

Oil and *Chicha*: Indigenous Movements and Survival in the Ecuadoran Amazon

by Rebecca Reider, MEd 2005

Introduction

Around the world, poor people, including indigenous people, despite being vastly out-matched in resources and power, have often stood in fierce opposition to multinational resource extraction companies and complicit governments (Gedicks 2001; Brysk 2000; Martinez-Alier 2002). How do subsistence-level agrarian people build strong socio-environmental resistance movements? Investigating the formation of a local indigenous movement against oil development in the Ecuadoran Amazon, in this article I focus on a nascent indigenous organization – RECOKA, *La Red de Comunidades Kichwas de la Amazonía* (Network of Kichwa Communities of the Amazon). RECOKA's story is worth studying not only for its presence in the province of Napo, the newest frontier in Ecuador's high-profile petroleum struggles, but as a broader window onto what drives the "environmentalism of the poor," or "the activism of poor women and men threatened by the loss of the environmental resources and services they need for livelihood" (Martinez-Alier 2002: 119).

Understanding the mounting anti-oil movement in Napo requires understanding not just the political and economic context of oil, but the lives of the individual people who make up the movement. As Escobar (1992: 63) argues, movements begin within people's individual

lives; to explain the development of social movements, "theory must start with people's self-understanding, with giving an account of people as agents whose practices are shaped by their self-understanding." In constructing this type of account, I examine how Kichwa people in Napo see the forest, indigenous organizations, and oil companies in relation to their own lives. I argue that such a multi-faceted perspective is a requisite first step for any efforts (on the part of international environmentalists, for example) to build lasting alliances with local people's movements. I further argue that these movements will succeed most strongly when they attend to people's material aspirations and survival concerns.

Oil in Ecuador

Modern Ecuador was built on "black gold." In 1967, the Texaco-Gulf consortium discovered oil in Ecuador's Amazonian rainforest region, known as the "Oriente." The industry took off rapidly thanks to a worldwide upswing in oil markets in the 1970s. Soon, half the federal budget came from oil revenues.

Over time, however, many began to question whether oil actually was helping Ecuador's people economically. During the oil boom, as the government took out high-interest foreign loans, Ecuador's national debt skyrocketed from \$209 million in 1970 to \$12 billion in 1990; meanwhile, national poverty rates grew from 47% in 1975 to 67% in 1995 (Gerlach 2003). Still, under pressure to make debt payments, national administrations continually sought to pump more oil. A new Heavy Crude Pipeline, completed in 2003 with foreign

Rebecca Reider, a native of California, has worked as an environmental educator and writer in the U.S. She has lived and worked with indigenous communities in Guatemala and Ecuador on environment, development, and agriculture projects.

investments, doubled the capacity to export oil out of the Amazon. Searching for oil to fill the new pipe, the Ecuadoran government ventured to open new central Oriente areas to oil drilling – including Napo Province.

Petroleum extraction has already devastated the Oriente's people and environment elsewhere. In the northern Oriente, during the 1970s and 1980s, Texaco operators carelessly spilled oil from ruptured pipelines and disposed of toxic waste products in unlined pits, which seeped into forest soils and regularly overflowed into local rivers (Kimerling 1991). The contamination killed fish, animals, wild plants, and food crops, and caused epidemics of cancer and other diseases (Acción Ecológica 2001). As oil's impacts in Ecuador have become more widely known, opposition has swelled, particularly among the Oriente's eight indigenous groups.

Stemming the Oil Tide: A Case Study

Ecuador's legal resource rights regime virtually guarantees conflicts over oil. Indigenous peoples in many cases possess increasingly secure legal titles to land; but all resources underground, such as petroleum and metals, still belong to the state. Conflicts ensue when the government auctions off these resource rights to oil companies, which then attempt to enter local people's lands to access the underground materials. In this way, the Oriente's resource struggles are literally rooted at the level of the soil.

Napo Province is the newest front in Ecuador's oil wars. The government prepared to auction off rights to two new oil blocks there in 2003. Together, oil blocks 20 and 29 contain more than 80,000 inhabitants, including 536 indigenous communities, most of them Kichwa.

Local and national activists are using both legal tactics and protests to keep the Napo oil blocks unexploited. The concession process is on hold because of a lawsuit claiming that local people have not received proper prior consultation,

a right guaranteed by the 1998 Ecuadoran Constitution and International Labor Organization Convention 169. However, many Napo activists believe that as long as petroleum interests dominate Ecuador's government, oil opponents will have to fight “not in the courts, but in the streets,” in the words of RECOKA coordinator Fredy Alvarado. This belief is not mere idealism; Ecuador's indigenous movement has been a strong political force in recent decades (Selverston-Scher 2001). Mass marches and acts of civil disobedience resulted in land titles for some Amazonian indigenous groups in 1992, and contributed to the forceful removal of the country's president from office in 2000.

