Ecuador: The Huaorani People of the Amazonia, self-isolation and forced contact

Huaorani culture and society is shaped by their will to self-isolation. Very little is known about their past, except that they have for centuries constituted nomadic and autarkic enclaves fiercely refusing contact, trade and exchange with their powerful neighbours, be they indigenous or white-mestizo colonists. Ever since their tragic encounter with North American missionaries in 1956, the Huaorani have held a special place in journalistic and popular imagination as "Ecuador's last savages". Despite the "civilizing" efforts of missionaries, they have largely retained their distinctive way of understanding the world. Relations with outsiders, seen as murderous enemies, are fraught with hostility and fear; there seems to be little space for communication and exchange, other than complete avoidance or the threat to 'spear-kill'.

For the last sixty years, Huaorani history has unfolded in response to oil development, although it is only recently (in 1994) that oil has been commercially extracted from their land. In 1969, a decade after having "pacified" the Huaorani, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) received government authorisation to create a protection zone around its mission. The 'Protectorate' (66,570 hectares, or 169,088 acres) represented one tenth of the traditional territory. By the early 1980s, five-sixth of the population had been called to live in the Protectorate. On April 1990, the Huaorani were granted the largest indigenous territory in Ecuador (679,130 hectares, or 1,098,000 acres). It is contiguous with the Yasuní National Park (982,300 hectares, or 2,495,000 acres), and includes the former Protectorate. The population (around 1,700) is now distributed in thirty or so semi-permanent settlements organised around a primary school, except for one, or possibly two, small groups that cling to autarky, and hide in the remote forested areas of the Pastaza province, along the international border separating Peru from Ecuador.

The non-contacted Huaorani, known as the Tagaeri and the Taromenani, comprise between thirty and eighty people. The Tagaeri used to live in the Tiputini region, which became the heart of the southern oil fields in the early 1980s. The Tagaeri decided to separate permanently from the main Huaorani population when the SIL mission caused a major population displacement by actively encouraging the eastern groups to come and live under SIL authority within the Protectorate. Relatives of the Tagaeri who now live in the Protectorate say that the latter’s decision was partly due to intra-tribal feuding (they did not want to live in the territory of their enemies), and partly to their straight refusal to integrate; they did not wish to receive "the benefits" of civilisation. In other words, it was their political decision to live in isolation.

During the next thirty years, many raiding and killing episodes marred the interactions between Tagaeri and outsiders. Famous for their fierceness, the Tagaeri have ‘spear killed’ oil workers, missionaries, and others whom they saw as intruders. Most famously, they killed an Archbishop from the Capuchin Mission and a Colombian nun from the Laurita mission in July 1987. And their people have been wounded and killed as well. In the early 1990s, various informants told me that military helicopters had thrown rockets on Tagaeri longhouses, and that Tagaeri dwellings had been burnt down by company security guards. There was once a plan to exterminate them all. And then the hope, especially amongst missionaries, that they would finally surrender and accept 'pacification'. Oil

exploration in the block where the Archbishop and the nun had been found dead was suspended, and the government promised to grant protection to the non-contacted Huaorani who kept fleeing away from the blocks operated by PetroCanada, Texaco, PetroBras, Shell, and Elf Aquitaine. The implicit policy, though, was to push them further to the south, in the hope that they would cross the border with Peru, and cease to be a national problem.

We now know that there were other indigenous groups refusing contact on the Peruvian side, where oil extraction and colonization has been far more intensive than in Ecuador. They too have gradually come to take refuge in the border area, at the confluence of the Curaray and Tiguino Rivers. The Huaorani mentioned the Taromenani (literally the giant people living at the end of the path) to me several times, but the descriptions of these ‘similar but different’ people were so extraordinary that I assimilated them to the vast category of fantastic beings that are said to people the forest.

These non-contacted groups, whatever their provenance and trajectory, all live like refugees in their own lands, by choice. They no longer prepare clearings, but plant root crops and maize under the canopy to avoid being spotted by helicopters. They cook late at night, so that the smoke rising from their hearths does not give them away. They are on the move at all times, endlessly searching for quieter hunting spots, and better hiding places. According to my Huaorani friends, they hate the noise of machines and engines, and choose to flee to the same places where the monkeys and the peccaries flee.

These self-isolated groups have suffered a great deal because of the loss of their territories, the invasion of oil companies, and the continuous encroachment of poachers, loggers, drug traffickers, tourist companies, and other adventurers. They also fear the 'pacified', ‘Christian’ Huaorani, who dream to ‘civilize’ them. They too have become enemy outsiders. These fears are not unfounded. More than once, I heard young Huaorani men boast that they will attempt to pacify the Tagaeri. “Ingesting rice and sugar like us”, they told me, “the Tagaeri will become wholly tame and gentle, like toddlers”. Some added that this would greatly please ‘the company’ (the term they use to describe the vast and complex consortium of companies, subsidiaries, contractors, and subcontractors that work in partnership with PetroEcuador), which, in return, will behave generously towards them, by offering them all the cash and all the goods they ask for.

