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## Pachakutik: Tracing the Development of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement as a National Actor

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Pachakutik: Tracing the Development of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement as a  
National Actor

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies of Bard College  
by  
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*To Cherry,*

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## **Introduction**

The October 2019 protests, and their sequel in June 2022, reminded the Ecuadorian public once more of the tremendous capacity of the national indigenous movement to organize and mobilize. The mobilization was led by the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), an indigenous organization founded in 1986 whose power has steadily grown since, but whose popularity with the rest of the Ecuadorian public has fluctuated. Nonetheless, it has become and maintained itself a pillar in the country's political arena. The CONAIE functions as a larger structure of numerous smaller and more regional organizations. It was founded when the ECUARUNARI (Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimuy), an organization based in the *Sierra*—the highlands—partnered with the CONFENIAE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana) based in the Amazon, nationally referred as *Oriente*. ECUARUNARI represents much of the indigenous population in the Andean highlands and it coalesced with help of the Catholic Church and new ideological currents within it such as the Theology of Liberation, as well as with significant experience working with leftist organizations. Meanwhile, the CONFENIAE was created as a joint effort by different Amazonian nationalities to fight government and corporate incursion in their territory for resource extraction. Previous to the creation of these organizations, big historical figures in indigenous struggle such as Tránsito Amaguaña had ties with the Communist party of Ecuador and other socialist-minded collectives around the 40's, this close relationship declined however after the two Agrarian Reforms the country experienced, the first on 1964 and the second on 1973. Different ideological currents (evangelists also play a role) shaped what became the CONAIE of today and the Ecuadorian indigenous at large.

The most recent protests began as a response to the government's repeated attempts to eliminate state subsidies on gas prices after making a deal with the IMF to receive a loan. This position, largely credited to the CONAIE's current leader, Leonidas Iza, has provoked controversy for its counterintuitive push for greater reliance on fossil fuels while making secondary demands to stop illegal mining and more oil concessions. There has been some internal disagreements over the direction the CONAIE is going under Iza, especially among Amazonian indigenous members, but the organization's impressive cohesion makes the movement, and oftentimes the leadership, impermeable to these critiques. After the October 2019 protests, Iza alongside two academics, published a book called *Estallido: La Rebelión de Octubre en Ecuador*. The book recounts the struggle of the protests and the state's excessive use of force. Most iconically, it asserts that the protests point to the "light at the end of the tunnel" coming from "a believed affirmation, looked for and unpostponable: indo-american communism or barbarie...". In clear reference to the writings of the Peruvian marxist thinker José Carlos Mariátegui, Iza and his co-authors center the focus of the protests and ideological drive in class struggle and the need for the progression of historical materialism in the Andean context. Inspired by Mariátegui, Iza and other younger indigenous leaders have turned to a more class-based approach with coalitions with syndicates such as the powerful public transportation syndicate which initially sparked the protests over the cut of gas subsidies.

The CONAIE can boast the toppling of 3 governments of general dislike and two successful demands that the government keep its subsidy on gas. Among many other things, they were also at the forefront of making Ecuador a 'plurinational state,' with the ratification of the 2008 constitution. These achievements emphasize the importance of studying such a powerful force within Ecuadorian politics and what has been termed by several academics as the strongest

indigenous movement in Latin America: *Why has the indigenous movement in Ecuador become such a political actor? What has allowed it to become such a large force on its own?*

