoption of gasoline-powered pumps for irrigating cash crops. The fishery itself has never recovered from a short-sighted development scheme in the 1960s, in which carnivorous black bass were introduced in hopes of promoting tourism through sports fishing. Instead, a centuries-old traditional fishery, based on traps and vegetation enclosures, was destroyed when native species were devoured by the introduced bass.

Sociocultural Crisis

Recent decades have witnessed fundamental social transformations in highland Guatemala associated with changing economic orientations, political turmoil, and the ascendancy of global telecommunications and international consumer brands and cultural symbols. Thirty years ago, fairly tight-knit Mayan communities comprised households who either planted enough corn to meet family needs or augmented milpa farming with seasonal labor on plantations or the sale of cash crops and crafts. In the period since, regional, national, and international processes have combined with population growth to result in a shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture, from production for household use to a more monetized life. The altitude and volcanic soil of much of the highlands are ideal for growing high-grade coffee, and in many areas virtually all suitable land has today been converted from corn to coffee. Increasingly, quality as well as quantity of land has led to greater social differentiation. Communal landholdings (land controlled and managed by the community) has been replaced with the buying and selling of private property by individuals which now occurs even across municipal boundaries.

Along with the decline of milpa farming as the universal occupation and varying access to land, the gap between richer and poorer Maya has widened through the diversification of economic activity. Greater accumulation of wealth is possible not only for those with a land base to expand, but also for those entering relatively secure teaching and government jobs and for those with capital to invest in commercial activity. With the growing significance of outside markets, a small number of men in each community have acquired trucks and, as a result of the profits associated with commerce, have become far more wealthy than most others. Large multiroom residences now stand out among small adobe houses.

Just as changes in the larger economy involving region and nation have ushered in changes in the local economy and greater social stratification, transformations in larger government and church institutions have been reflected in changes in political and religious organization in the villages. Traditionally, community service through the civil-religious hierarchy functioned to help unify by defining sociocultural identity, as well as to foster respect for the local authority system based on seniority and to confer

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prestige. Conscription into Guatemala's armed forces increased the reluctance of young men to accept unpaid community service, at the same time that the national government undercut local autonomy by channeling power through appointed authorities, often ladinos. Participation in national political parties in turn became a primary means for individual, if not collective, gains. At the same time, factionalism has increased, largely associated with the proliferation of Catholic and Protestant congregations. Boundaries of "community" have thus been eroding from above as well as from below.

Given the military apparatus that has dominated Guatemala for virtually its entire history, continuing Mayan ambivalence toward government and its largely ladino functionaries is not surprising. Their changing world became tragically apparent during the growing and then violent conflict that engulfed the highlands during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Even innocent activities like organizing health efforts and advocating bilingual education became politically suspect, leaving a legacy of caution and diminishing further communal sentiment.

Ideological developments have accompanied these profound political-economic shifts. While values of responsibility, hard work, and thriftiness persist, growing access to outside markets has altered the range of images available to people. Whereas fatalism was understandable in the face of insecure harvests and malnutrition, Maya are increasingly and perhaps inadvertently more oriented toward the future. Television and other media provide models that encourage consumption, individualism, and competitiveness. Higher levels of schooling, made possible as children's work has become less critical than it was in subsistence agriculture, boosts greater proficiency in Spanish at the same time as it encourages greater assimilation to the national culture and entry into wage labor, increasingly outside of home communities.

All Tz'utujil communities have experienced these social changes in various degrees. Coffee has been planted widely, providing sufficient earnings to stimulate higher levels of consumption, ranging from new construction to vehicles to longer schooling of children. *Cofradías* have disappeared in some towns and are on the wane elsewhere. Growing orientation to the outside has been accompanied by expressions of shame of their own culture. First evident in the 1970s, this was marked by the shedding of handwoven clothing and the rejection by youth of the wisdom and moral authority of their elders, including shamans. Widespread intrusion of external values has also come through the growing numbers of tourists to the lake region, the availability of a wide array of material goods, and the reruns of U.S. television shows and movies (from *The Three Stooges* to *Rambo*). Frequent travel to previously infrequented places has become commonplace with multiple bus and boat connections each day. Growing numbers of

younger men and women have emigrated to Guatemala City to work in assembly plants or in the service sector, returning mostly only for visits such as during the annual town fiesta.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

It is like mushrooms, which spring up on their own.

—Maya leader Demetrio Cojtí on Mayan cultural resurgence³

The Maya of highland Guatemala have faced multiple threats to their cultural integrity in recent years: continuing loss or fragmentation of land, deforestation and degradation of topsoil, monetization of nearly everything, and mass tourism. A new phase of social and economic transformation followed in the shadow of the trauma of counterinsurgency. While each community is distinct, certain common ways of dealing with the changing world have emerged. Some continue to sell remaining land; others contribute migrants to cities, and almost all are intensifying their investments in coffee and other export commodities. Paralleling the vast changes in livelihoods across the highlands are fundamental transformations in community relations and identity. Perhaps the most significant basis for Mayan cultural survival is the contemporary affirmation of the continuity of their ethnicity. The Mayan past has long been glorified in Guatemala at the same time the Mayan present was denigrated and repressed, but Maya today are everywhere reclaiming their past while also asserting their crucial and varied roles in the present.

Economic Strains and Strengths

The history and habitat of poverty have led indigenous Guatemalans to make heavy commitments of time to a wide range of economic activities in order to utilize fully the resources available to them. Through a highly organized household economy, family workloads are allocated among everyone but the very young. Even socialization of children and the care of siblings represent a cultural system for ensuring child and family survival. As both population growth and loss of land to outsiders have required new economic ventures—and undercut self-sufficiency—new pressures are being brought to bear on Mayan families. Interdependence is still a primary organizing principle for a full range of household maintenance requirements and for some production activities. However, as the emphasis shifts to export production, commerce, and emigration, the perceived utility of children is increasingly seen as a future investment linked to higher levels of schooling. It is not at all certain, though, that further education necessarily leads to expected occupational gains; today, for ex-

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ample, there are far more youth qualified to teach or do accounting than there are positions available.

Erosion of shared patterns of land tenure and work also represents a threat to community solidarity. Where houses and harvests traditionally drew on unpaid extended kin and communal labor (labor that is allocated and shared among members of the community), these tasks are today almost exclusively arranged on the basis of daily wages. However, new cooperative ventures have arisen to help offset this trend. The agricultural, coffee, and weaving cooperatives that exist in many communities allow access to bulk purchases of supplies as well as larger or more secure markets. As relative peace has replaced the bloody years of civil war, numerous international agencies and community development initiatives have entered highland communities. They provide a valuable source of investment and expertise for a variety of indigenous economic and educational ventures. Yet their varied understanding of historical and contemporary social and cultural dynamics, gender relations, and implications of income differences within and between communities poses a further challenge to maintaining unified communities.

Cultural Revitalization

From the Spanish conquest through the recent terror, the highlands of Guatemala have been a region of refuge for the indigenous population in their struggle to resist domination. Mayan history reveals numerous examples of resistance, from outright rebellions to more passive means of surviving without full subjugation. Most social and religious practices today reveal syncretism, as Maya strive to retain indigenous heritage by selectively incorporating and modifying what is thrust upon them. Even religious conversion and ethnic conversion, or "ladinoization," are increasingly seen as survival strategies. Neither did the recent horrors of counterinsurgency eliminate Mayan consciousness. Scorched-earth campaigns spread great fear, but Mayan roots remained intact. In fact, the war seems only to have intensified Mayan commitment and helped redefine strategies. As earlier, current resistance is based less on revolutionary idealism than on continuing pragmatism. There is also growing recognition that, ultimately, demography is destiny. The proportion of indigenous survivors in Guatemala is higher than in all other areas of the Americas except the Andes and the highland Oaxaca. Today the Maya represent 60% of the population of the country.

Coinciding with global panindigenous activity, the 1990s has seen a remarkable Mayan renaissance. Central to current developments are identity questions, while common to activities in all communities is the sense that the Maya have been an excluded people. Longstanding state and ladino power contribute an increasingly regional and national character to the

Mayan struggles, but there really are a multiplicity of Mayan movements rather than a single voice. What it means to be a Maya is today being discussed and re-created in every community. Rituals are being reintroduced or reinvented, including the introduction of Mayan elements into the Catholic Mass. Since language is a critical marker of identity, Mayan languages are being consciously used at home and in the community, in names and signs, and through an increase in the number of publications printed in Mayan languages.

Today there are over 500 Mayan organizations, ranging from local associations geared to meeting specific needs relating to education, health, and cultural practices, to higher level coordinating bodies. Mayan proposals for political reform and participation are being implemented as identity and cultural rights accords at the national level. These address such areas as bilingual education, sacred sites, rights of indigenous women, officialization of languages, and even greater economic independence and territorial autonomy. Expanding ventures by Maya outside of their local communities is reflected in increasing assertions regarding the national and even transnational character of Mayan peoples today, as they are found in urban centers and even as far away as the United States.

Tz'utujil Developments

Rapid political economic changes in the Lake Atitlán region have both substantiated and transformed the sense Tz'utujil have about themselves and their communities. The communities around the lake are a discrete cultural and ecological area, and they are among the most sought-after destinations of international travelers. They are also at a pivotal point in an uncertain developmental trajectory. They are increasingly integrated into national and international arenas through extensive coffee production and out-migration, as well as tourism, and it is recognized that the present and future are vastly different from the past. Yet there are also growing efforts to reclaim Tz'utujil history in order to provide guidance during the current flux. Elders are again being sought out to explain traditional norms of conduct as well as their underlying principles. Since the oral tradition presents an antecedent and then a consequence to reinforce an important value, proverbs and myths are being collected. The Tz'utujil language is also being explicitly used in ceremony, for names on signs, and in school instruction.

Particular efforts are being made to halt the extensive environmental degradation experienced by the lake and surrounding lands in recent years and restore the land and water. Trees are being planted, partly to provide shading for coffee, partly to offset the continuing harvest of firewood. Reed beds along shore have been rerooted. New reports state that a tiny number of flightless grebe found only on Lake Atitlán may have narrowly escaped

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extinction. Ecotourism now goes hand in hand with cultural tourism. Further conservation efforts include organic farming of coffee and other crops. Still, local factionalism and longstanding boundary disputes between villages persist, complicating long-range planning and more effective restoration possibilities.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Maya of highland Guatemala provide valuable lessons for understanding how indigenous people confront powerful forces of economic change, ecological degradation, and violent repression. Following a lengthy impoverishment and the recent slaughter of thousands of civilians, a relatively peaceful transition is under way. Today a variety of Mayan cultural revitalization activities are occurring in nearly every community, while at the same time new production activities are stimulating higher levels of consumption, less perceivable economic value of children, and widening disparities in wealth. The Tz'utujil Maya represent a case of people responding to a combination of factors over which they have limited control, including outside market forces, shifts in national political climate, expansion of landholdings and lakeside homes by outsiders, and international tourism. Whether they ultimately will achieve greater empowerment and local control or experience further dependence and social decomposition remains to be seen.

Questions

1. With thirty different languages, can Guatemala become a model for a truly multicultural nation? Can heightened awareness of being one people with a long past overcome the linguistic, religious, ethnic, and wealth differences among the Maya?
2. Can the peaceful transition in Guatemala be sustained, given the memories of tens of thousands of Maya killed so recently.
3. What does the growing migration of Maya to cities and across borders mean for their future as a people? Can Mayan identity be sustained through the turmoil associated with globalization and transnational development?
4. How does tourism and ecotourism impact the Maya, either positively or negatively?
5. Women and children are central to the transmission of culture. How are their activities and roles changing today?

NOTES

The information presented here is based primarily on the author's ethnographic fieldwork in the Tz'utujil communities of San Juan and San Pablo beginning in the mid-1970s.

Endangered Peoples of Latin America

1. Author's fieldnotes.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature

- Canby, Peter. *The Heart of the Sky: Travels Among the Maya*. New York: Kodan-sha International, 1994.
- Carlsen, Robert S. *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.
- Carmack, Robert M., ed. *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.
- Fischer, Edward F., and R. McKenna Brown. *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.
- Gonzalez, Gaspar Padre. *A Mayan Life*. Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.: Yax te' Press, 1995.
- The first English-language novel by a Maya author, it is available through <http://www.yaxte.org/>.
- Watanabe, John M. *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

Videos and Films

- The Cakchiquel Maya of San Antonio Palopó* (1991). Discovery Channel, Peoples of the World series (Tracy Ehlers, anthropologist).
- Daughters of Ixchel: Maya Thread of Change* (1993). University of California Extension, Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center St., Berkeley, CA 94704 (Kathryn Vigesaa and John McKay, filmmaker).
- Todos Santos Cuchumatán: Report from a Guatemalan Village* (1982) and *Todos Santos: The Survivors* (1989). Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films, 153 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014 (Olivia Carrescia, ethnographic filmmaker).