The social movement against oil in Napo began from the ground up. In March 2004, more than 2000 people from 120 communities gathered in the city of Tena, the provincial capital, to hear anti-oil testimonies and officially form the *Frente de Resistencia a la Actividad Petrolera* (Front of Resistance to Petroleum Activity). Seventeen local organizations signed a declaration opposing oil activity in their territories. For the organizers, mobilizing a large number of communities was not just an expression of populist spirit, but a tactical necessity; elsewhere, oil companies have broken down resistance by trying to make individual agreements with communities outside of the movement (Sawyer 2004: 9).

The following case study examines the dynamics of movement-building within one of the organizations most actively leading the *Frente de Resistencia* in Napo: the association of 16 indigenous Kichwa communities calling themselves RECOKA. From June-August 2004, I lived in Shiwayacu, one of RECOKA's member communities, and worked as a volunteer in RECOKA's office in Tena. My main work was to survey member communities to provide information to the organization's leaders. RECOKA's mission is not only to resist petroleum development, but more generally to “generate alternative projects for a higher quality of life” (RECOKA

Corn growing in a cleared rainforest plot - here, in the community of Shidayacu - represents one of the few opportunities for rural Kichwa people to earn a cash income. Photograph by Rebecca Reider.



2004). The survey therefore addressed communities' land tenure, transportation access, infrastructure, agricultural systems, schools, health services, interaction with oil and mining companies, and opinions of RECOKA itself. Results for seven communities are described below.¹ Though the survey's immediate goal was to help RECOKA plan future projects, the survey also illuminated more broadly what it means to build a social movement among forest-dwelling indigenous people.

Findings

Survey results, coupled with observations from my time living in Shidayacu, suggest a constellation of issues that oil opponents must consider and deal with: not just petroleum economics, but agricultural economics; not just anti-oil messaging, but local access to cash and education. The RECOKA communities, like other subsistence-level agrarian people, view the forest, their fields, oil companies, and NGOs through a common lens: a strategic eye for their own survival. Some conservationists have noted that indigenous people often view the environment in terms of the goods and services it provides, and may be more likely to conserve species and ecosystem functions which are useful to them (Redford and

Stearman 1993: 253). Utilitarian concerns alone cannot completely explain the Kichwas' complex cultural relationship to the forest. Still, on walks through the forest, people in RECOKA communities, regardless of their age, would point out to me dozens of plants, usually with reference to the plants' usefulness: medicines, fibers, fruits, wood, ceremonial plants, decorative seeds, dyes, and trees which attract game animals or harbor edible grubs. Similarly, RECOKA's people view the growing thicket of non-governmental organizations and companies with an eye toward furthering their own communal survival.

Forest livelihoods

RECOKA's people survive based on small-scale agriculture. Balanced with one foot in the market economy and one outside, they engage in some production for self-consumption and cash cropping of a few major commodities – chiefly cacao and maize. Subsistence cultivation takes place in the *chacra*, a dense and diverse garden planted under shifting cultivation in cleared forest plots. One study found 23 different annual crops and 23 perennial crop trees being grown in chacras in Napo (Perreault 2002: 90). Yuca (manioc), the main staple crop, is eaten steamed, or is mashed and fermented to make a beverage known as *chicha*,



Leaders from several RECOKA communities march through the streets of the national capital, Quito, as part of an international indigenous people's demonstration.

Photograph by Rebecca Reider.

drunk throughout the day.

A single family may possess multiple *chacras*, planted and harvested at different times to assure a continuous year-long supply of yuca. However, all communities report that they are on the edge of subsistence; during occasional food shortages they may eat only yuca and plantains or drink *chicha* in place of meals. Dwindling fish and game populations put further stress on Kichwa diets. This reality is reflected in statements community members commonly made to me: "If we don't do this [grow crops], we're not going to eat anything"; "If we don't work, we will die."