The paper attempts to understand how social actors and collective identities are shaped by political processes and how the indigenous movement of Ecuador has endeavored to challenge the hegemonic social, economic and political order of the country. Hegemony is understood from Stuart Hall's elaboration on Gramsci, as; "practices which secure the hegemony of a dominant group over a series of subordinate ones, in such a way as to dominate the whole social formation in a form favorable to the long-term development of the economic productive base" (Hall, 213) From a Latin American perspective of 'dependency,' hegemony is enforced on different planes, internationally as well as on national scale; Ecuador like others in the region, has from very early in its history followed a commodity-exporting economy, in the Ecuadorian case primarily cacao, bananas, shrimp, flowers, oil and the burgeoning mining sector. Arturo Escobar identifies the concept of 'development' one of the primary hegemonic tools through which the West prescribes, and national elites willingly take, steps which the country is meant to take to become a 'developed' country. These prescriptions come from the experiences of countries with very different histories and social make-ups, and for many procedural factors—that be insufficient application of reforms, dependent markets or lack of state permeation—the state was unable to enact these reforms. Hegemonic understandings of development, which did not account for Ecuador's geographical and social diversity, has operated under a self-defeatist cycle where elites attempt to adopt 'modernizing' practices while simultaneously limiting these practices to maintain a relatively unchanged political and economic state of domination. This process of 'modernization' or capitalist expansion creates



new conditions where the different actors are compelled to change their relationship to one another and struggle to make space for themselves in a changing environment.

This text rejects essentializing views of identity or indigeneity for that matter; using a constructivist approach to analyze the case of Ecuador, indigeneity has become a collective identification that has been produced dialogically through different social encounters. (Lucero, 23) As will be clear in the paper, analyzing Ecuador's indigenous movement requires a substantial revision of social movement theory produced in North America and Europe and instead understand the plurality Latin America, in terms of its diversity of "economic and cultural nodes of production and the segmentation and transnationalization of cultural and economic systems." (Escobar and Alvarez, 67) Simply put, Ecuador, like much of Latin America, has been transformed in layers rather than the European understanding of stages, creating a national environment that not only varies temporally but spatially as well.

For this reason, it is important to delve into the political economy of the country as a whole while at the same time pausing to describe the regional variances. I pay particular attention to corporatist changes in the country, especially apparent with the two consequential military regimes, the first from 1963-1966 and the second between 1972-1976. These governments are both understood as having corporatist tendencies because of their enactment of land reform and expansion of social rights, while maintain authoritarian rule, which thrust 'indigenous communities'—groups of different ethnicities— into the national stage, in a new position of relative oppression and stigmatization, and thereby posed the challenge to indigenous identity the hegemonic social, political and economic sphere; in the process of which this identity was transformed. The corporatist regime is then followed by a decade-long transition to

neoliberalism, during which the Indigenous movement had already articulated its main tactics and priorities.

Economic crisis, a perceived failure of ‘developmentist’ policies along with a transition to neoliberalism worldwide in the 1980’s, encouraged national elites to follow the global economic trend of reversing many of the social rights granted to low-income sectors by the state but also the reintroduction of democracy opened the political field and expanded on political rights. (Yashar, 48) However, as I argue in this paper, the indigenous movement in Ecuador had already developed the necessary tools to challenge these material, political and social changes. The indigenous movement in Ecuador has been successful because it has effectively gained space as in the Ecuadorian social imaginary, and has gained concrete political gains. Social movements can be understood working in a “political struggle in terms of access to the mechanisms of power, but also [a] cultural [struggle] in the search for different identities” (Jelin through Escobar and Alvarez, 4) Cultural practices and the struggle for power structure each other— and their combination define their objectives. This does not imply that it is in the direction of a complete transformation on the modes of production as necessarily ‘structured in dominance,’ but rather greater political, social and economic agency on a national scale as the indigenous movement in Ecuador is irreversibly a major force. The openings created by the indigenous movement in Ecuador has created new understandings of a democratic arena—not only through political gains but through social visibility as well as organizational autonomy.

I borrow Leon Zamosc’s ‘three basic coordinates of collective action:’ to analyze how the indigenous movement in Ecuador has been able to consolidate itself as such a powerful actor. 1: “instrumental dimension, related to the fact that the action is directed toward attaining shared goals;” 2: “the organizational dimension, or the networking and articulation that make collective

action possible; and 3: “the expressive dimension, which alludes to the fact that the form and content of collective action have denotative value regarding the social identity of the group in question.” (Zamosc, 50) I explore how these three coordinates correlate with three different tools developed by the Ecuadorian movement between the 1940’s to 1990’s; 1: capacity to mobilize a national protest and form alliances with other popular sectors, developed through a relationship with socialist activists; 2: structured communities as bases for organizing and networks between them, developed in conjunction with progressive sectors of the church; and 3: construction of the contested and broad concept of ‘nationality’ for the indigenous context, through the appropriation of its traditionally western origin, by exchanges with non-indigenous academics.