WWW Sites

A great deal of information about the Maya with links to many other resources can be found on several WWW sites. Three of the best include:

University of Georgia, Department of Crop and Soil Sciences
<http://mars.cropsoil.uga.edu/trop-ag/the-maya.htm>

Jaguar Books
<http://www.criszenzo.com/jaguar/maya.html>

The Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala

Indigenous Peoples Literature—Newsgroup
<http://www.indians.org/welker/maya.htm>

Organizations

Guatemala News and Information Bureau
3181 Mission, Box 12
San Francisco, CA 94110
(415) 826-3593 publishes quarterly "Report on Guatemala"

National Coordinating Office on Refugees and Displaced of
Guatemala
1830 Connecticut Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20009

SOUTH AMERICANS



KEY
----- International boundary



Chapter 11

The Awa of Ecuador

Janet M. Chernela

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

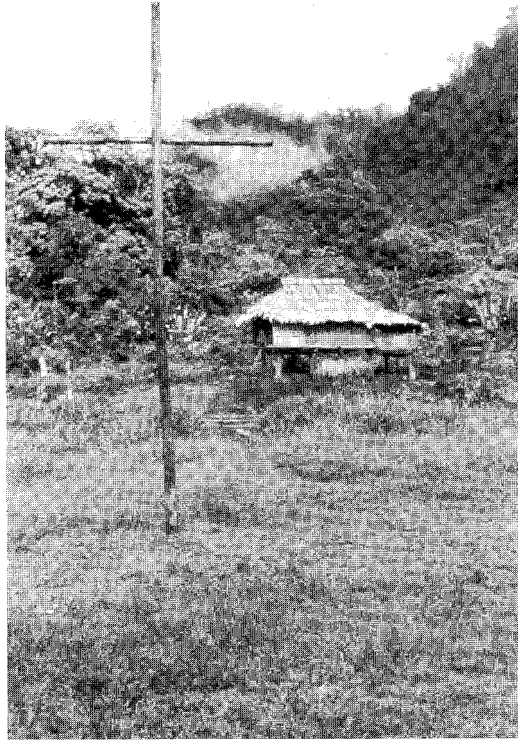
The term Awa refers to approximately 10,000 native Amerindian speakers of the language Awapit who are situated on both sides of the Colombian-Ecuadorian border. In 1987 about 3,000 of these indigenous people, or 30% of the total population, were located in one continuous area within Ecuador. The remaining 6,000 to 8,000 Awa resided in scattered communities, interspersed among newer settlers in Colombia.¹

This chapter is concerned with the Awa and the formation of the Awa Reserve in northwestern Ecuador. The Awa Reserve, which, formed in 1987, combined Ecuadorian indigenous legislation with forestry legislation and administered and managed by the indigenous Awa as stewards of their own lands, was one of the first of its kind. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) with its Agenda 21 would not be written for five more years, and the conceptual linkage between indigenous peoples and environmental sustainability had not yet entered the language of international policy. The case of the Awa, therefore, is a remarkable one. It continues to provide an example of environmental preservation, economic sustainability, and local autonomy of indigenous peoples. To date, the Ecuadorian Awa ethnic and forest reserve remains one of the few that may be deemed a success.

The Setting

Lying within the southern extension of a bioregion whose core is the Chocó area of Pacific Colombia, the region inhabited by the Awa contains

Endangered Peoples of Latin America



Awa traditional house. Courtesy of Janet M. Chernela.

some of the widest biological diversity found anywhere in the world. The area presents an extraordinarily large number of distinct habitats, including humid tropical forests, low montane forests, upper and lower páramo zones, and high montane forests. Among these are two of the most endangered ecosystems of the world: tropical wet forest, including one of the world's few remaining true cloud forests, and the ecologically distinct páramos. The area includes over 300,000 hectares (741,000 acres) of pristine tropical montane wet forest, estimated to have one of the highest concentrations of endemic species in the world. The various ecosystems that make up the area contain large numbers of both migratory animals and endemic species of plants and animals, including endangered tropical ungulates, carnivores, primates, and avian species. Over 500 bird species have been identified within the area; a full 30 of these are endemic to the region. More than 400 species of epiphytes have been identified, including numerous orchids and bromeliads. This rare wealth of biota includes the only species of bear found in South America, the spectacled bear (*Tramaretos ornatus*), declared endangered by the international conservation community.

The Awa of Ecuador

A combination of factors, including high rainfall, extreme variability in topography and climatic conditions within a relatively limited geographic area, and proximity to the equator, account for this high concentration of species diversity. The region comprises an altitudinal range from 50 meters (164 feet) in the southwestern tropical lowlands to 4,850 meters (15,900 feet) in the upper montane region. The area also includes numerous intermediate ranges with uniquely characteristic biota. The average annual temperature varies from 12°C (53°F) in the higher elevations to 24°C (75 °F) at the lower elevations, while precipitation in the highest regions ranges from some 2,000 millimeters (78 inches) annually and to a high of 8,000 millimeters (315 inches) in the lowlands.²

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Traditional Awa subsistence practices combined hunting, gathering, and fishing with plant cultivation. Today, the Awa continue these activities with some changes and have added to them income-generating activities such as animal husbandry. Like many inhabitants of humid tropics elsewhere, the Awa practice a form of shifting agriculture in which the forest is cut into small parcels (from 0.5 to 2 ha [1.25 to 5 acres] in size), cultivated for two or three cycles, and left to lie fallow for more than seven years. The Awa variety of swidden cultivation is known as slash and mulch to distinguish it from the more common slash and burn. Burning, employed elsewhere in the neotropics to release nutrients locked in the standing forest, is not possible due to the dampness of the vegetation. Instead, the Awa cut the moist vegetation cover and leave it to decay. Within a period of days a shallow humus layer, which forms on the rotting mulch, provides favorable conditions for the planting and sprouting of seeds, such as corn. When the forest cover is removed, the heavy rainfall leaches out important nutrients, leaving the soils infertile. Yields quickly decline after one or two harvests. Awa agricultural techniques may be regarded as a means of coping with the conditions of high rainfall and quickly eroding soils.

The complex composition of Awa gardens is characterized by a mixture of plant varieties with differing resistance qualities, nutrient requirements, climate tolerance, and rates of maturation. There is both diversity within and among species. In addition to growing different crops in the same garden, intraspecies variation is high. For example, the Awa plant at least five varieties of plantains and an undisclosed number of manioc varieties. The technique, known as intercropping, mimics the floristic diversity of the standing forest and is widespread among native lowland South Americans. This strategy of polycultures has proven more successful than monocultures in the tropics where the risks of any single crop loss to disease or predation are high.

The main staples of contemporary Awa gardens are the plantain, a crop domesticated in Asia and imported to the Americas, and maize, a New

World domesticate. Gardens also contain a number of New World tuberous crops including manioc (*Manihot esculenta*) (tapioca) and two high-carbohydrate, yamlike tubers (*Colocassia* and *Xanthosoma*). Additional plants, including beans, sugarcane, fruit trees, medicinal plants, and fish-stunning plants, are intercropped among others.

Planting schedules are complex. Each crop has a distinct maturation cycle, and Awa families maintain several gardens in various stages of maturation. For example, corn is harvested from five to eight months after planting, depending upon the variety, and manioc is harvested between six and nine months after planting. The cultivation of plantains and sugarcane involves a lengthier process. Plantains mature from nine to twelve months after planting, while sugarcane requires a full annual cycle between planting and harvesting. In some cases, the timing of plant introduction is closely related to the rainfall regime. Although there is no true dry season, some plants, such as maize, must be planted in January and August when rainfall is at its lowest. Likewise, manioc is susceptible to rotting when soil conditions do not allow adequate drainage.

Many fruit-bearing trees and shrubs are interspersed among crops in the gardens. These include hot peppers (*Capsicum spp.*), chirimoya (*Annona sp.*), (sweetsop or custard apple) tomato (*Lycopersicum*), tree tomato (*Cyphomandra*), lulo or naranjilla (*Solanum quitoensis*), peach palm (*Bactris gasipaes*), papaya (*Carica papaya*), madrono (*Rheedia chocoensis*), guayaba (*Psidium guajava*), inga, (*Inga edulus*, *I. spectabilis*), tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), borojo (*Boroja patinoi*), avocado (*Persea americana*), and anchiote (*Bixa orrelana*). A number of important trees bearing edible fruits have been selected and improved for quality by Amerindians over centuries or millenia. One of these, planted by the Awa, is the peach palm. Its densely clustered fruits are rich in oils, protein, Vitamin A, and other essential nutrients. The wild variety has far less flesh on its fruits than has the improved domesticated variety. In the shifting agriculture practiced by the Awa, a plot of land is harvested for two or three cycles, then a new garden is cut and the former is returned to secondary forest. The planted trees, which long outlast the food crops, enhance the biodiversity of the subsequent secondary forest, providing fruit after the last crops are harvested and attracting game, such as deer, that feed on the fruit. A number of researchers argue that arboreal species are deliberately planted by indigenous gardeners in order to enrich the soil for future vegetation. These include a number of leguminous species, including inga, a tree valued for its tasty fruit as well as the nitrogen-fixing properties of its root system. The former garden sites that appear to be abandoned may continue to play an important role in food production as well as species diversification and soil enrichment.

Population density tends to vary with altitude; the lower elevations are more sparsely populated than the higher elevations. The Awa living in

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lower elevations depend more on game and fish than those living at higher elevations. Awa hunt in both primary and secondary forests. Secondary or so-called abandoned forests may serve to attract game. Among the animals hunted are the large agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*), paca (*Agouti paca*), collared peccary (*Tayassu tajasu*), brocket deer (*zamaa americana*), iguana, and a number of large birds.

Before the introduction of the shotgun, animals were hunted using a blowgun and poisoned darts. Two types of poison were used in dart venom: one was extracted from the skin of the frog (*Dendrobates histrionics*) and the other from the latex of the *Maraceous Perebea sp.* The blowgun has been replaced by the shotgun, and, after a period of overexploitation by indigenous peoples and new settlers, hunting is now regulated within Awa territory.

Fish is also a food source of greater import at lower elevations. Together with catfish (*Bagre spp*), the common freshwater characins constitute the majority of fish captured and eaten. Besides spear fishing, and fishing with a hook and line, the Awa employ a variety of fish traps said to be introduced by them and generally in use throughout the Chococo lowlands. These include fish fences in which are set guillotine-type devices and funnel traps with capture chambers. The Awa understanding of plant-animal interactions is revealed in a number of their fish-collection practices that demonstrate a close awareness of feeding habits. Capture techniques, for example, utilize the fruits favored by a specific variety of fish or animal as an attractant to traps. In addition to baiting traps with fruit, the Awa are reported to build capture platforms in fruiting trees. These practices illustrate that the Awa have observed the importance of fruit in the diets of fishes, something that was not known to Western scientists until recently.

The Awa also use the plant product barbasco (*Lonchocarpus sp.*) in fishing. When beaten, the plant produces a milky discharge. During the brief dry season, the Awa mash and beat the leaves, stems, or roots and submerge them in low streams. The discharged liquid stuns fish, causing them to float to the surface (an action similar to that of rotenone) where they are easily captured in small nets and baskets. Prior to 1990 both Awa and neighboring non-Awa employed dynamite to capture fish. This practice resulted in drastic reductions in fish populations, and the Awa have since prohibited it.

The Awa maintain domestic animals but invest in the activities associated with them minimally. These animals, including chickens, pigs, ducks, and guinea pigs, roam the environs of houses and former gardens, feeding on available food. Occasionally wild fowl are captured and kept for eating. With the exceptions of pigs and cattle, both of which are raised to be sold for cash, most animals are raised as food.

According to a conservation biologist with two decades of experience among the Awa, the Awa production system exhibits the zoning principles

contained in the modern concept of a biosphere reserve.³ Each core of protected forest or household production unit forms a portion of the system, providing important services to other productive areas such as microwatershed protection, erosion prevention, and nutrient provision. In zones of protected forest, the Awa harvest forest products on a sustainable basis. Along with other features, the complex macrosystem contains zones of intensive agroforestry that combine agriculture and animal husbandry practices; buffer zones of low-intensity slash-and-mulch horticulture well adapted to the regenerative capacity of the soil and the high rainfall; and fallows of different ages, including those recently returned to secondary forests, enriched by human contribution. Some conservation biologists assert that this combination of permanent, semipermanent, occasional, and annual plants is an excellent example of sustainable agriculture and agroforestry.

