
Peoples' traditional knowledge embedded in their territory versus “traditional knowledge” in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity

Interview with Blanca Chancoso, Kichwa member of the Otavalo peoples and vicepresident of ECUARUNARI – the Kichwa Confederation of Ecuador.

In order to advance the so-called new economy with nature, governments that are parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity created the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Promoters of the initiative want to reinterpret and capture biodiversity for markets and industry. The Platform also seems to be tempting some indigenous groups to embrace this concept of biodiversity, with its promise of recognizing “traditional knowledge”—even though this recognition does not fully reflect indigenous peoples' ties with their territories. What do you think of this tendency — gathering traditional knowledge to benefit markets and industries? Is it compatible with indigenous peoples' worldviews and traditional systems of knowledge?

Regarding traditional knowledge, biodiversity and our vision as indigenous peoples, it is first important to clarify that we do not accept that these are “resources.” All that is nature is not a resource; these are living beings, they are animals, they are plants, what people call fauna and flora. All of these are “beings of nature,” and this is how we share and believe it is.

We have found that all beings — animals, rocks, forests — have a duality in their effects, male and female. Even in the case of waterfalls, there is a male waterfall and a female waterfall, feminine and masculine; the same is true for rivers and rocks, they have that same duality.

And that is how we cure a person's health. If a woman is ill and she needs urine therapy, it would have to be with a man's urine, because that will produce balanced healing. If a man were ill, healing would be done with female urine. This is how it works, whether for a poultice (herb- and plant-based preparation placed on external parts of the body) or for any other treatment; it is done in this way. Likewise, in this vision of the masculine and feminine, one seeks balance between warm and cold. Warm does not mean that something has to be hot in terms of temperature, it is called warm if it has a specific component. So if you were sick with a warm temperature, and were given a plant you didn't know about but that is warming, it would complicate the situation. Then you must balance it with another plant that we call cool, in order to bring the body into balance.

This is why our contact with nature is always on these terms, in order to discover and to gain knowledge. It is not enough to say, for example, that llantén (a medicinal plant) “is good for this.” I must also have knowledge to first balance the internal and external body temperature. The same is true for plants in nature. This is our vision, and this is how we live. Wood or animals are other beings that complement people. That is why we say that humans are nature, humans are part of biodiversity, like it or not. If you, as a human, speak of biodiversity in the third person—as if it were something not a part of you—then who is it that feels it is speaking? Who are you talking about when you say biodiversity? You talk about plants and about animals, but where are the humans? So what is the importance of biodiversity for a human being who does not feel part of it? How will he or she defend

it?

But in indigenous peoples' worldview, I too am nature. I am made of flesh and bones and am human, but I am of nature and I live with her. I need a plant just as much as it needs me; and the river needs me and I need the river. Nature and I mutually complement each other. This is the case with all beings. Take a rock for example: if you see yourself as human, and nature as separate, you will see it as a rock without significance, except perhaps for its use in building, in construction or for decoration. So it does not have much value, or perhaps you give it economic value because it is used in construction. You place an economic value on it, only if it is good “for” something. In contrast, indigenous peoples do not see a rock for its economic value but for the value of life, because the rock has life. There is the masculine and the feminine rock. Depending on how we want to use the rock, we seek one out that complements us depending on that specific use; that is, I need the rock to grind something, but the rock can also help me with my health—so I will use a male rock or a female rock depending on what I need and on what I need it for. There are also energetic rocks that can help or protect me. Just by rubbing myself with it, the rock can take away bad energy that I have picked up somewhere, or it can protect me from bad energy. So it is not economic value, but the value of connection between humans and this being of nature. Likewise, there are trees that can give me energy. Not only can I eat or drink of it [to cure me], the tree itself is also energetic; it is a sacred tree because it is energetic, and this is not turned into economic value. It is simply sacred, and it is like my protection.

That is the difference and the importance for us. When we hear a yachay [spiritual master or shaman] from the rainforest or mountain say that a certain medicinal plant was once very good but no longer works, why is that? If that place is contaminated, the plant will also be contaminated and cannot be used in the way it was before, and in the way it is needed. The same is true for food. Food—where does it come from? From mother earth. If mother earth is clean, the food is healthy, but if mother earth is sick, the food will also be sick. When it is shared with humans, we will get sick. We will be very weak and will not have defenses, and I may think that the food is no longer good for me, or it is harming me. But it is not that the kind of food harms me; rather, it depends on where it comes from and how I take care of that place. Therefore it is important to protect and heal the earth in order to maintain biodiversity, because the earth is where all the other beings—plants, mountains, water—are born. It is in mother earth. If the earth is not healthy, the rivers and the plants will no longer help me, and then where will I go as a human being? I will have to leave that place. Or similarly, when we go to cities, we do not find that place and so our lives change, our health changes, our food changes; because I no longer have the sustenance of that place. I change that place for a room—perhaps a dark one, or any kind—and I have no place to grow food, to feel that sharing with mother earth, with nature, with everything that is biodiversity.