There has been considerable scholarly work on the appearance of indigenous movements in Latin-America in the late 20th and 21st centuries. Some, like Amalia Pallares and Deborah Yashar, have focused on citizenship regimes while others such as Marc Becker and Melina H. Selverston has analyzed coalitions and exchanges of indigenous communities with other national and international organizations. Yashar analyzes Ecuador from a structural perspective, where networked politics are crucial and the state is the deciding factor on how indigenous identity is defined nationally. She identifies three categories to analyze the rise of indigeneity; trans community networks, political associational space and changing citizenship regime. My work elaborates on trans-community networks and to a lesser extent political associational space but this paper diverges from Yashar as it contends that it is the actor itself that creates local autonomy and the state, where the changing citizenship regime, is also subject to this change, under pressure from the indigenous movement. Focusing on the Ecuadorian highlands, Amalia Pallares emphasizes the Ecuadorian indigenous’ search to reconceptualize the state as plurinational in the late 20th century; which served not only as a goal but as a discursive mean

that assembled communities, and provided an ideological framework that encouraged deep organizational capacity. She ascribes both class and ethnic based components to the contemporary Ecuadorian indigenous movement and describes the change from *campesinista* to *indianista*. Marc Becker is also primarily concerned with the Ecuadorian sierra context. He emphasizes that the indigenous movement in Ecuador has a much longer history than is often accounted for in academia, tracing its origins to the creation of the FEI (Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios) between indigenous leaders and the Communist Party. Unlike Yashar who seems to trace a strong line between class-based movements and ethnic-based movements among indigenous communities, Becker argues that these often coincide and organizations such as the FEI are just as “authentically” indigenous as are more contemporary ones such as the CONAIE. He goes on to make the point that class-based and other leftist organizations have been an integral element to the indigenous movement in Ecuador and is what in many cases has allowed for it to create coalitions and historical momentum. Melina H. Selverston, making a comparative analysis of many different Latin American countries, sees the rise of indigenous movements as the result of the weakness and fracturing of leftist parties by the turn of the 21st century, leading pushback on anti-neoliberal reform. She attributes the holistic strategy of ‘cultural subversion’ by the CONAIE as its strength confronting the Ecuadorian state. However, the weakness of leftist politics in Ecuador can also be explained by the salience of the CONAIE, which became an anti-political force.

### **Corporatist Governments of Ecuador**

There are three moments of 20th century Ecuadorian history that are crucial to understand its corporatist period. The first is the promulgation of the *1937 Ley de Organización y*

*Régimen de las Comunas*, more commonly known as the *Ley de Comunas*. This law sought to standardize the governing mechanisms of the highland countryside, much of which was administered by large landowners under the *huasipungo* system. The aim of the law was to ‘modernize’ state management, making initial steps to circumvent the traditional political leaders and arbitrators of the region; the hacienda and the church. (Yashar) It assigned political officers to comunas to become the new arbitrators of these communities, a break from the traditional process of contention and compromise between the hacendado and the indigenous communities. (Ospina Peralta) However, the reach of this law was very limited, and the landed elite along the Catholic Church and local politicians still held extensive control over indigenous communities, while the *huasipungo* system was still largely in place.

Despite its limited application, the law set a juridical precedent for the creation of corporatist rural communities with territorial integrity, which became essential in the forthcoming agrarian reforms, it also delineated spaces of political mediation within communities, set apart from municipalities and other political spaces that required literacy or explicitly excluded indigenous people, allowing greater autonomous community participation within a deeply segregated state. (Yashar, 123) The law passed in a context of political instability and economic transformation, with the collapse of the large cacao-exporting sector and greater national demand for food-products, industrialization in the textile industry, as well as burgeoning *indigenista* understandings of the national formation within upper-middle class intellectuals which saw indigenous people as the source of the nation, under the notion that the state must integrate them into a larger national-state project of modernization.