Social and Political Organization

The extended family household is the fundamental unit in Awa social and political life, and settlements are dispersed at some distance from one another. According to a consultant to the Awa for two decades, each semi-isolated extended family household once functioned as an independent and self-reliant economic, social, and political entity (personal communication). Family household clusters were united through kinship ties into some eight loosely allied larger social groupings. Marriage is permitted among members of the same society who live in different residential clusters. The household cluster continues to be the elementary building block of Awa society even in the context of more formal organizations that have been recently established.

Prior to 1986 there were no Awa organizations larger than the residential cluster of households. During their visit to the Awa in the 1970s, two anthropologists found no coercive political controls, no foci of power, and no formal structures of rank or status among the Awa that differentiated individuals.⁴ All political, economic, and social decisions were made at the household level. Invidious distinctions between individuals, including displays of prestige or power, were not positively valued.

Religion and World View

The Awa recognize a cosmology that explains their origins as a people. In addition, they possess a body of oral literature, passed down from generation to generation, which recounts adventures of figures with supernatural qualities. These are often transformations of forms that Westerners would place in the realm of "nature." The Awa hold to a theory of interaction among all living entities. Within this body of theory, the individual

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is responsible for consequences and is vulnerable to consequences that are beyond his or her control. Theories of health and illness are based upon a conceptualization of the body into internal and external forces and entities. Penetration by external disease-bearing agencies is treated by a specialist shaman who must remove the harmful agents in order to return an ill person to health. It is the role of the shaman to protect the body from foreign objects and to remove them once embedded. Shamans rely on a large corpus of knowledge of different types of curing methodologies. These include a wide repertoire of forest plants with medicinal qualities, as well as incantations and fumigants. In recent years the number of healing specialists has diminished, and the extensive knowledge accumulated and passed on by shamans over generations is now threatened with disappearance. One important shaman, for example, respected by Awa and Western scientists alike for his treatment of snakebite, had no apprentices when visited by a botanist less than a decade ago. It is not unusual to find a decline in shamans among indigenous peoples that accompanies western education and increased contact with non-indigenous populations. Shamanism is based upon an intricate body of knowledge that must be learned with extreme dedication and sacrifice. Shamanic students apprentice themselves for a period of years to experienced shamans, during which time they are required to abstain from many ordinary tasks and foods. Practicing shamans themselves are vulnerable to dangerous supernatural threats and must undergo protective measures to avoid these. The difficulties associated with becoming a shaman, together with new values placed on bilingualism and western medicinal practices compromises the traditional medicinal specializations.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

The Awa have been described as an independent people who have zealously guarded their autonomy from outsiders and their lands from invasion. These attributes continue to characterize the Awa in spite of the many historic alterations to their lifestyle and increased interaction with outsiders. Their attitude was formed by several decades of threats to their land and their livelihood, including pressures from ranchers, gold miners, lumberers, and landless migrants. Ranchers invaded Awa territories from the highlands to the east, while lumbering companies entered from the lowlands to the west. Along with miners and settlers, they appropriated lands claimed by Awa communities. Disputes and disagreements resulting from counter-claims for the same lands were common.

Pressures on land reached a culmination in the 1950s when a railroad line and roads brought an abrupt influx of newcomers into the Awa territory. While the road provided the Awa with access to markets, it also greatly accelerated penetration into their territory. One of the most pro-

found impacts following the opening of the region by roadways was the drastic depletion of game, caused by unsustainable exploitation practices. The greater number of people and the narrowing food base resulted in competition for increasingly scarce resources. In the last forty years, several animal populations have become severely depleted, including formerly important food sources such as wild pigs and large rodents. Endemic species such as the military macaw and the spectacled bear became threatened. Numerous additional animal populations are also in decline, including the opossum (*Didelphis*), two-toed sloth (*Choeleopus*), three-toed sloth (*Bradypus*), anteater (*Tamandua*), tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*), nine-banded armadillo (*Dasybus*), prehensile-tailed porcupine (*Coendu*), black howler monkey (*Allouatta palliata*), and black spider monkey (*Ateles seniculus*). Currently, the Awa are attempting to restore animal populations to their former sizes, and there are some indications that populations of some species are on the rise.

In order to preserve their lands, and their control of them, the Awa have become internally organized into a federation with several levels of representation. The federation, in turn, participates in national-level indigenous organizations as well as global networks. In the context of overarching hierarchical institutions, the Awa have maintained their strong traditional egalitarian values.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Since the early 1980s Ecuador's Ministry of Foreign Relations has demonstrated concern over its northwestern border with Colombia. Fearing that without a government presence the region could become a refuge for guerilla movements, narco-trafficking, small-scale mining, and other undesirable activities, it took a number of measures during that decade to regularize a formal Ecuadorian presence in this frontier zone. The ministry recommended surveillance of the region, a precise demarcation of the little-known border, the issuance of citizenship documentation to all residents, and the demarcation of an indigenous reserve. In 1983 the ministry formally expressed concern for the "preservation [of] . . . 'Awa' . . . native culture, presently in danger of extinction."⁵ With encouragement from international funding sources, a coalition of government agencies, international indigenous advocacy organizations, and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) formed to meet the stated goals. Attempts made by this coalition to demarcate Awa territory between 1983 and 1989 encountered difficulties. Demarcation efforts were punctuated with disputes and disagreements owing to counterclaims for the same lands. In some areas, such as Guadalito, lumber companies continued to log the forests in spite of Awa attempts to halt their activities. A number of mining companies, such as one in Mataje, had become installed and

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could not be moved. Ranchers and colonists settled on Awa lands, then refused to leave. Solutions eventually were achieved through negotiation and compensation in which indigenous organizations and public agencies worked jointly to remove outsiders from the demarcated area and compensate them. Between 1984 and 1986, the Ecuadorian government and the Awa, with assistance from international, nongovernmental agencies, such as Cultural Survival, a North American, indigenous advocacy organization, accomplished several major objectives. The most important among these was the issuance of citizenship cards to over 1,100 adult Awa and the demarcation of Awa territories.⁶

The consortium also functioned to present proposals to international funding agencies and to receive financial assistance from these sources. In less than a decade, collaboration among the Awa, the national Indian association, and governmental agencies resulted in the demarcation of indigenous lands and numerous projects in organization, resource management, health, and education. Among the projects were the construction of meeting facilities and medical stations, initiatives in sustainable resource management, and education, including a bilingual training program for Awa teachers and a curriculum geared to the Awa.

New forestry legislation prompted the framers of the Awa reserve to incorporate the guarantees of forestry legislation into a new and original land title. The Ecuadorian forestry law of 1981 guaranteed that forested land in the categories "protective," "regenerative," or "in permanent use" would be protected by the national government. Prior to that legislation, lands not visibly in use could be expropriated, and tropical forest Indians wishing to title their lands were often forced to clear forests rather than risk losing forested lands to competitors. Although "forest reserve" would provide the Awa with more titled land than an Indian reserve, forested lands are state owned. The national Indian organization, aware of land disputes under way in the eastern tropical forests, opposed application of the forest reserve form of land title to Indian lands. After months of negotiations, the communities and the commission agreed to combine two pieces of legislation, one regarding forest reserves and the other Indian communities, in order to create a unique Indian/forest reserve. In 1989 the government created the "Awa Ethnic and Forest Reserve" (*Reserva Etnica Forestal Awa*) and officially recognized Awa territorial rights. The final demarcation produced a land claim of approximately 120,000 hectares (296,400 acres) for a population of about 1,800 people.

With outside pressure on lands increasing, the Awa perceived the need for links to existing national-level indigenous organizations and for spokespersons to negotiate with the state and international agencies in support of their interests. This meant the creation of a political structure capable of uniting all Awa and allowing for representation of all constituent units. Following the experiences of other indigenous groups in Ecuador, such as

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the large and well-organized Shuar of southern Ecuador, the Awa, in 1983, began to create a federation based upon a model of regional centers. In their 1997 *Diagnostico de la Zona de Esmeraldas, Territorio Awa del Ecuador*, written by a planning group of the Federation of Awa Centers of Ecuador (Federación de Centros Awa del Ecuador, or FCA), Awa spokespersons described the formation of the federation this way:

Before [the existence of the Federation] the Awa obeyed the oldest member of the family. Problems that arose were treated at the level of each family, and it was unusual for people of different families and different communities to sit down together to discuss their problems and to seek common solutions. As long as the problems that confronted people were related to Awa life and the environment in which we lived, this system of family organization functioned well. But when groups of organized settlers together with lumbering and mining firms began to threaten the Awa territory, people realized that another kind of organization was necessary that would unite all the Awa in order to defend our lands, our forests, and our culture.⁷

In order to deter the Awa from establishing their own reserve, members of the federation were accused falsely of carrying out narco-trafficking and guerilla activities. Numbers were arrested and jailed.

The work of organizing wasn't easy. We were accused of being guerrillas, narco-traffickers, and everything else. We were called Colombians and told that we had no right to our lands. Many of our companions were imprisoned, beaten and threatened so that they would stop organizing among the Awa . . . Finally, the strength of the Awa organization succeeded in blocking the entrance of these companies.⁸

In 1986, after numerous setbacks, all the Awa communities united to form the FCA.

The FCA comprises fifteen regional centers. Each center includes all the inhabitants of an area and is governed by locally elected councils. The FCA holds workshops in each center in order to assess needs and gather input from members in each locale. This bottom-up form of representation is regarded as crucial by the Awa. Representatives from each center, who walk for as many as four or five days, attend FCA assemblies. The FCA, in turn, maintains representation in the national indigenous organization, thus linking each Awa regional center to a national indigenous network. It is only through the formation of the FCA that the Awa achieved control of their lands. Spokespersons continue to explain the necessity of the FCA: "The future of the Awa depends upon the organization of the Federation from the basic level of each Center. This we all know. It was through our organization that we succeeded in demarcating and titling our territory, addressing, and resolving innumerable internal and external problems."⁹

During the first decade of its existence, the FCA worked with the Min-

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istry of Foreign Relations in proposing and receiving financial support from international funding agencies to implement resource management programs in the area. Besides the U.S. organization Cultural Survival, the Awa received assistance from the MacArthur Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund, and various Belgian and British foundations. Today the Awa federation has an independent legal identity, as has each community in it.

The FCA's first project was the creation of a "green belt" around the territory. The belt was intended to define clearly the boundaries of the reserve to outsiders. Within the green belt, the Awa federation worked jointly with the indigenous confederation of Ecuador, technicians from the Ministry of Agriculture, and international botanists. Besides providing income to Awa communities through cash-producing crops such as cocoa, coffee, coconuts, and native fruit trees, the belt provides a visible ring of cultivation, delimiting Awa territories, and discouraging encroachment by new settlers. "The belt sends the unmistakable message to all the world that the Awa will not permit others to destroy our lands."¹⁰ Moreover, the FCA monitors its borders and removes intruding miners and loggers by force when necessary. "Today we are respected; the [mining and lumbering] companies don't try to enter our territory because they know that the Awa People will not permit it. We earned this respect through our struggle, through our organization of the Federation."¹¹

The FCA's bylaws and regulations are decided by community consensus and are subject to ongoing review by the membership. This last is critical to maintaining ground-level support and compliance of members to these regulations. In ten years, the Awa have changed the regulations somewhat, after discussion and approval by the assembly, according to problems raised by Awa communities. Regulations regarding natural resources, for example, are reviewed regularly. According to Awa spokespersons, the FCA

entered an accord among the communities regarding certain rules and regulations for the management of the natural resources of our territory. The purpose of these regulations is to assure that the different natural resources that exist within our territories are not depleted, not by ourselves nor by our children or grandchildren. These natural resources are the basis of life for the Awa; it is from the forests and the rivers that we get our food, medicines, materials for house construction, and much more.¹²

After review and debate, the membership agreed once again that it was necessary to maintain these rules in order to maintain natural resources. Outsiders are prohibited from entering the Awa territory to fish, hunt, or prospect. Although miners, lumberers, and ranchers have tried to befriend individual Awa, any negotiations or proposals for transfer must be discussed during group meetings. The Awa have refused offers from timber enterprises, and the FCA prohibits the cutting of timber by outsiders. More-

over, the Awa themselves are regulated in their use of wood and wood products. Removal of wood for sale is permitted only in cases of urgency, and then felling is limited to two trees by authorization of the center directive. Hunting and fishing are regulated and limited to consumption by the Awa. It is prohibited to sell fish or meat to outsiders. Regulations for the management of natural resources of the Awa territory include prohibitions on fishing with dynamite or poisons. As part of the ongoing effort to sustainably harvest resources, communities inventory and monitor animal populations. The Awa identify the times of year in which the animals reproduce and prohibit hunting during these times. Recent programs by the Awa to preserve habitats appear to be successful. The 1997 report documents the return of several important species. A number of animal populations are currently on the rise, including several species of monkey.