Hungry for cash

Even in plentiful harvest years, most Kichwa families surveyed no longer consider their *chacras* sufficient for survival because subsistence crops do not yield access to one of the most coveted resources: cash. Cash crops hold a highly privileged place in household economies, reflected even in the words of children in RECOKA communities, who readily differentiated cacao trees in the forest understory by telling me, "*Con cacao ganamos plata*" ("With cacao we earn money"). In every community surveyed, people agreed their most serious agricultural problem was a lack of profitable markets for their cash

crops, principally corn and cacao.²

Family incomes depend on the fluctuating prices received from middlemen who buy the crops in nearby towns or at road heads. Difficult physical access to markets exacerbates the problem of low prices. The distance of RECOKA communities to the nearest markets ranges from a short bus ride to a day's journey by bus, canoe, and foot. High bus fares, coupled with horse rental fees, can make the trip to market quite expensive; in farther communities, it may cost as much as \$2 to get a quintal (100 pounds) of corn to market, when that quintal might eventually sell for only \$5-7.³

Oil, organizations, and survival

It is from this vantage point, perched on the edge of subsistence, that Kichwa people eye both oil companies and NGOs. In the community surveys, those who mentioned any possible benefit of oil exploitation mentioned attractive material benefits: jobs and cash. When an oil company constructed a pipeline through the area in 2003, it paid off the affected communities and offered various goods, including buildings, soccer fields, electricity, potable water, classrooms, productive projects, and sometimes even computers or copy machines; some goods were delivered, while others were not (Lange 2004).

When community members spoke out against oil development in responses to this survey – giving responses based on information they had received from anti-oil education campaigns – the people likewise framed their opinion of oil development in terms of its impacts on their survival. In the Santa Monica community, one resident who had seen oil-affected areas elsewhere in Ecuador warned, “The rivers were pure black” with inedible fish and “The terrain was almost a desert; if one plants yuca, it doesn’t give anything.” In the Santa Rosa community, the opposition to oil was immediate and vocal in response to a survey question: “No!” “Out out!” “We reject it!” “Our products will produce worse.” “We’ll be left poor.” On a walk through the forest, a utilitarian perspective offered by Gabriel Cerda, president of Shwayacu community, was typical. After pointing out a dozen medicinal plants, he suddenly stopped and said, “Because of this we do not want petroleum... step by step there are medicines. If petroleum comes, it will destroy everything.” Listing forest food sources – mushrooms, plantains, yuca, wild tubers – he said, “When the contamination comes, they don’t serve for anything, they cannot be eaten. So from what are we going to live?”

A survival-based perspective also influences the way people view their affiliation with outside organizations, including RECOKA. Not surprisingly, those with the most positive feelings about the organization and with the most negative opinions about oil were those that had received the most projects or support from RECOKA – such as participation in a handicrafts marketing cooperative or a communal chicken-raising project, or tactical support in a land rights struggle. Communities view the relationship with the organization as one of give and take: in the words of Gabriel Cerda, whose community has been supported by RECOKA in a land titling conflict, “What they [RECOKA] ask, like to go to protests, we support, and they support the community.”

People in the RECOKA communities frequently referred to themselves as “*dejado*” (“left

behind”) by their government. In the void left by inadequate government services, NGOs and oil companies have become parallel rural development organizations battling for indigenous people’s allegiances. Communities perceive RECOKA and other organizations largely based on the concept of “projects” – in Spanish, “*proyectos*.” Such relationships are an artifact of the high number of organizations – governmental and non-governmental, local and international – providing assistance to communities in the region. Various surveyed communities had received classrooms and musical instruments from the Spanish Red Cross, medical training from a private doctor, fish (to be raised in ponds) from the provincial council, water tubing from the municipal government, support from a private foundation for a daycare, and agricultural loans from an indigenous federation. Community leaders in Shwayacu, where I lived, repeatedly asked me for help in obtaining “some *apoyo* [support], some *proyecto*,” though they did not have a firmly defined idea of what such a project should entail. Cerda, the community president, believed that “The support of international foundations is the only path, because the authorities from here don’t worry themselves for anything.” The community joined RECOKA after becoming disillusioned with the larger regional indigenous organization, FONAKIN, because after 20 years of belonging to FONAKIN, Cerda said, “We have not had any *proyecto*.”⁴

Cash crops and social movements: The link

Cash-generating *proyectos* may have multiple political outcomes. For RECOKA community members, a cash income is not just a matter of economic importance, but a matter of political importance directly affecting people’s capacity to educate and organize themselves. Cash resources are important for both education and basic social mobilization, both of which are in turn important to the future of the movement.

Most directly, RECOKA members’ access to cash influences their ability to participate in

a social movement at all. RECOKA illustrates the resource mobilization theory of social movement formation at its most basic: “more prosperity favours social mobilization” (Foweraker 1995: 16). Mobilizing the communities to assemble for meetings or other events was no simple task during my time there. None of the communities surveyed had any means of outside communication other than listening to radio stations. The Shiwayacu community president had to travel frequently to Tena to deal with the village’s land rights case, paying 95 cents bus fare each way; on these days he might not eat during the day to save money, despite the hour-long walk from his home in the forest to catch the bus. The RECOKA director, earning only \$40 a month for his work three days a week for RECOKA, had to spend \$26 of his \$40 on daily bus fare from his home community to the office, and was only able to support his family by doing outside work as a Christian missionary.