The *Ley de Comunas* set a largely legal precedent for the formation of a corporatist state in Ecuador, that would be formally established with the military dictatorships of Ramón Castro

Jijón (1963-1966) and Guillermo Rodríguez Lara (1972-1976). Ecuador had experienced political instability from the 1920's to the 1940's, with a brief period of stability under Galo Plaza (1948-1952) whose presidency experienced an export boom and embarked in ambitious development programs. After Plaza's presidency, however, the country began to experience economic hardship when international agricultural demand fell and the country was swept once more to populist presidencies, most notably the incessant return of José María Velasco Ibarra, who was elected president five times and tellingly boasted "give me a balcony and I will be president." (Becker, 121) Cold War anxieties heightened in the region with Fidel Castro's communist revolution in Cuba, and conservatives alongside the US Central Intelligence Agency organized a military coup, where a military junta under the leadership of Castro Jijón was established.

This military junta—in line with corporatist objectives of state modernization and incorporation of citizens into a national project—expanded social rights while neglecting political ones, as exemplified by its application of several social programs around social security, health and infrastructure while also repressing 'radical' political actors such as through the outlaw of the Communist Party. (Black, 32) While the 1960's military junta was internationally hostile to the Cuban Revolution, domestically, it was best known for implementing the first agrarian reform in the country, on 1964, under incentives by the Kennedy administration and its Alliance for Progress, which promised to loan large quantities of money to Latin American countries in exchange for carrying out wide social reforms, with the intent of stabilizing the political systems of countries whose wild inequality and limited state permeation threatened collapse to popular discontent and support for communist revolutionaries. This fear was acutely responsive to the different *campesino* mobilizations that sprang around the country from the

1940's to the 60's, of which will be further discussed. The 1964 Agrarian Reform and Colonization Law sought to address the continuation of the *huasipungo* system, doing so in material terms rather than juridical, as had been done with the 1937 *Ley de Comunas*. Large landowners in the sierra were given a year-long ultimatum to end precapialist relations with the local indigenous communities, by transitioning from an arranged exchange of labor for lands and resources, towards free wage-labor and the distribution of small plots of lands to former *huasipungeros*.

The 1964 agrarian reform signified the virtual end of the *huasipungo* system, with lukewarm results: the reform threw many indigenous farmers into a state of precarity, with an insufficiently assisted transition in the power relations of the region, where the hacienda and the church lost significant protagonism, and the state was unable to reorganize the countryside into sufficiently inclusive cooperatives. Moreover, the redistribution of land mainly concerned small plots of land—an estimated average of 3.5 hectares in the sierra according to (Black, 25)—that were deemed less productive by the haciendas, resulting in discontent among rural communities, which continued to pressure for further reform. These developments nonetheless led to the permanent rupture of indigenous communities under the control and arbitration of landed elites and the church giving way to direct engagement between these communities and the state. It incorporated indigenous people as rural peasants, where the issues of land rights were no longer mediated in enclosed interactions between the hacienda and strikers, but instead indigenous communities confronted the state to demand for further land redistribution and other interests. (Yashar, 94)

The 1960's military junta was forced to abdicate in March 1966, after constant social discontent and turmoil. The 1964 agrarian reform opened up the possibility for greater expansion

of social rights for indigenous communities, while also underscoring the limited interests in reform among Ecuador's political elite. The country returned to a civilian government, only to have Velasco Ibarra elected once more, who proclaimed himself a dictator and was then ousted by the military with U.S assistance, this time under the leadership of Guillermo Rodríguez Lara.