The successful effort to control exploitation contrasts with the prevalent devastation of the surrounding areas. In 1950 80% of the coast was covered with forest; now only 7% is. Of the remaining forest, about one half lies within Awa territories; its preservation may be attributed to Awa land-use practices. By refusing to accommodate timber companies and mining concessions, the Awa have kept deforestation at bay and have limited impact.

The Awa are aware of the importance of their efforts.

The geographic and climatic conditions result in the very special qualities of the Awa Territory . . . We know that the forests within this portion of our territory are unique. The contiguous primary forests of the Awa Territories of Ecuador and Colombia form the largest protected area of tropical Chocóan forest in the world. Elsewhere along the Ecuadorian coast, forests have been destroyed by lumberers and settlers. The Awa Territory holds the only remaining reserve of these natural resources. We have conserved them.¹³

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Formerly Awa social networks were composed almost exclusively through kin relations or residential proximity. Today, an elaborate internal federation overlies the informal network of kinship that unites households. For the acephalous Awa, organization has been an important experiment. Through it the Awa have attempted to preserve the egalitarian underpinnings of their society, while at the same time utilizing the bureaucratic models of internal specialization and organization that allow communication, representation, and decision making among constituent communities. The success of the FCA is due in part to its recognition of traditional organization: the elementary building blocks of the federation are the very household clusters at the center of traditional Awa society, now organized into “centers.” Each center has its own decision-making process and par-

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ticipates in the decision-making apparatus of the Awa federation. The federation, in turn, articulates with broader external national and international entities and networks.

Traditional Awa society lacked formal structures for decision making. The Awa of 1970 had no organized leadership nor wide-reaching formalized organization. When, in 1986, the Awa communities of Ecuador formed the FCA, they created mechanisms for a structured organization of representation. The first organizational challenge for the Awa, therefore, was internal organization. Such organization involves the incorporation of all Awa into local, juridical identities, themselves organized into a hierarchy of increasingly inclusive membership groups with juridical and practical identities. Moreover, groups at every level are linked through mechanisms of representation. At the highest level, the Awa as a confederation are represented in the union of indigenous peoples of Ecuador. A certain amount of autonomy has been lost as a degree of interdependency has been achieved. However, the Awa have maintained the egalitarian qualities of their society in spite of a system of regulation and a structure with roles of leadership and differential responsibility. The second organizational challenge for the Awa is the articulation of the emergent Awa federation within larger constituencies, both governmental and nongovernmental. First working closely with government agencies, the Awa have more recently opted for an independent presence.

The Awa case is an exception to the general prevalence of development models in which decisions are initiated at a national or international level, are subject to a government's or an agency's broader policy goals, and are not necessarily matched to the specific needs of the peoples targeted to benefit by them. Far from being the passive recipients of "assistance," the Awa themselves spearheaded the self-representation and coalition building that allows them their own linkages to resources.

Questions

1. In what ways do you think the formation of the Awa Federation has affected life at the community level? How have things changed for men? Women? Children?
2. Has the Awa Federation changed or maintained Awa culture?
3. Are there lessons from the Awa example for other cases described in this volume, such as the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve participatory mapping and management project described in Chapter 7?
4. Why do you think the Awa have been so successful in managing and maintaining their traditional territories?
5. What does the Awa example tell us about notions of indigenous or native peoples "living in harmony with nature?"

NOTES

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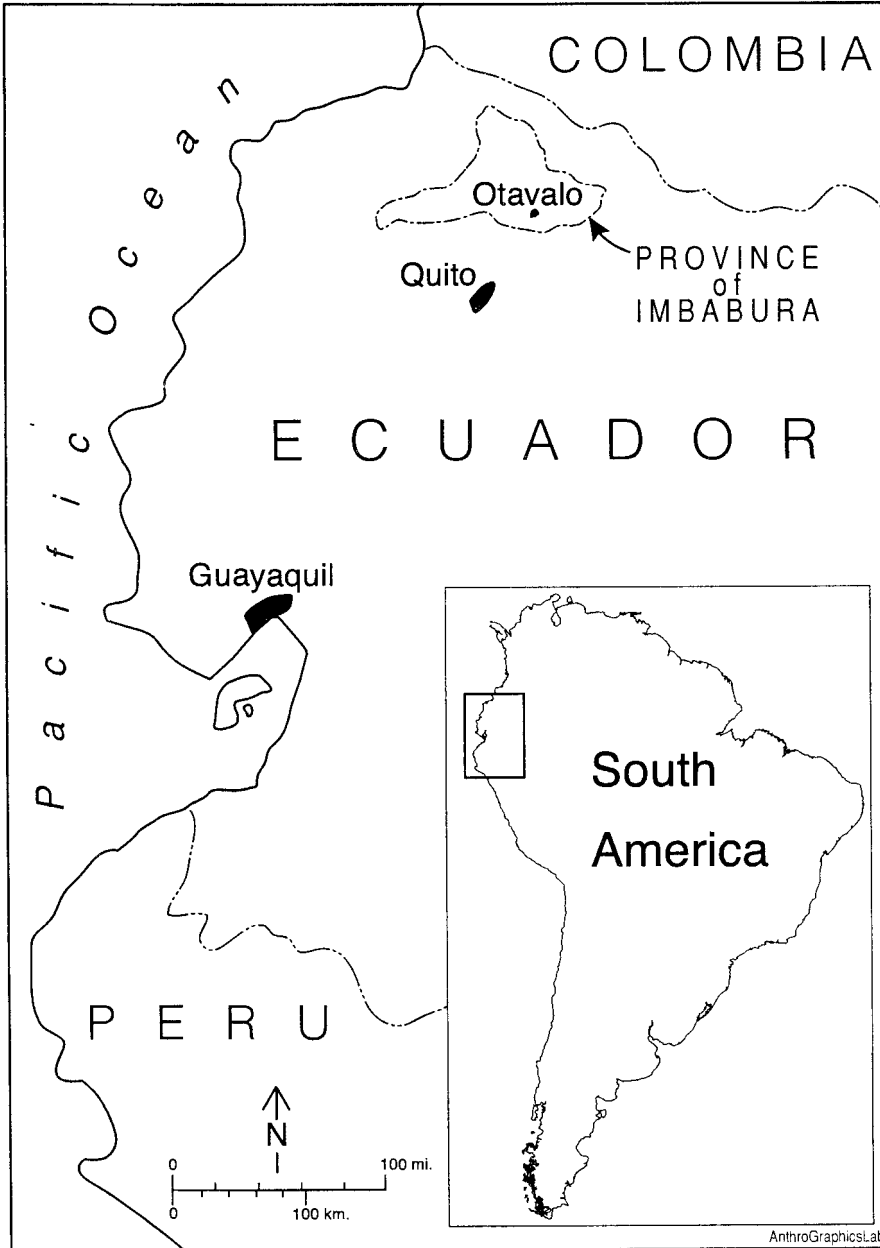
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Chapter 12

The Otavaleños of the Ecuadorian Highlands

Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The Otavaleños are a Quechua-speaking indigenous group, one of many ethnically distinct Andean Indian societies in the highlands of Ecuador. Numbering about 70,000, they have a unique reputation among native groups for their cultural pride—signaled in part by their distinctive outfits—their business acumen, and their international travel. They, in fact, do suffer the problems of other indigenous groups, including discrimination against their language and culture, land shortages, poor schools, and a lack of potable water, electricity, and other crucial services. However, throughout the twentieth century, they slowly overcame many of these disadvantages by making the most of their subsistence farming resources and expanding the local textile trade into an international ethnic-arts business. Their success has now created new problems. Overcompetition and increased economic inequality are undermining important social institutions, and population pressure and continued disparities in land distribution hurt agriculture. In the face of such challenges, the Otavaleños have developed new political and economic strategies that hold the promise not only to preserve, but also to revitalize, key elements of the indigenous Otavaleño culture.

The Setting

Covering an area the size of Oregon and with a population of about 12 million, Ecuador is South America's most densely populated nation. Although no longer officially tracked by the national census, ethnic identities divide the politically and culturally dominant mestizos from a variety of

significant minority groups including multiple indigenous peoples (who alone account for approximately one-third of the total population), as well as Afro-Ecuadorians, Asian-Ecuadorians, and others. Two high, parallel ridges of the Andes run the length of the country from its northern border with Colombia to Peru in the south, creating three regions—the coast, the Andean highlands, and the upper Amazonian rain forest—each with a distinctive political and economic identity. Home to expansive plantations, the coastal plain has historically been the most economically dynamic region (exporting more bananas than any other region or nation in the world), and its largest city, Guayaquil, is the center of commerce. In contrast, the upper Amazonian rain forest to the east of the Andes was peripheral to the economy until the 1970s when large-scale, commercial exploitation of the petroleum reserves began. This oil exploration and extraction has seriously threatened Amazonian native peoples, even as it led to an economic boom in the capital city Quito. Located in the inter-Andean valley, Quito is not only the nation's political center, but also the cultural center of the Hispanic landed elite who for centuries have dominated the highlands' most fertile lands with their haciendas or large estates.

The majority of Otavaleños live and work in about seventy-five communities that range in size from 200 to 3,000 inhabitants and stretch across a broad valley in Imbabura Province, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of Quito. In the midst of this region lies the small, provincial market town of Otavalo. Home to the region's weekly market, banks, civil offices, and minority (but politically dominant) white-mestizo population, Otavalo also hosts a swelling class of indigenous merchants and small-scale manufacturers. After decades of migration, additional Otavaleño communities exist in the provincial capital of Ibarra, Quito, Bogotá, Amsterdam, and elsewhere, accounting for an expatriate population of between 5,000 and 10,000 people.¹

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Farming, weaving, selling, and wage work have long anchored the economy. Taking advantage of a vertical ecology that ranges in altitude from 2,000 to 4,000 meters (6,560 to 13,123 feet), the Otavaleños plant diverse crops, including potatoes, oca (a tuber similar to a potato), quinoa (a traditional Andean grain rich in protein), peas, beans, and, most important, maize. From the margins of their fields and the areas that fringe gullies and streams, they gather mora (a fruit that resembles raspberries) and other wild fruits, as well as medicinal herbs. In order to meet their needs, households must also earn cash, often by performing low-paying manual and domestic work.

The greatest opportunities for advancement have come through the handicraft industry. Textile manufacture and trading have long been a dis-

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Belt weaver displaying his wares before a sales trip to Ecuador's central Andean highlands. Courtesy of Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld.

tinctive feature of the economy, documented first in colonial chronicles and, later, in the diaries of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's ambassador, who described the bustle and diversity of the Indian market over a century ago. Since the 1960s, local weavers have continually innovated their craft, developing new products for tourists, including wall hangings, backpacks, and sweaters.

Social and Political Organization

Households, the core economic and social unit of Otavaleño society, usually consist of a married couple and their children. Earlier in the twen-

tieth century, extended families, called *ayllus*, structured the wider public and economic life of rural communities. Reckoned through both the mother's and father's sides, these kinship ties created a social group that could be tapped into for help with planting and harvesting, fulfilling ceremonial obligations like weddings, and managing civic affairs. Though still important, *ayllus* have weakened over the past thirty years. Migration, exhausted subsistence resources, and erratic job markets have fragmented the economy and undermined the social institutions that have long held Otavaleño society together.