When local people complained of poor cash crop markets, they most often framed the problem in terms of their children’s education. Comments from Shiwayacu and Bellavista Alta residents, respectively, typified this perspective: “There is no money to maintain and educate the children because there are no products to sell, only maize and cacao”; “There is no way to buy things and make the children [able to] study.”

All communities reported shortages of schoolbooks and materials; many students share materials because they cannot buy their own. Only one community has a high school; youth from other communities must commute by bus or foot, study through distance-learning programs, or live with relatives in town. Parents in several communities complained that teenagers must drop out of school for lack of funds for materials and fees. Families’ cash crop incomes thus directly determine the level of education which their children can attain.

The degree of education that people can afford has direct effects on social movement-

building, creating capacity for political mobilization. Educated people are more likely to understand their legal rights, and are more able to garner external financial and political support for their cause. Even the most politically savvy indigenous federations in Ecuador have found themselves disadvantaged when negotiating with oil companies because of their lack of technical, environmental, and legal expertise (Rival 1997: 2). Cash is thus an important ingredient in building a strong movement, over both the short term (through basic mobilization) and long term (through education).

Conclusions: For Movements and Their Allies

This research is relevant not just to a theoretical understanding of the “environmentalism of the poor,” but to the process of building local and international alliances to sustain such movements. Keeping oil companies out of the Ecuadoran Amazon has become a goal not only for indigenous people, but also for many Northern environmentalists who consider the area a global “biodiversity hotspot.” Alliances between indigenous people and international NGOs have a history of environmental campaign victories in other Latin American countries, especially Brazil (Conklin and Graham 1995). But environmentalists attempting to form anti-oil alliances with local people must consider how people living on the margins of survival will act in accordance with their own subsistence needs. If people can be made to understand that oil activity threatens their own survival, they will oppose oil activity. Furthermore, people are more likely to support anti-oil organizations if they, in turn, feel their livelihoods supported by those organizations. Activists fighting to keep oil companies out of Amazonia need to think not only about oil economics, but also about the economics of agricultural commodities.

Still, while indigenous people may oppose oil development because it conflicts with their

survival interests, as Anthony Bebbington and colleagues (1993) argue, economic interests promoted by indigenous organizations are not always ecologically sustainable. Environmental groups working with the indigenous anti-oil movement should be mindful that supporting these movements is one part of a regional sustainable development strategy, not an automatic route to forest preservation.

Ultimately, anti-oil movements will meet no lasting success as long as the Ecuadoran government's policies remain stuck on the same treadmill of pumping oil to pay debt service. In the year 2000, half of the national budget still came from oil revenues (Gerlach 2003), and more than half of the government's \$2.4 billion oil revenues went toward paying off interest on the country's foreign debt (Barthélémy 2003). The above lessons to social movements therefore apply to the anti-oil campaign as a whole: opponents of oil development must also think about expanding the markets for other commodities if they wish for a different national strategy on oil. In the meantime, local people will likely continue struggling to fend off oil companies day by day, community by community – because they know their survival depends on it.

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Endnotes

¹ I wrote the survey in cooperation with RECOKA coordinator Fredy Alvarado and admin-

istered it in five communities: Atahualpa (*barrio Pantanal*), Bellavista Alta, Santa Rosa, Santa Monica, and Shewayacu. The survey was administered in two more communities, Kachiwañushka and San Pedro de Auca Parte, by Ines Refenner, a representative of the Austrian NGO Horizont 3000, who was working with RECOKA at the time. The surveys were conducted through community meetings, with typically 12-15 adults participating; answers reported here, unless noted, appeared to be the general consensus of all those present. Surveys were a mix of basic factual queries (e.g. crop prices and distances to markets) and open-ended questions (e.g. "What is your most serious agricultural problem?").

² Communities living closest to road networks sell a wider variety of products, such as yuca, plantains, oranges, and papaya; but all communities sell corn and cacao because it is easily stored and transported. Coffee was a major cash crop in the area until international markets crashed in the late 1990s, yet another case of commodity-price dependence creating problems for the country's rural people.

³ Since 2000, the currency of Ecuador has been the U.S. dollar.

⁴ FONAKIN, the Federation of Kichwa Nationality Organizations of Napo, is a long-established organization claiming to represent Kichwa people throughout the province.

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