The “Nationalist and Revolutionary” government under Guillermo Rodríguez Lara—known at the time as “Bombita”—embarked on a program of more substantive social and material benefits for the countryside, through greater proliferation of the corporatist state. Bombita’s government enjoyed a drastic rise in revenue from oil extraction, which allowed for greater state expenditure. Similar to the the 1960’s military junta, Bombita enacted a series of reforms expanding social rights, in part under the recommendations of of the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the U.S Agency for International Development and on the other, under pressure from sporadic rural mobilizations, though in-all, largely guided by the fear of communist insurrection.

Bombita, as embodied in the ‘nationalist and revolutionary’ spirit; declared: “(In Ecuador) there is no more Indian problem. We all become white men when we accept the goals of national culture.” (Yashar, 95) However, *comunas* would take advantage of the government plan to incorporate the broader population within these groups, the number of *comunas* would rapidly increase, seeing the benefits of incorporating within the larger state project to claim lands. (Zamosc, 40) In 1973, Rodríguez Lara enacted the second land reform. This one was more serious than that of 1964, and yet still largely prioritized large landowners. As part of the 1973 land reform program, Rodríguez Lara also created the Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC) that as the name suggests was in charge of settling land disputes as well as distributing ‘barren land’ on the Amazon under the *Ley de Tierras Baldías* (Law of empty lands). (Black, 38)



Land grants for settlers in the Amazon became a mechanism through which the IERAC did not make sufficient land reform in the *Sierra*, but rather responded to demographic and economic pressures for land reform by encouraging colonization of the Amazon. This became a major source for politicization in *Oriente*, whose name itself alludes to a settler's view.

### **Origins of CONAIE**

Most accounts on the origins of the CONAIE, begin with the 1990 uprising. On June 4, 1990, the organization that would become the unquestioned leader of the indigenous movement of Ecuador, the CONAIE, made its debut on a national scale by mobilizing around the country and forcing the left-of-center president of the time, Rodrigo Borja, to negotiate with the organization on a diversity of issues, involving concerns such as land reform, bilingual education programs, and amending the first article of the constitution to declare Ecuador a plurinational state. What became known as *Levantamiento del Inti Raymi*—after the traditional Sun Festival that was happening at the time— was first kindled the 28 of May, when 200 indigenous people from the provinces occupied the Santo Domingo church, in the old town of Quito and two blocks from the presidential palace, demanding Borja's administration take action on the piling land disputes that had consistently favored large landowners. Local bases in other parts of the country rose up as well, and the leadership of the CONAIE and its other filial organizations invoked other members of the confederation to join the mobilization by June 4th. (Zamosc, 63) The protestors set up roadblocks all along Sierra and parts of the Oriente region, paralyzing the national economy and inducing food shortages in many cities of the country, which were dependent on the countryside for sustenance.

The government retaliated by deploying the police and military, these confrontations leading to the detention of several indigenous leaders and the death of a protester. However, these measures were not enough to stop the mobilizations and on June 8th the government met with some of the leaders of the CONAIE. Indigenous protests ended the roadblocks and the detainees were released. (Becker, 175) The negotiations went on for months, and although no significant commitment was reached between the government and the protesters, it established a direct line of communication between the CONAIE as the main representatives of the indigenous people's interests and the government. (Yashar, 146) The importance of the 1990 *levantamiento* in understanding the Ecuadorian indigenous movement is the sharp contrast it laid bare; between its mobilization capacity and expansive counter-hegemonic demands, contrasted with the utter national ignorance on indigenous organizing and the sudden catapulting of the CONAIE to a central role in national politics. It marked the first truly, country-wide 'indigenous' mobilization and set the stage for further pushes to open the democratic space.

The CONAIE was formed in 1986, after several encounters during the late 1970's and the early 1980's, between the two largest organizations of indigenous peoples of their respective regions, the Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimuy (ECUARUNARI) of the *Sierra*—highlands region, and the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (CONFENAIE) of the *Oriente*—Amazon. Growing collaboration between the two organizations culminated during the National Coordinating Council of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONACNIE), which met from 13 to 16 of November, 1986, and resulted in the drafting of a national agenda based around “cultural identity, unity through diversity, organizational autonomy, and the struggle for the democratization of the political process, while maintaining connections to structural reforms in the economic and agrarian sectors.” (Black, 28) The

collaboration between these two organizations led to the creation of the CONAIE; yet this merger into a national organization had to account for deep historical, ethnic and ideological differences. A closer look into the two reveals how each organization came to develop its agenda based on its own geopolitical and identitarian circumstances and how a variety of encounters with other social and political actors created more resilient, and capacious structures for both, that allowed for such a strong organization to emerge.