Non-contacted groups are not a threat to any one, except to intruders; they only want to be left alone. As I argued some years ago, we need to invent a new human right for all the groups still hiding in the Amazon forest: the right of no-contact.

In continuation, let me illustrate the predicament of these non-contacted groups, and the persecution to which they are subjected, with two stories.

The ultimate modern dream: film the first contact. In the Spring of 1995, I was contacted by a Californian TV company which was developing a new project entitled "The Tagaeri: the Last of the Free People." This series of three programmes proposed to ‘document’ the first contact between the Tagaeri and the 'botanist' Loren Miller (the man who patented the plant from which Northwest Amazon Indians make the hallucinogenic locally known as ayahuasca or yagé). According to the script, the first episode would show how Christian Huaorani contacted their savage brothers, and managed to convince them of the virtues of western civilization, with the help of the army. The second episode would focus on the encounter between the chief Tagae and Loren Miller, the former sharing his knowledge of medicinal plants with the latter. The third part would centre on the western botanist "telling the world of the great possibilities of scientific research and the potentialities of Tagaeri land for ecotourism”. The TV company, which was seeking the support of CNN and the

National Geographic for this project, had to back off in the face of a wave of protests from the indigenous peoples organisations, COICA, and various other indigenous rights organisations. They graciously sent a message expressing their "agreement with the many enlightened individuals who expressed concern and disagreement with our project". They added: "We ask that you respect the right of isolation, of privacy and of non-contact of the Tagaeri population of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The Tagaeri are a community that live with the natural jungle and they made the choice not to integrate the western civilization. Please respect their decision." But the project was too tantalising, and, in the following years, various contacts were attempted by tourist companies and/ or TV crews. For instance, one Belgian tourist guide, a former mercenary in the French Legion, guided 'survival expeditions' in Tagaeri land. A British student expedition managed to provoke a group of non-contacted Indians (possibly Tagaeri). A member of the expedition got speared in the thigh; the whole episode got filmed, and was heroically shown on Channel 4 in 1997.

Christian Huaorani slaughter savage Huaorani. In May 2003, around 15 non-contacted Indians identified by the press as Taromenani were speared to death by nine Huaorani 'warriors'. The army recovered twelve bodies (nine women and three children) from the raided longhouse. A spokesperson for the army declared that: "the patrol will not interfere with the customs or ancestral sanctioning procedures of the Huaorani, the armed forces are very respectful in this sense." Everyone in Ecuador became an expert in ancestral customary law or Huaorani culture, and avidly debated the issue. Why they had done this, what it meant for the nation, what should be done about such fratricide, and so forth. The 'Ecuadorian Network for Legal Anthropology' was formed to analyse the Tagaeri-Taromenani-Huaorani conflict from a legal perspective, and propose a reform of the Ecuadorian judiciary system in a way that would accommodate different legal systems, including Huaorani revenge killing. The President of the tribal organisation (ONHAE) and other Huoarani representatives were eventually asked to comment on the slaughter. They emphasised the increased level of interference from illegal traders and loggers in Huaorani territory. On the 25th of June, the national press reported that ONHAE had decided to forgive the nine warriors, who had been involved in a killing raid for the first time, and had sworn to renounce violence and not seek revenge in case the Taromenani decided to strike back. Young Huaorani would phone me day and night during this stressful period to keep me informed of the developments. I kept asking them whether they (or any one else) had spoken to the warriors, but it seems that no one was interested in knowing what they had to say about the whole affair. Could they explain what had happened? Despite the distance, I could perceive some of the internal and external reasons that had pushed these men to kill. First the Babeiri had been in conflict with the Tagaeri for several decades. The hostilities were rekindled when PetroCanada relocated the former in the traditional territory of the latter, where they were confronted to all the ills of the frontier culture – alcohol, prostitution, dependency on alms, and so forth. Living along the oil road, the Babeiri were constantly solicited by loggers and traders of various sorts. The Babeiri raided the Tagaeri for a wife in 1993, as a result of which they lost a young man, wounded by retaliating Tagaeri. In November 2002, a logger's boat overloaded with illegal timber collided with a Huaorani dug-out canoe. Several Huaorani were killed. All these factors somehow converged in giving the nine men the determination to carry out the raid. It was reported that the 'warriors' comprised the father of a woman killed in the November 2002 accident, and the brother and the brother-in-law of a man killed in the same accident. Without the personal accounts of the warriors themselves, all inference is open to debate. However, it is clear that there is a direct relation between increased extractive activities and the rise of violent conflict between 'pacified' and 'non-contacted' Huaorani. It would be wrong to blame violence simply on tribal vengeance and savagery, as so many Ecuadorian and other commentators have done.

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