Religion and World View

The Roman Catholic Church is the greatest institutionalized influence upon the spiritual lives of the Otavaleños, although, in recent years, a number of Protestant sects have gained significant numbers of converts. Work and celebration annually unfold in a rhythm marked by Christian holy days. Weeding takes place around Christmas and harvesting around Easter. The final storing of the cornstalks happens toward the end of June at the time of the region's most important fiesta, the feast of Saint John, which people also sometimes call by its Quechua name, Inti Raymi (the feast of the sun). Church ritual also marks significant life cycle events, consecrating them through baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. More than marking individual milestones, these ceremonies formalize interfamilial social bonds through the institution of *compadrazgo*, or co-parenthood. In the case of a baptism, for example, the parents and the godparents who sponsor a child's initiation into the church become *compadres* and enter into a lifelong obligation of assistance to each other as well as to the baptized child. *Compadre* obligations help organize wide networks of households and families.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Demographic Trends and Environmental Problems

A middle-aged man with four children stood up at a community meeting and spoke in support of a development project that might have improved the value of his land: "Divided up, divided up, our land is in pieces. What will we give our children?"²² A walk through the fields on the slopes of Mount Imbabura above the indigenous farming and weaving communities shows why he is concerned. A once vital zone of agricultural production, the area supports a bleak patchwork of small subsistence plots—sometimes little more than two meters (six feet) wide—and spindly cornstalks widely placed in tired, gray soil. These are the material traces of two broad historical processes that have shaped Ecuador's highland economy: rapid pop-

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ulation growth and failed land reform policies. The nation's population grew from 8.1 million in 1980 to 12.8 million in 1998 and currently has the second highest annual population growth rate (2.2%) in South America.³ Furthermore, recent research has shown that populations are growing faster in predominantly indigenous areas like the province of Imbabura where the Otavaleños live.

Such expansion would challenge subsistence agriculture practices under the best of circumstances. Unfortunately, indigenous peoples frequently farm under the worst. Through centuries of coercion and mistreatment, large landowners dispossessed native highland communities of much of their land. By the 1950s, just 6% of the population owned 80% of the land; 389 estates accounted for half of that figure.⁴ The vast majority of the rural population—90% of the landowners—farmed holdings that averaged about two hectares (five acres) and accounted for only 16% of the land.⁵ Such severe inequalities led to a major land reform initiative which was passed into law in 1964. Seeking to abolish exploitative labor practices that bound Indians to haciendas (large estates) through debt peonage and to redistribute underutilized land holdings to peasant farmers, the law had mixed consequences. While the reform swept away the last vestiges of formalized, unpaid exploitation of hacienda laborers, little land changed hands. In 1974, for instance, small farmers (those with less than ten hectares [twenty-five acres]) still accounted for 87% of the landowners and used 18% of the land—a slight improvement. However, the average parcel size dropped to 1.9 hectares (4.7 acres).⁶ Again and again, in the years following land reform, indigenous peasant communities found their claims to land stalled in interminable legal proceedings.

Unable to expand significantly the amount of land available for farming, the Otavaleños have seen their fields divided into smaller and smaller plots. Inheritance practices speed the breakup. Following deeply held cultural norms, each individual man and woman in rural Otavaleño society inherits roughly the same amount of land as his or her siblings. Although a married couple farm their land together, they retain individual rights to their fields, and a husband and wife will see to it that each child receives a fair proportion of their separate holdings. Some sibling sets come to agreements that leave fields intact. However, many are forced to break fields up into ever narrower allotments leaving individuals with a series of micro-holdings spread out through two or more communities. Under such circumstances, the costs of subsistence farming (primarily the time it takes to get to and work one's fields) increase as its overall contribution to the family budget decreases.

Along with diminishing plot size, declining yields pose another threat to subsistence farming. Many informants have indicated that "the fields do not give as they did before." Farmers cite several factors that have decreased productivity. First, with growing involvement in the tourist econ-

omy and urban labor markets, people have less time to farm. Consequently, rather than multi-cropping potatoes, beans, maize, and quinoa on the same plot, households narrow their crops to just maize and beans. This reduction means that households can cut down the number of trips they make to weed and harvest crops that mature at different rates. As they do so, though, they eliminate nutritious foods such as quinoa that require extensive labor to separate the tiny grains from the chaff and wash the bitterness from their husk. The land's productivity also declines the absence of sheep and cows that once provided the primary fertilizer for fields. Now with less time to care for them and fewer fields on which to pasture them, households rarely keep more livestock than a few pigs and some chickens.

In sum, long central to their economy and their sense of identity as native Andeans, agriculture has rewarded Otavaleño labor less and less. Land shortages and falling yields decrease the viability of subsistence production. Ironically, such decreases come at a time when instability in other segments of the Andean economy make farming resources all the more necessary.

Economic Cycles and Indigenous Peoples

Since the 1960s, the Otavaleños, like almost all of Ecuador's native peoples, have migrated to urban areas in significant numbers, finding work with transportation cooperatives, on construction sites, and in big city marketplaces. The rapid expansion of oil production and revenues led to a building boom in Quito during the late 1970s, creating relatively high-wage jobs where people learned new skills. Contrary to expectations, though, the expanding urban economies caused a *decrease* in permanent migration of native peasants to the cities and an increase in temporary migration.⁷ That is, as people found new opportunities to earn higher wages, they renewed their investments in houses and fields back in rural sectors.

In 1982, however, oil prices fell sharply, and Ecuador's financial markets collapsed, precipitating an economic crisis that endured into the late 1990s. Native people bore the brunt of these shocks as construction work and other nonsalaried positions were among the first casualties of the faltering labor market. In indigenous areas north of Quito, the failure of urban wage markets had sharper, more immediate consequences for Otavaleño men than for women. Careers built on construction skills and urban contacts derailed, cutting men off from advancement and knocking out a much-needed source of income for many households. Unlike other Quechua peoples, however, the Otavaleños still had an important avenue for their ambition. The handicraft textile market flourished in the 1980s, although this growth spawned its own problems.

From the beginning of the trade in ethnic arts and handicraft textiles, Otavaleño merchants looked for ways to satisfy the growing demand well beyond their local market. An anthropologist wrote in the early 1960s that

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it was not uncommon to see Otavaleño traders in the streets of Bogotá, Colombia, or in the airport in Lima, Peru. Later, working with peace corps volunteers, weavers developed whole new categories of products, like wall hangings and sweaters. By the 1980s, entrepreneurs had further diversified these to encompass over twenty new craft goods made specifically for the tourist market.

Such innovation illustrates the creativity of Otavaleño craftspeople. It also demonstrates a key problem that producers face. Intense competition and technological innovation erode the profits that can be earned with any one class of goods and lead to rapid product cycles. For example, once the mainstay of textile production, the poncho nowadays gets made only by a dwindling number of older weavers. The craft was the first victim of the electric power looms that native weavers invested in over thirty years ago. Where automation does not flood the market, scores of rival hand weavers will. Many have turned the treadle looms once used for poncho making over to the task of making *tapices* (wall hangings). These are especially prone to copying because all merchants can see which designs sell well in Otavalo's stores and open market and then make them on their own looms (or pay other weavers to make popular designs for them). Thus, the weaving of wall hangings gives way to the weaving of panels for bags, and these in turn may yield to making cloth for sweaters or some other good. Those who do not innovate often find themselves reduced to the status of piecework weavers, supplying wealthy merchants with high quantities of standard designs and receiving low wages in return.

The Case of Belt Weaving, 1978–1998

The work there, in Quito, became a little “more-or-less” [hard to find]. I returned. Indigenous men must defend themselves with their own work in their own homes. . . . [My brother-in-law] said “work here” and he taught me belts and then I made my own designs. With belts, one can earn a little, and little by little, advance.⁸

This young man, in early 1994, offered a biographical glimpse into the kinds of connections that exist between national labor markets, weaving careers, and artisan practice. Indigenous women in Otavalo and elsewhere in the Ecuadorian Andes wear *fajas* or colorfully woven belts that are about ten centimeters (four inches) wide and three meters (ten feet) long. The belts, which are laboriously created on a narrow backstrap loom, were one of the last subsistence crafts, produced by men for their wives, mothers, and daughters. In 1978 an entrepreneurial nineteen-year-old weaver from the community of Ariasucu on the rural fringe of Otavalo developed a way to make the belts on a more efficient, upright, wooden treadle loom. Soon

he could weave as many in a morning (three to four) as could have once been made in a week, and he developed a successful belt-making business by hiring other weavers, adding looms, and traveling to sell the belts in cities where indigenous women had migrated.

The commercialization of *faja* production, however, began in earnest after the collapse of urban wage markets in the mid-1980s. In the wake of the economic crisis, many industrious men from Ariasucu found themselves out of work and back home with few opportunities. They learned the skills of the trade by starting out as piecework weavers in the few established shops in their community. Eventually, they abandoned the original shops, fixed up their fathers' looms (or bought a new one for themselves) and ran their own operation. By 1992 half of Ariasucu's 135 households had become involved in belt making in one fashion or another, with some of the later shops expanding at an impressive rate to include up to ten paid weavers besides the original proprietor. Designs, too, multiplied with teenage boys manipulating nine-pedal looms to produce intricate diamond and sun patterns. Through innovations and expanded sales, belt weavers improved their standard of living. In the early 1990s, the weavers bought televisions, radios, gas stoves, and other goods at double the rate of households that did not specialize in the new trade.

The economics of belt making then soured, and they did so over a very short period. To be sure, profit margins had declined throughout the 1990s as inflation ratcheted up the costs of thread, and competition kept people from raising prices. Yet skilled weavers could still sell all their wares and make reasonable earnings through early 1994. Later that year, however, even the best belt makers with the greatest market knowledge began to return home with unsold product. As one discouraged weaver said, "There was no way to sell. Those with shops, those resellers say, 'your countryman was just here. I can't take anymore.' In vain did I travel."

One of the finest weavers, who continued to find outlets for his wares, saw his profits on two months of belts drop from around \$100 to \$10. Faced with the flood of product coming from two large, neighboring communities as well as their own, Ariasucu's belt weavers began to drop out of the trade and look for other opportunities. While a highly specialized craft, belt weaving suffers from the same general problem that afflicts subsistence farming and urban labor markets. Too many people are scrambling to make the most of too few resources and opportunities.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Political Strategies

This is not a workers' strike.

This is not a teachers' strike.

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This is not a students' strike.
THIS IS AN INDIAN UPRISING.¹⁰

So shouted the marchers who confronted soldiers during the indigenous uprising of 1990. Deep frustration about the pace of land reform, in particular, had galvanized Indians for action at a national level. The uprising began when indigenous leaders and activists occupied the Santo Domingo Church in Quito in June 1990 to protest the failure of the legal system to process land claims. With impressive solidarity, native peasants from throughout the highlands left their fields, hearths, and workplaces by the thousands in order to block highways with tree trunks and boulders, march on provincial government offices, and support the Santo Domingo occupation. The protest forced the government to begin negotiations, which focused attention on seventy-two stalled land claims identified by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Yet, the bargaining went beyond community efforts to recover their fields to press demands for the constitutional recognition of indigenous culture, the expansion of bilingual education, and other protections for native peoples.

While these events resulted in few immediate changes, they deeply shook the complacency of the dominant white-mestizo society which has long assumed that indigenous cultures had no future in the modern nation-state. June 1990 proved them wrong, showing not only the Indians' cultural strength, but also their capacity for high-stakes political mobilization. Indeed, for indigenous people, this event brought new effectiveness to a society that was fragmenting through growing class differences, urbanization, migration, and reduced involvement in subsistence agriculture. According to an indigenous woman lawyer from near Otavalo, who is a leader of CONAIE, the uprising was a "sacrament of dignity, a symbol and path to liberation."¹¹

Intensifying a nascent indigenous movement, the 1990 protest set the tone for native politics in the subsequent decade. Mass demonstrations and strikes have continued, most notably to protest the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America in 1992 and to block the implementation of land reforms laws in 1994 that would have weakened peasant communities' ability to maintain communal land holdings. Indigenous leaders, moving out of the streets and into the halls of power, have been elected to political office at all levels, including the national legislature in 1996, where Luis Macas, the former president of CONAIE, took a seat as a member of the Pachakutik movement—a political alliance that takes its name, in part, from the Quechua word for "world transformation."

In and around Otavalo, the national indigenous movement has both reinforced native people's pride and raised the profile of local political groups, including the Imbabura Federation of Indigenous People and Peasants (FICI), who have led provincial struggles for land redistribution and

governmental reform. Yet, the movement has had little material impact on most peasant artisans. Indeed, many rural Otavaleños pursue an alternative politics, led by community councils, in order to change the factors that many feel severely limit their ability to get ahead—badly operated bus cooperatives, the lack of potable water and electricity, and a dearth of community meeting houses.