### **Sierra**

The development of indigenous organizations in the *Sierra* region of Ecuador can be largely understood as a process of competition and confluence between class-based and ethnic-based concerns. (Becker, 14) In fact, determining the first ‘indigenous’ organization in the region is contested among scholars and the public precisely because it requires us to determine whether ethnic concerns are necessary to fall within that category and it raises questions about the political extension of indigenous identity.

The cooperation between leftist organizations and indigenous communities goes far in the Ecuadorian *Sierra*. Between the 1920-1930, emboldened by the Soviet Revolution and the rise of *indigenista* literature such as Jorge Icaza’s novel *Huasipungo*, and the political writings of peruvian marxist philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, such as the *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, urban socialists traveled to the countryside in an effort to organize indigenous communities against abuses from the hacienda and the *huasipungo* system along class lines. (Becker, 46) (Black, 19) The national socialist party, PSE, was an important actor in this collaboration; in 1926, Indigenous people went on strike against and occupied the state-owned hacienda of Changelá, claiming the land was legally theirs. (Black, 45) This action was

unprecedented from previous forms of mediation between indigenous communities and the hacienda, where disparate protests and repression would be resolved internally. Leftist activists of the PSE worked with indigenous communities to organize themselves as syndicates and therefore mobilize more effectively against the hacienda. (Ospina, 197)

As Marc Becker notes however, these activists did not create new organizational structures within the communities, but rather, they built off these pre-existing efforts to collaborate towards a larger vision of class struggle. (Becker 47, 51) Meanwhile, indigenous communities began to adopt the language of *campesino*—peasant—reinforced by leftist organizers and political leaders seeking to modernize agricultural production in the country, in an effort to voice their concerns on a wider stage. Beyond externally presenting themselves as syndicates, indigenous communities also engaged with the ‘national’ ideal of the *campesino* to appeal to the political elite and gain land. This is evidenced by indigenous appeals to modernizing the nation, through *campesino* identification to gain access to land under the 1937 *Ley de Comunas*; “If our petition is favorably attended...we will contribute our part to the expansion of agriculture, the increase of national production and the progress itself of the Nation (Patria), besides the fact that we will also be able to support ourselves and our children.” (Clark, 58) These burgeoning relationships between socialists and indigenous communities would continue to expand, and so would understandings of a shared struggle with different sectors in a national project be formed.

### **FEI**

In August, 1944, the Communist Party, Confederation of Ecuadorean Workers (CTE) along with a few indigenous syndicalist leaders from Cayambe, founded the Federation of

Ecuadorian Indians (FEI.) (Becker, 84) The FEI was born out of the previous syndicalist experiences among indigenous communities as well as renewed interest from the Comintern to organize indigenous and peasants from non-industrial countries for revolution. (Becker, 81) Unlike the previous syndicates, the FEI was no longer interested in working within the *huasipungo* system to pressure landowners for better working conditions, rather, its sought to abolish it in an effort to create a salaried class of semi proletarian rural workers rather than indentured servants and it pushed for land reform. (Yashar, 101) The FEI connected indigenous communities around the Sierra and other peasant organizations as part of the same movement, and demanded greater labor rights and land reform. (Black, 19) The organization primarily functioned within public haciendas (government-owned land that was taken from the church in previous liberal conflicts) but it even went on to collaborate with *huasipungeros* on private lands, and through this process, it developed effective striking strategies that would create even more pressure on the government and landowners to adopt reform policies. (Becker, 131)