So we believe that biodiversity should not be seen as a “resource,” because by calling it so, one already places an economic value on it; and according to that value it is classified and easy to sell. Then comes the destruction. But if we were to talk about a being, I believe this being would not be for sale. And so it is worrisome that successive governments have labelled that which they are trying to extract as a resource, granting concessions and selling without taking into account that they are affecting human beings too—those who live there, and also those who are directly or indirectly affected elsewhere. Because the land provides food for the whole world. Food and other products reach humans wherever they live through export and import. When that food reaches humans, if it is good it will do me good, and if not it will affect me in a negative way. But what does it matter to the government if it does me good or harm? What matters to the government is that it has already sold the resource. It does not care about humans; and even less so in our case. If they sell our sacred places it is like desecrating them, they would be desecrating the most important part of our

communities, and then we will not even have a place to go. In the Eurocentric vision of a non-indigenous person or mestizo, the only sacred space is a church, a temple with images. That is a sacred place. But for us, even though we also share those spaces in some ways, a sacred space is there in nature, it is there in the mountain.

The State and companies promise to share benefits. What is your opinion of and experience with such promises to “share benefits?”

They are not sharing benefits; they have never shared any benefits. If there has been sharing, it would be sharing in the sense of what the bible says that Judas did; that he sold their master. Judas would be sharing with another Judas, but in exchange for what? To leave me without a place to live? So first of all he would not engage that deal. But it's possible that communities could be tempted by this “sharing.” But what are they sharing? So far they have taken away the oil and they have not shared. They are taking over places for mining, and the country is in more debt, yet villages are more neglected.

The hospitals they mention as part of improvement projects are not in indigenous communities. They are not in remote areas, but in the city. And what's more, even if I make the effort to go to the city, there is a new program where you no longer go to the hospital but request an appointment by phone. Even patients with emergencies have to request an appointment. If they manage to answer the phone and you request an appointment, when they respond, they will give you an appointment one or two months later. It is not immediate to human need, but rather based on the way they plan. So even there, we can say that there is no sharing. We can see this is not even the case with the so-called “improvements in the healthcare system” that the government has talked up so much. We do not have access to those improvements because they have put in place a system with obstacles for us.

In education what can we share? They have closed community schools, and where have they placed the MIES buildings (Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion)? They are not in the communities that need them. They are far away from where people live and they isolate students from their families. They take them away from a family situation of closeness, and especially place small children at risk. In many of our communities that are close to towns, people often prefer to send their children to schools there, but not the youngest ones. They send children who are already in the third grade or so—eight- or nine-year-olds—because they can take care of themselves better. But it is dangerous for a five- or six-year-old; there is no school transportation to pick them up from the community and take them to the MIES center. The closest one is an hour away, by foot. But in fluvial areas like the Amazon, in order to get to the riverbank, how many hours do they have to walk? And once they reach the riverbank it's another three or four hours by canoe to get to the MIES center; and that puts children at risk. And the more time children spend traveling to their schools and back, the less time they spend in communities; so they have less time for learning and education processes in the community itself. So what do we gain when we say that from now on we will share in education, in health or to develop some knowledge initiative that a community can promote? This has not happened at all. They have harmed us. At least it does not feel like sharing.

Another way they say they have shared is through the Socio Bosque program. You become a partner by providing your land, and the government or REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) puts up the money. But you are practically mortgaging your land for 10 or 20 years, so that you can't touch it during that time. But who takes the profit when the trees are cut? The government takes 70% and I get 30% for having taken care of it, and on my own land! That is not sharing. What's more, if some external situation out of my control occurs, like rain or thunder, or someone burned down the forest, or let's say it “accidentally burned down,” it is not that I did not

take care of it. But that is how the government sees it and it is one more reason to extend the agreement. Apparently, they write off the investment Socio Bosque makes under the following condition: “we forgive you and we will not take legal action, but you have to sign another agreement for 20 more years for the land.” And thus they continue to give you money for 20 more years. Between the previous 20 and the 20 now, they are controlling the land for 40 years. So with that system, and the experience we have been through, their “sharing” forces me to give up the land to them and leave it behind. People should give this a lot of thought, and I would even say this to my own brothers and sisters, members in the communities and indigenous peoples. One must think in order not to fall into this temptation. Because I can accept a million dollars today, thinking that I need it now perhaps because of an illness or a personal debt. I take the million dollars and give them the land. But the money disappears quickly, and when the million dollars run out and I return to my land, I have nowhere to live or even shelter myself. But on the other hand, if I make a little more effort, I will not have a million dollars. But the land will always provide for me, and I will be able to share with my children and with my children's children forever. But I cannot do that with money. I will use all my money today, and I will not even have anything to give to my children, much less to my great-grandchildren. Absolutely nothing is left.

These are the concerns and reflections that I can share with everyone. I believe there is still much to talk about; to present this way of seeing biodiversity as nature and not as a thing or an external resource. As humans we are part of that biodiversity, part of that nature. So I am also affected because I am inside it. If only we would see it this way, we could feel it, and we would value nature in another way.