Once shunned by Otavaleños, officially sanctioned community councils now hold the key to rural development. When first mandated by national law in the 1930s, the councils posed a threat to the decentralized leadership of peasant communities. In a society where senior members of *ayllus* (extended families) and the holders of religious offices mediated conflicts and organized communal tasks, elected councils seemed at best redundant or, at worst, an unwanted intrusion of state power in local affairs. Through time, however, traditional leadership positions have weakened. Growing opportunities in the ethnic arts trade induced men and women to spend money on weaving implements and craft inventories, not the costs that come with fulfilling religious offices. Furthermore, dispersed by migration, *ayllus* no longer interact regularly and consequently fail to structure rural obligations and opportunities the way they once did.

In contrast, councils have strengthened, in large part due to their role in competing for development programs. Frequently, participation in an electrification project or water pipeline extension program depends not on state planning but on council politicking. Community presidents build out their sector's infrastructure by exploiting insider contacts, while at the same time motivating (or badgering) hundreds of volunteers to mobilize for *mingas* or communal workdays. With good timing and collective effort, councils can leverage the meager investments of state agencies or non-governmental organizations into community-wide improvements.

Yet there is a downside. Too often, council politics leads to factionalism, unhelpful competition among sectors, and piecemeal solutions to regional problems. In the absence of a province-wide implementation of water and electricity projects, for example, the community-led efforts have left small, poor neighborhoods on the margins of larger communities without services. More generally, hostilities crop up both within communities and between them when a small group of people seems to be accumulating benefits at the expense of others. Individuals may then seek to undermine councils and other political authorities. This is evident in the remarks of one man from a neighborhood bordering Ariasucu:

If I had some conflict, I would not go to the political officer, nor to the council, I would go to the National Commissioner directly. I go and get a lawyer and a warrant. Here the political officer is an enemy and the council is even more of an enemy and if the National Commissioner will not play, I go to the mayoralty in Ibarra.¹²

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Such scheming can plunge communities into cycles of recrimination, thwarting all constructive efforts for change.

In the past, regional peasant organizations like FICI have stepped in to mediate these conflicts. As the national movement strengthens organizations like FICI, one of the indirect benefits may well be a political mechanism that will achieve greater cooperation among powerful community councils.

Economic Strategies

Participants in one of the strongest handicraft markets in Latin America, the Otavaleños have used economic channels as much or more than political channels to cope with the difficulties brought on by Ecuador's fiscal crisis. Over the past twenty years, textile entrepreneurs have worked hard to formalize and expand wholesale, retail, and export occupations. Indeed, perhaps more than any other Latin American native group, the Otavaleños have succeeded in maintaining their control over reselling—opportunities that offer the greatest chance for profits in the trade. In contrast to political strategies, these efforts are not collective. Nonetheless, their cumulative consequences have transformed the market town of Otavalo and the power of native-owned businesses within the provincial economy.

Refuting the stereotype of traditional artisans who weave goods only for their own use rather than sale, the Otavaleños have long marketed their wares to nonlocal buyers and pride themselves on their market expertise. Since the 1970s, successful entrepreneurs have purchased and remodeled houses throughout the northern side of the town of Otavalo, opening up their ground floors as retail shops or bulk-selling wholesale outfits. As these operations grow, their proprietors expand into other market niches: exporting sweaters to Europe; supplying younger or part-time merchants with inventory on consignment; importing crafts from Peru, Bolivia, and elsewhere; or establishing branches of their operation abroad in places like Amsterdam. The most successful go on to diversify their investments. Restaurants, hotels, and even health food stores have opened up under indigenous ownership.

Such active selling and investing ensure that much of the profits from the trade circulates within the indigenous society, although not to everyone. In fact, the consolidation of larger retailing and wholesaling operations in recent years has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots in Otavalo. Moving to new town homes, doing business via telephone and fax, traveling to sell abroad, and driving around in imported pickup trucks at home, members of the rising, native merchant class anger those peasant artisans who have been bypassed by the region's new wealth. The rural poor say that the wealthy have rejected their culture and "live like mestizos." Worse, prosperous natives are accused of mimicking the old elite by

adopting their prejudices. "They go to Europe and sing of Andean life and native culture. But, when they come home they call us *indio sucio* (Dirty Indian)," observed one impoverished peasant artisan (personal communication/field notes).

During their visits to their old communities where they show off their new cars and clothes, many merchants could certainly be charged with arrogance. However, even those who have moved to the city cannot be accused of trying to blend in with the dominant mestizo culture. In comparison with poorer peasants, successful merchants are more likely to wear formal, explicitly indigenous outfits; spend large amounts of money on festive gatherings of *ayllu* members; and give Quechua names to their children. Cumulatively, these and other practices demonstrate the vitality of a modern, urbanized native Andean identity. Matching the political confidence of the indigenous movement, the economic accomplishments of the Otavaleños testify to the ways in which indigenous societies can strengthen themselves through engagement with the global economy.

Social Strategies

Because of its uneven distribution, the prosperity of the textile trade has not alleviated the insecurity of the poorest peasant artisans. Indeed, for all the economic innovation and political mobilization of the past twenty years, peasants still fall back on traditional social tactics to weather crises. In the 1970s, when entrepreneurs showed signs of being able to expand their operations greatly both at home and abroad, anthropologists in the region predicted the decline of *compadre* relations. They argued that the costly baptisms, confirmations, and weddings that formalized these bonds would lose out to investments in the textile trade. Instead, the new tourist arts economy of Otavalo has intensified spending on *compadrazgo* for three reasons.

First, both the Otavaleño society and economy largely operate in the absence of strongly centralized institutions. Banks, courts, government agencies, and even the police serve indigenous people haphazardly at best, corruptly at worst. In the absence of formal safeguards against failed crops, broken contracts, theft, indebtedness, and other economic risks, people prefer to do business with those with whom they share obligations of mutual support. Second, through the internationalization of the business, the artisan economy has become extraordinarily complex. Both neophytes and veterans depend on their social networks to learn of opportunities and to structure the credit that enables them to enter or expand new markets. Third, growing class stratification within Otavaleño society has made "vertical ties," those between rich and poor, all the more important. Those without resources seek out powerful allies to provide an entrance into the handicraft world, to intercede with authorities, or to offer emergency loans.

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Meanwhile, entrepreneurs and successful migrants need their poor *compadres* to take care of their fields and perform mundane weaving tasks, which take too much time away from more profitable activities.

For all these practical reasons, *compadrazgo* endures. Yet, these ritualized bonds cannot be explained purely in material terms. Paced by the vibrant music of five-piece bands that belt out the latest soap-opera ballads, fueled by cauldrons of toasted cornmeal soup, and punctuated by carefully presented dishes of salty, garlic, roasted *cuy* (guinea pig), *compadre* fiestas celebrate more than strategic social bonds. They rejuvenate families and neighborhoods. The parties, which last for days, satisfy men and women's "anxiety to dance," while expressing the cultural exuberance of a tough, resourceful, and creative people.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

More than simply adapting to economic change, the Otavaleños have sought it out. Artisans and merchants have actively engaged international markets for their wares and have pursued opportunities in Central America, North America, Europe, and Asia. Such entrepreneurship takes place in relation to a declining subsistence agricultural economy in the Imbabura countryside and erratic labor markets in Ecuador's cities. The uncertainties of these occupations have been amplified by integration into a global economy in which the collapse of oil prices, or new lending policies of the World Bank, or even changes in global consumer fashions can eliminate jobs or markets that have sustained households. Given the Otavaleños' long history of resilience, these new risks probably do not threaten the survival of their culture. Nevertheless, they have also sharpened social problems and have raised broader issues about the political and economic place of native peoples in the world economy.

As profits have flowed in from international sales, social inequality around Otavalo has dramatically increased. Do wealthy, indigenous entrepreneurs have any special obligations to promote the development of their home communities? If so, why should one moral standard prevail for successful capitalists within an ethnically subordinate community and another prevail among those in the dominant society? Far from being merely abstract ethical issues, these matters regularly crop up in conversations around Otavalo where people complain about the arrogance of some merchants while praising the goodness of others.

Although the Otavaleños garner praise from mestizo and foreign observers for the strength and unity of their culture, migration, occupational diversification, and stratification have deeply eroded the commonalities of experience. A monolingual, Quechua-speaking, poncho-weaving farmer has little sense of how to sell sweaters on the beach in California. Conversely, young merchants literally cannot believe that some households live without

electricity. Can traditional rituals and practices bridge such differences? How effective are newly “invented traditions” in instilling shared values and perspectives?

Finally, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of migration, sharp rises and even sharper falls in income, and the development of urbanized tastes and skills within the indigenous society. And yet paradoxically, after deep integration within the national, Hispanic culture and economy, the native peoples organized a powerful indigenous movement. While white-mestizos have always believed that greater involvement with the modern economy would spell the end of Indian society, the opposite has happened. Why? What is it about the experience of working in manual wage work, selling handicrafts, and struggling to find viable incomes in liberalized marketplaces that leads to intensified commitments to Indian culture and politics? The answer to this question has as much to say about the consumerist, “Americanized,” urban cultures as it does about those of modern, native peoples.

Questions

1. Is the state obligated to push through land reform, even if peasant agriculture is not commercially viable in national or international markets?
2. Should an artisan community try to reduce competition among its members, even if it means it will cut down the overall sales of their goods?
3. Do successful indigenous businesspeople have a special obligation to promote the development of their community?
4. Do shared consumption practices—including meals, family gatherings, and building homes—offer the same sense of community and culture as a common livelihood, such as agriculture?
5. Does the rise of a native movement signal the rejection of modern goods, values, and practices?

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Video

Weaving the Future, by Mark Freeman, is available from Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02172, Docued@der.org.

WWW Sites

Abya Yala Net Site

<http://abyayala.nativeweb.org/>

The Abya Yala Net site contains information on this project which is supported by the South and Meso American Indian Rights Center (SAIIC) in collaboration with Native Web. The site includes information on indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central America, and South America as well as links to other sites about native peoples of the Americas.

Endangered Peoples of Latin America

Otavalo WWW Site
<http://otavalo.com.ec/>

The people of Otavalo maintain their own WWW site in English and in Spanish. This site contains information on local tourist attractions, locally owned tourist businesses including hotels, and locally produced textiles.

Organizations

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador
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Chapter 13