Its impressive scale, its country-wide demands, along with its emphasis on indigenous organizing and material interests, makes the FEI the first indigenous organization to many scholars. (Ospina, 204) (Becker, 78) However, there are limitations to this understanding; there was little emphasis on ethnic concerns within the organization's program, and the leadership was largely white-mestizo, the latter of which became a larger problem later on its history as approaching the 60's, the leading organizers within the FEI and the Communist Party steered away from indigenous concerns in the highlands and focused on creating programs on the coast, asserting stringent class discourse and identity. (Becker, 153) (Yashar, 100) Collaborating with the Confederación de Trabajadores del Ecuador CTE, on December 16, 1961, the FEI mobilized to Quito with thousands of indigenous activists to demand agrarian reform and an end to the

*huasipungo* system. This country-wide strike was one of the multiple factors that pressured the central government to enact the 1964 Agrarian Reform. (Becker, 130) Once the Agrarian Reform was promulgated, the FEI were central mediators between campesinos and the Institute on Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC) that was established thereafter. (Black, 20)

The FEI declined rapidly in presence and numbers by the 1960's, once its principal objectives of agrarian reform and ending the *huasipungo* system had been accomplished. Its largely white-mestizo leadership doubled-down their emphasis on class struggle as the left became ever-more divided with international events such as the rift between the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, and the emergence of progressive sectors from the Catholic Church advanced by Liberation Theology, which offered less radical and orthodox platforms. (Becker, 147) This incapacity to renovate its rhetoric can be attributed partly to the vertical structure of the FEI, which answered to the Communist Party and the CTE to determine its direction and by the later part of its history failed to engage with the interests of its bases. (Pallares, 15) Indigenous organizers within the FEI, however, largely used the organization to advance their own interests and at times deviated from leftist doctrine.

Two figures within the FEI and the early indigenous struggle that stand out in the Ecuadorian imaginary demonstrate this: Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña. Both grew up within *huasipungo* haciendas, and witnessed rampant illiteracy, alcoholism, child mortality, gender-based violence and constant abuse from landowners. Cacuango (1881-1971) experienced the death of 8 of her 9 children due to abhorrent life conditions in the rural Sierra and was sent at young age to work as a housekeeper at the hacienda owner's house in Quito, where she saw the stark contrast of unequal livelihoods. These experiences propelled Cacuango to organize her own community, first forming part of a syndicate in her home Cayambe, and then co-founding

the FEI and working as its Secretary General. Tránsito Amaguaña (1909-2009 ) was also a co-founder of the FEI alongside other peasant activists, she worked her family's *huasipungo* at the age of 7 and began her activism after escaping an abusive marriage. They both sought to expand their activism beyond the FEI's parameters of land reform by opening the first bilingual schools in Ecuador, where Spanish and Kichwa were integrated into the curriculum. (Becker, 25-26) This was done after years of pressure to develop a more classically 'peasant' identity. Yet, Cacungo and Amaguaña continued endeavoring to open up education for Indigenous communities and instruct the local younger generations in Kichwa. (Becker, 44)

Transito Amaguaña's own experience doing activism with FEI alongside other communist organizers offers some insight into the relationship between indigenous interests and leftist frames and practices. In an interview done in 1977, Amaguaña recounts the first interactions when urban leftists began to visit her community while she was young. The community at the time was looking for land recognition for their *huasipungos* and the activists offered help, so they decided to work together through the communist platform; "I joined the communist party out of hunger and mistreatment" (Rodas, 36) She describes how, initially, some within the community feared that the activists were trying to divide the community, and held distrust for them and their ideas, fears such as their godlessness and treachery, which the local church and the landowners propagated. To these admonishments, she rebuked that; "They (communists) have never been disrespectful, mocking, to me. They have always respected me. That is why I have continued in this line. If they had done something bad to me.... oh shit!" She further remarks; "I have grown old in this struggle. I have been a communist and a communist I will die. If it's with my communist soul, then it must be. Is there a soul or is there no soul? What do I know, I don't know yet. I know nothing." (Rodas, 36) (My translation) In a search for

dignified treatment and serious engagement over her concerns for land reform and indigenous rights, Amaguaña saw the socialists as her allies, demanding respect from them too. She became a communist through practice; refusing to make assertions on God or secularism, but rather, only affirming her identity—her soul—as the product of her practice as an activist, performed on a communist platform. As Marc Becker asserts, the “Communist Party did not create the indigenous movement, rather both were born from the same struggle.”