The Quechua of the Peruvian Andes

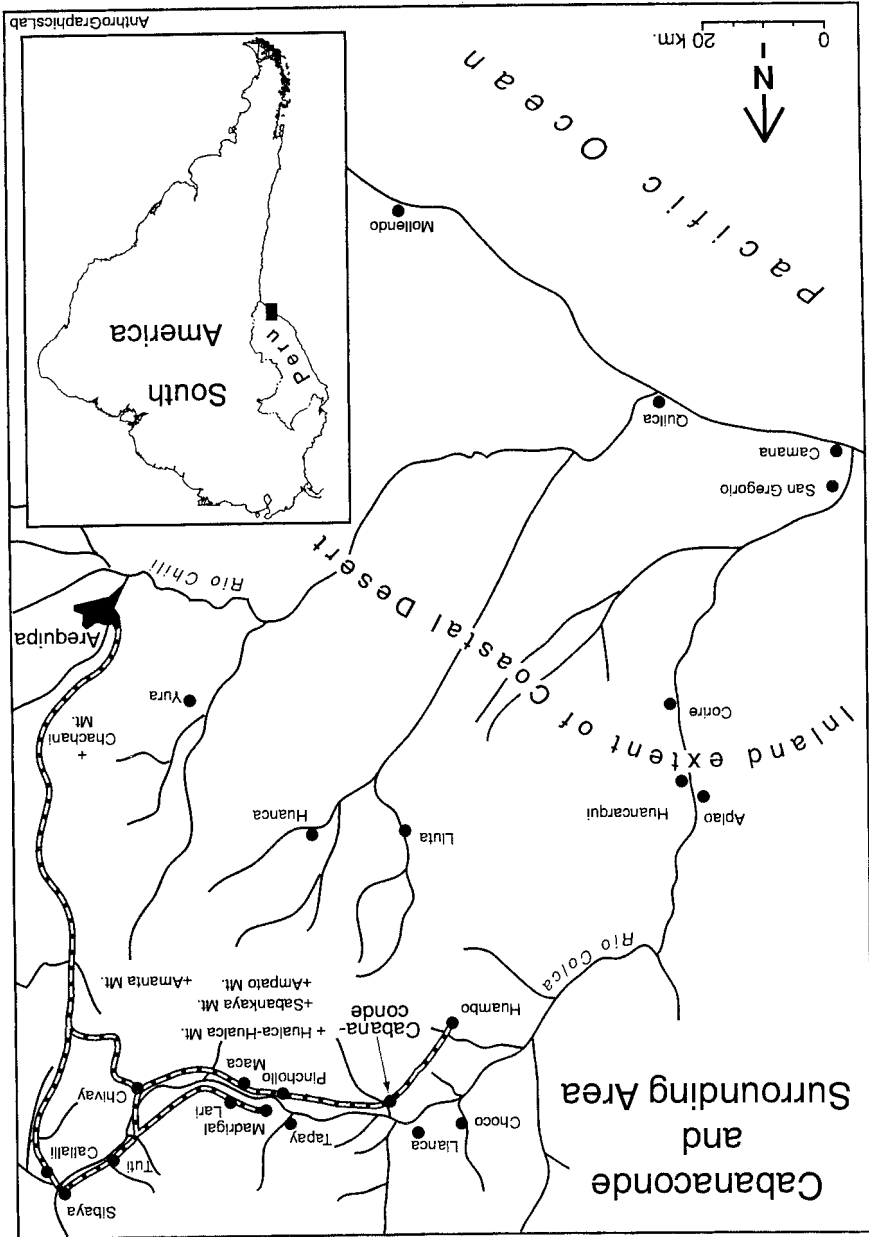
Paul H. Gelles

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The central Andean highlands cover the better part of the largest mountain chain in the world and are home to the greatest concentration of indigenous peoples in the Americas. They live at over 10,000 feet above sea level (f.a.s.l.), in thousands of hamlets, towns, and cities spread over a rugged and vertical terrain. Found in warm fertile valleys, on steep mountainsides, and on frigid high plains, indigenous peasant communities control vast territories in the highlands of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The millions of indigenous Quechua and Aymara people who live in these communities are tied to and affected by national and international political and economic forces. At the same time, members of this cultural majority have beliefs and rituals that are locally generated and distinctly Andean, providing important meaning and identity for their lives. Ignored and denigrated by dominant sectors in the Andean nations, these beliefs and ritual practices have long been a fundamental component of local systems of agricultural and pastoral production, of those activities that sustain life.

Together with terracing, llama and alpaca herding, and the vertical control of different ecological niches, irrigation facilitated the development of pre-Columbian states in the rugged environment of the central Andes. With the great population decline that followed the Spanish invasion, close to three-quarters of the pre-Columbian terraces were abandoned, as were thousands of irrigation canals. Over the last century, the rapidly growing highland population has put pressure on communal resources, engendering attempts to recover some of the lost infrastructure.



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Two women from Cabanaconde talking and drinking *chicha* (corn beer). Courtesy of Paul H. Gelles.

The Setting

Cabanaconde, a large and growing community of some 5,000 bilingual Quechua and Spanish speakers, is flanked by mountains on one side and a precipitously deep canyon on the other. While the community sits at 10,500 f.a.s.l., nearby Mount Hualca-Hualca is almost twice that high (19,500 f.a.s.l.). Here snow melt courses down the Hualca-Hualca River to the community and is the lifeblood—or as the Cabaneños put it, the “mother’s milk”—of the agricultural fields and the townspeople. All agriculture in Cabanaconde is irrigated, and because it produces a valuable commodity for subsistence and trade—Cabanita maize, which is famous throughout the southern Andes for its taste and quality—irrigated land is the central source of wealth in the community.

The productive potential of the Hualca-Hualca River basin and Cabanaconde’s warm valley led at least two pan-Andean empires, the Wari and the Inka, to colonize this hydrological system and the people dependent

upon it. During Inka rule, Cabanaconde's warm valley was the seat of the Cavana nation and was more important politically and in productive terms than neighboring valleys. There was considerable intensification of agriculture in Cabanaconde during Inka rule, and the rich volcanic soils and temperate climate that favored the production of maize allowed for greater population density. Here, and in hundreds of other areas, the Inka state invested in its periphery, expanding pre-Inka canals and terraces.

While the Cavana polity continued to be extremely productive during the early Spanish colonial period, this was not to last. Diseases, civil wars, and exploitation in the nearby mines of Caylloma led to a population decline, which reached an extreme in the late seventeenth century. From the 1570s until the 1680s, the number of "Indian" tribute payers decreased from 1,345 to 256, over 80%. With the population loss, the Cavanans were unable to maintain their pre-Columbian infrastructure, and dozens of canals and thousands of hectares of terraced fields were abandoned. Since the early part of this century, the Cabaneños have attempted to rehabilitate part of this lost infrastructure.

These attempts are part of other significant changes taking place in Cabanaconde. A road linking Cabanaconde to the city of Arequipa was built in 1965, which increased migration and participation in the market economy. Improved transportation changed community life dramatically. Today buses arrive and leave daily, and there is a continual flow of people, goods, and ideas between the community and its colonies in Arequipa, Lima, and Washington, D.C., which in 1987 had populations of approximately 1,000, 3,000, and 150, respectively. The associations formed by migrants in these cities are a part of community life; they channel resources back to the community and intervene decisively in communal conflicts with outside interests.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Cabanaconde is an economically differentiated community, and people there have conflicting interests. Different types of assets—land and cattle holdings, social networks, god parenthood (*compadrazgo*) ties, migrant remittances, access to market opportunities—vary greatly from family to family. Competition, factionalism, and envy, therefore, are part of community life and play an important role in the political processes of the community.

Lying on the arid west slope of the Andes, the territory of Cabanaconde is environmentally diverse and supports an extraordinary amount of wildlife; however, there is little hunting or fishing. Instead, Cabaneños depend on domesticated plants and animals. Cabanaconde has production zones ranging from 6,500 to 14,500 f.a.s.l., reaching from tropical orchards deep in Colca Canyon to high pastures, where alpaca, llama, sheep, and cattle herds are kept. The bulk of agricultural production takes place in the fields

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surrounding the town, between approximately 9,500 and 10,800 f.a.s.l., where Cabanita maize, famous for its taste and quality, is grown.

All agriculture in Cabanaconde is irrigated, and about three quarters of the 1,200 hectares (2,964 acres) of irrigated lands in the main fields is dedicated to maize. The Hualca-Hualca River picks up water from supplementary sources—since 1983 this includes the Majes Canal—as it winds its way down from the snow melt of looming Mount Hualca-Hualca. Annual rainfall is extremely variable, and periodic drought occurs in this area of the Andes.

Irrigation water in Cabanaconde and throughout most of the Andes is a type of common pool resource—understood to be a type of property relationship in which a particular resource (in this case water) is controlled by an identifiable community of interdependent users. This property management system usually excludes outsiders, and members of the local community regulate use. In the case of Cabanaconde, the access of *comuneros* to irrigation water is managed and controlled by a village-wide water users' association called the irrigators' commission.

Social and Political Organization

The official political structure of Cabanaconde, like many highland communities in Peru, consists of the municipal council (*concejo municipal*), the governor (*gobernador*), the Peasant Community (*Comunidad Campesina*), and an irrigators' commission (*comisión de regantes*). Today, while these different political institutions often cooperate on projects of mutual interest, they also compete over local resources, personal loyalties, and funds from government and nongovernmental organizations.

The most respected and democratic institution in communal life is the Peasant Community, which can legally act as a corporate person to defend communal interests from internal or external threats. Individuals are inscribed as community members (*comuneros*) of the Peasant Community. In return for attending communal assemblies and carrying out communal work service, the (*comunero*) gains access to the common pool resources of the community. These common pool resources, which are managed by long-standing rules within the community, include irrigation water, grazing lands, medicinal herbs, and firewood. Other benefits, such as fiesta celebrations sponsored by the community, are also enjoyed by the *comunero*.

Religion and World View

During pre-Columbian times, and throughout the Spanish colonial period, Andean peoples and polities throughout the Central Andes traced their origins to sacred features of the landscape, such as mountains, lakes, and springs, which also often happened to be a source of irrigation water.

This peculiarly Andean definition of ethnicity continues to find expression in contemporary highland communities. As providers of fertility and life as well as of disease, death, and destruction, mountains and other features of the sacred landscape, as well as Catholic saints, serve as protector spirits and emblems of local identity. The ritual offerings, libations, and religious celebrations that are directed toward these deities are key features of social life, ethnic identity, and agricultural production.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Population Growth, Water Politics, and the Peruvian State

For the people of Cabanaconde and millions of other indigenous people in the Andes, water is life. A key element of production, water is also a source of great meaning and conflict. By exploring the Majes conflict and the Cabaneños' response to it, we gain insight into how state policies and other political forces condition Cabanaconde's relationship with its resources, and how Cabanaconde resists and, in turn, conditions these outside forces.

The population of Cabanaconde began to recover in the mid-nineteenth century and has more than doubled over the last century. As of 1987, there were at least 600 households and some 4,000 people in the community. This demographic expansion and the rampant partitioning of land holdings have been factors in permanent out-migration. Most important for our purposes here, since at least the turn of the century, the Cabaneños have attempted to expand their irrigation commons and rehabilitate some of their lost agricultural land. The Peruvian state, however, has lent little support to these efforts and, in some cases, has worked against the attempts of the Cabaneños and other highland peoples to expand the productive potential of their agricultural infrastructure because of negative stereotypes regarding highland peoples and the coastal-oriented nature of development that predominate in Peru. As in many other culturally diverse societies, state officials in Peru ignore the potential of indigenous technologies and models of resource management. This is because of the alleged superiority of "modern" Western cultural forms and organization and because the power holders and dominant cultures of these nations regard indigenous peoples as racially and culturally inferior.

Today, popular and national cultural discourses present the Spanish-speaking, white, Western-oriented minority as the model of modernity, the embodiment of legitimate national culture, and the key to Peru's future. Many of the negative stereotypes directed toward *indios*—that they are backward and unproductive—are extended to the mountains and their systems of production. These prejudices of a dominant cultural minority are

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diffused throughout Peru's educational system, civic ceremonies, language policies, and even its water policies.

The Majes Conflict

In March 1983, every night after the town was well asleep, the “eleven heroes”—as the people of Cabanaconde would later call them—met in the parched, water-starved fields outside of town and, picks and drills in hand, ascended the almost dry riverbed of the Hualca-Hualca River basin. When they arrived at Tomanta, the moonlit cement casing of the Majes Canal stood out against the clear Andean night like a wide, white sidewalk—or a white scar, a permanent reminder of the abuses and broken promises incurred by the Peruvian state and the billion-dollar Majes project as they gouged through communal territory to channel highland water to the coast. For over five years, the project had usurped resources and wreaked havoc on the social and ecological fabric of the community. And now, as the worst drought in thirty years devastated the community, Majes still refused to provide the promised water. While the remaining plants withered under the intense Andean sun, a virtual river was streaming by the community, sequestered in a thick cement canal and destined for cash crops on the coast. Enough was enough. Two stood guard, while the others, laughing and cursing, went at it again. They had already been at it several nights and were making little progress. It would have to be dynamite, they decided. Dynamite it was, and the rest is history.

As illustrated in this vignette, an important source of water, as well as of contention, is the large canal built by the Majes Consortium through communal territory in the late 1970s. Many of the maps elaborated by this billion-dollar development project neglect to show that in the path of the proposed canal lay more than a dozen communities and tens of thousands of peasants. This is symptomatic of the low regard that Majes and the Peruvian state had for the inhabitants of Cabanaconde and the Colca Valley.

The role of the state is clear. As early as May 6, 1967, the Ministry of Development and Public Works by way of Arequipa Board of Rehabilitation and Development stated that Cabanaconde “is being considered for three thousand hectares” to favor the irrigators there. Various other government agencies convened later that year. An entry in the Books of the Irrigation Commission states that the community is “[s]oliciting some three thousand liters [per second] of water from the Main Canal of Majes to be used in the irrigation of the fields now being cultivated and in the expansion of new lands.” This same entry, dated November 10, 1966, reports that the Ministry of Development and Public Works, the Board of Rehabilitation of Arequipa, the National Fund for Economic Development, and the national office of the Agrarian Reform were going to study the springs of

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the entire area so that if the Majes Canal affected the town's resources, Cabanaconde could claim damages.

Promises were made but not kept. Until 1983 there were no benefits from the project, except an improved road and poorly paid, temporary, and dangerous jobs. The project instead brought widespread social and environmental problems to Cabanaconde. Workers from the project, who came from other highland regions and from the coast and who were housed in a large encampment near the community, abused the local townsfolk. Many workers would not buy products from women accompanied by their husbands, and there were incidents of prostitution and rape. Although the improved road provided the means for greater mobility up and down the valley and to and from Arequipa, the community was also subjected to economic, cultural, and political forces it had never experienced before. More money began to flow into the community, and stores were opened to meet the needs of a boom economy. Many Cabaneños lamented the changes and abuses the project brought. "Everything became money, money, money," as one man put it.¹

Harder to express are the profound social and cultural changes the community experienced, including the way in which local society defined itself. "Criollo" views, disparaging toward the "simple" and "backwards ways" of the Cabaneños, became widely felt. As the president of the community ruefully expressed, "The workers would come rolling into town. They were from all over—Cuzco, Puno, the coast—all over. They'd come in, saying in Spanish, 'son of a bitch, it's hot! Hey, give me a case of beer,' and pretty soon all the boys in town were walking around, saying 'hey, son of a bitch'."² Less respect for elders, an increase in vandalism, and the breaking down of social mores were other consequences of Majes. The local culture was denigrated, and several rituals, such as *torotinkay* during the sowing, disappeared. The workers even instituted a new saint in the community.

The social impact was paralleled by an ecological one. Economic dependence on income generated by the project increased as the community's resources suffered. During a series of drought years, when the volume of river water was already extremely low, the project used large amounts of water from the river for its operations without the community's permission. Project roads damaged canals and terraces. The underground tunnels built by the project also affected subterranean sources of water. Because of the drought and Majes' insensitive use of the little river water that remained, the cultivated area decreased dramatically. A petition sent by the Irrigators' Commission to the Ministry of Agriculture on March 18, 1980, states that the devastation caused by "the last droughts" and the water supplied to Majes had "horrific results . . . our agricultural fields have diminished by 80 percent."

Abuses were tolerated, in part, because of the irrigation water and ex-

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tended land base the community expected to receive from the project. Throughout 1979 and 1980, the Majes project continued to promise enough water, 1,000 liters (227 gallons) per second, to recover thousands of acres for the community. But it soon became clear to the community that Majes had no intention of carrying through with their promises. The first hint of resistance became manifest.

In March 1980, a commission made up of the president of the Peasant Community, the president of the Irrigators' Commission, and the mayor of Cabanaconde again requested water from the Majes Canal in the form of an offtake valve and assistance in improving the waters of Hualca-Hualca. They stated that "the District of Cabanaconde has been forgotten" and that "everyone will unite as one man" if their demands went unanswered. Later that month, a memorandum was sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and to the president of the republic, "clamoring for one thing alone, which is water." In August 1981, a letter to the Majes Consortium stated that, if it did not recompense the community for its water, "the agriculturists will stop the services they provide . . . the higher authorities are fooling us." More ominously, "the townspeople will take action to the last consequences if an immediate solution is not arrived at." Yet no water was allotted to the community. In September 1981, the books of the Irrigators' Commission refer to the drought of that year as "a frightful crisis."

In January 1983, the mayor of Cabanaconde sent another letter, this time to Fernando Belaúnde Terry, the president of Peru:

Cabanaconde is the most populated district of the Province of Caylloma . . . The ratio of man/land is unequal, and all community members are small holders, a situation which generates the massive exodus of the population . . . the current capacity is only 80 liters per second, insufficient for 1200 hectares. We irrigate every 100 days . . . This generates poverty, undernourishment, infant and adult mortality, alcoholism and illiteracy . . . Cabanaconde has been forgotten by the Majes Macon Project, whose canal crosses our jurisdiction and which has destroyed our natural resources, such as land and water, making even graver the already precarious economic situation of this community.

The letter asked President Belaúnde to authorize an offtake valve from the Majes Canal; money, machines, and technical assistance to reconstruct another canal; the construction of a cement reservoir in Joyas; and the settlement of families in the Pampas de Majes (the target area of the project). The communal authorities and several hundred people signed the letter. Their numerous cries for help—the many delegations and various pleas the community had sent to the consortium and to the regional authorities, the letters written, and the articles printed in Arequipa newspapers—fell on deaf ears. With the remaining plants withering in the most serious drought in thirty years, the possibility of famine became real.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Peasant Resistance

In March 1983, the Cabaneños opened the Majes Canal in a classic case of peasant resistance. The now renowned “eleven heroes” of the community, some of whom were authorities of the Irrigators’ Commission and the Peasant Community, went nightly to drill a hole in the thick cement casing of the canal where it crossed the Hualca-Hualca River. Finally, they used dynamite. People in town soon began to comment that the volume of the Hualca-Hualca River had increased, and an assembly was hurriedly called. The entire community swung into action.

A permanent guard kept watch in the church tower, ready to sound the bell should the police arrive. A trumpeter was stationed at the entrance of the town, and barricades were built on the road. The eleven heroes left the community or slept in the orchards deep in the Colca Valley. A committee made up of local authorities traveled to Arequipa to report what had been done, and they were immediately arrested. But the Cabaneños had skillfully published several news clips in Arequipa newspapers in the weeks before they opened the canal, decrying the drought, the way Majes had lied to the community, and the lack of government support. This was done to assert the Cabaneños’ rights to the water and to ensure that their actions would not be confused with those of terrorists.

A police contingent was sent to the community, but when they arrived the entire community confronted them. The community claimed collective responsibility for the opening of the canal and demanded that the water not be withdrawn. Several large machines of the consortium were taken hostage. A few days later, the subprefect of the region, the mayor of Cabanaconde, and other important authorities met in the plaza of the community. The subprefect agreed to provide a legal transfer of the waters within the briefest time possible, promising that there would “be no repression against the townspeople.” But when he asked that the machines be returned to the Majes Consortium, his request was denied by the community. The mayor demanded that 68 gallons per second be given to the community. After he agreed to the conditions set by the community, the subprefect received an ovation. People still talk excitedly and proudly about how the entire community took responsibility, and how they were ready to fight to the end for the water.

The communal authorities, with help from the migrant associations of the community in Arequipa and Lima, continued to negotiate with the regional authorities, explaining that they were not terrorists, but were dying of hunger. Fearing further conflicts, Autodema (Autoridad Autónoma de Majes)—the administrative unit of the Majes Canal—finally agreed to cede 150 liters (34 gallons) per second to Cabanaconde. The Cabaneños also

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demanding that the state's water tariff, instituted several years earlier, be rescinded.

In August 1983, the hole was patched and a valve was installed at Tomanta. The next day the entire community went to Tomanta in a procession, with a band at its head. An entry in the Books of the Irrigation Commission reads, "After the blessing by the priest the two valves were opened in the presence of the president of the Irrigators Commission and the townspeople." With this victory, the Cabaneños became heroes in the region. The other communities of the left bank of the Colca Valley threatened to take similar action "or call in the boys from Cabanaconde," as several Cabaneños proudly said.³ These other communities were soon given access to the "Majes water." When the abandoned fields were later recovered with the "Majes water," the eleven heroes were given choice plots.

Land Recovery

Once the flow of 150 liters (34 gallons) per second from the Majes Canal was secured in 1983, attempts to increase the cultivated area began almost immediately. Canals in the lower part of the agricultural lands were extended through communal labor, and abandoned terraced fields in the area of Auquilote were distributed through lottery. To decide which families could participate in the lottery for the 36 hectares (89 acres) being recovered, the Peasant Community held a communal assembly. As the name of each community member was read, the public decided who met the established criteria: full-time and responsible farmer, household head with dependent children, permanent resident in the community, and small landholder. More than 200 people qualified. The thirty-six lottery winners quickly organized into an association, elected a president, and began to rehabilitate their lands through cooperative labor. Many of the newly recovered fields yielded good harvests in 1988 and 1989.

Auquilote was the first step in recovering more than 1,000 hectares (2,470 acres) of agricultural land in Cabanaconde, this plan was predicated on an increase of water from the Majes Canal. The Majes Project Administration promised an additional 350 liters (80 gallons) per second if the community could provide a suitable plan for the use of the water. Release of the water was also contingent on the community's signing away their rights to Huataq, an important spring in the high pastures of Cabanaconde's communal territory. The reason for Majes' generosity comes to light: by releasing 350 liters (80 gallons) per second to Cabanaconde, they retain the 600 liters (136 gallons) per second of Huataq for the Majes Canal and for the powerful Arequipeños who currently use the Huataq water.

Nevertheless, since 1990, Cabanaconde's efforts to recover its lost infrastructure and agricultural have been extremely successful. As of 1997, the community had recovered more than 800 hectares (1,976 acres); another

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740 will be brought into production in the next few years. By the year 2000, the community will have essentially doubled its agricultural lands. After a century of efforts, the Cabaneños' courageous actions and astute maneuvering have provided them with a relatively large and growing land base.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The colonial categories and racist attitudes that were instituted in Peru during the colonial period have survived with incredible virulence. National power holders who determine the state's policy toward Andean communities live an urban criollo lifestyle in coastal cities with Western life ways, and they generally disdain *indios*. The Majes Canal and development policies that favor the coast are thus part of a larger cultural politics in Peru, one in which the human and natural resources of the highlands are viewed as inferior to the criollo coast—this marginalizes Andean communities in many subtle and not so subtle ways.

Today, because of the Cabaneños' resolve, the state-sponsored Majes Canal is used not only for capital-intensive agriculture on the coast but also to recover part of Cabanaconde's lost infrastructure. By the way Cabanaconde challenged the Majes project, it recovered abandoned terrace fields and democratically divided these for the greater prosperity of the townspeople—a dramatic case study of open resistance to Peru's coastally oriented political economy of development.

The understanding of water, ethnicity, and power developed here can be applied to the politics of community, irrigation, and development in other culturally plural countries. This is especially the case in the Andean nations of Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as in Guatemala and Mexico in Mesoamerica. In these countries, pre-Columbian empires flourished and established extensive farming systems and infrastructure (e.g., raised fields, terraces, and irrigation works). Today, indigenous peoples continue to constitute a large percentage, often the majority, of the population.

Questions

1. How is development conditioned by the particular cultural politics and ethnic conflicts in nation-states?
2. How do development organizations and the bureaucracies of these states interface with indigenous communities?
3. What is the nature of this interface, both politically and culturally?
4. What form, if any, does local resistance take in response to state intervention in resource use?
5. How do indigenous technologies, and the cultural rationales that underwrite them, fit into this resistance?

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NOTES

Data and information included in this chapter come from Paul Gelles, *Water and Power in Highland Peru: The Cultural Politics of Irrigation and Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). Quotations come from various administrative *Books of the Irrigation Commission, Cabanaconde*.

1. Author's personal communication.
2. Ibid.
3. Author's personal communication/field notes.

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WWW Sites

- Cultural Survival
<http://www.cs.org>
- Cultures of the Andes
<http://www.andes.org>
- Native Web
<http://www.nativeweb.org>

Glossary

Barrio. Neighborhood.

Calpulli. Territorially based kin group.

Campesino. Peasant.

Caudillo. Political strong man.

Class. Social category of modern societies used to rank the population into distinct levels based on wealth.

Compadrazgo (godparenthood). System of crosscutting upper and lower classes through a ritual kinship relationship.

Creole. Person of mixed European and African ancestry.

Curanderoa. A man or woman who cures diseases.

Degradation. Human-induced reduction in the quality of the environment or natural resources, such as water, air, and soil, that reduces the capacity of these resources to support life.

Ejido. Term used mainly in Mexico for a collective landholding, usually owned by indigenous or peasant communities.

Ethnicity. Regional or national identity based on heritage, religion, or language.

Gender. Way members of the two sexes are perceived and expected to behave.

Globalization. Integration of the world economies through various means.

Haciendas. Large Latin American landed estates often but not always used for the cultivation or raising of commercial agricultural commodities, such as cattle, for local markets.

Glossary

Indigenous. Human population originating in, or native to, an area or environment.

Ladino (similar to mestizo). Spanish term used throughout Central America to refer to a person of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry.

Latin America. Includes the countries of Mexico, Central America, and South America.

Maquiladores. Factories often located in border zones or free trade zones.

Mestizo (similar to ladino). Originally referred to a person of mixed blood, usually of Indian and Spanish heritage.

Milpa. A cornfield.

Plantations. Similar to haciendas but organized for the production of export commodities such as sugar and cotton for global markets.

Quinceañeras. Young girl's 15th birthday party.

Shaman. Religious practitioner and healer.

Swidden (similar to slash-and-burn agriculture). System of shifting agriculture dependent on cutting down and burning a small patch of forest, planting crops for a few years, and then allowing the plot to lie fallow (unused) for a number of years until the forest has grown back.

Syncretism. Fusion of elements of two or more distinct cultural traditions, such as religions, belief systems, philosophies, or music.

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