Indigenous activists would adopt many of the striking and mobilizing tactics used by leftists at this time for decades. The creation of alliances through a common struggle will also be relevant to how the indigenous movement develops.

### **FENOC(IN)**

Around the same time the FEI was losing importance, the Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (FENOC) rose to prominence in the *Sierra* and *Costa* regions. (Yashar, 102) The coup of the military triumvirate began a series of crackdowns on FEI activists, such as the imprisonment of Tránsito Amaguaña upon her return from a summit in the Soviet Union, over fears of a planned insurrection. Months later she is released with the help of former president Galo Plaza Lasso. The military undertook the agrarian reform and its plans for modernization by simultaneously stomping out organizations they viewed as ‘insurrectionary’ and instead working with others viewed as more compliant with their national modernizing project. (Lucero, 98) FENOC attempted to address the unsatisfactory results of the land reforms of 1964 and 1972 and pushed for greater redistribution and an expansion of social rights, by way of mediation with the IERAC and taking direct action. (Lucero, 98) (Zamosc, 46) FENOC has its origins in the Catholic Church, which attempted to provide an alternative to leftist organizations,



fearing communist influence in labor movements, and was initially led by Christian Democrats. (Becker, 157)

Just like the FEI, the FENOC was an offshoot of a parent organization, the Confederación de Organizaciones Campesinas de Obreros Católicos (CEDOC), meaning it was not an autonomous organization but rather responded to the the program of larger *campesinista* organizations which emphasized material interests. (Pallares, 15) Though having Christian Democratic roots, applying moderate pressure for land reform through negotiations and committees, by the early 70's the organization is taken over by militant socialists that change its program and adopt more aggressive strategies used by the FEI and other previous communist organizations such as land seizures, strikes and lawsuits. (Yashar, 102) (Becker, 102) It also affiliated itself to the PSE, the national socialist party. (Pallares, 15) The FENOC had special negotiating leverage with the government because it held significant influence amongst rural workers *Costa* region, and though it had an important presence in the Sierra as well, it began to lose ground to the emerging ECUARUNARI, which responded far better to the complex situation of indigenous communities in the region.

Many indigenous people, especially those who had mobilized in earlier years against the haciendas with the FEI, were left out of the new cooperatives created within the communities with government guidance or with FENOC's own organizing. (CONAIE, 50) The FENOC's compromising ties with the state's mission of modernizing and its ideological inflexibility—some of its activists seeing ethnic revindication as “false consciousness or old styles of colonialism (Lucero, 98)—began to friction with indigenous communities, who opted for more ethically-minded forms of organizing such as through *federaciones de comunidades* and *uniones de cabildos*, in line with the traditional comuna, in line with those created with the 1937

*Ley de Comunas*. (Pallares in Yashar, 97) (Selverston, 138) These factors along with a greater ‘crisis in socialism,’ lead to a diminishment of FENOC’s influence in the sierra. However, the organization continues to hold influence, and has undergone several programmatic renovations to offer a platform for indigenous organizing along class-lines, a response to the rise in ethnic understandings; indicative of that is its renaming to FENOC-I (addition of *Indigena*) in 1988 and later FENOCIN (*Negro*, for the afro-ecuadorian community) in 1997.

### **ECUARUNARI**

After years of church organizing within Indigenous communities for years, and sponsoring regional encounters between different localized organizations, ECUARUNARI emerged in 1972 building off this structure to become the largest indigenous organization in the region. (Selverston, 138) After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), progressive segments of the Catholic Church in Ecuador sought to renovate their engagement with the poor and oppressed sectors of society. This was propelled specifically with the rise of liberation theology, which was developed during the second Latin American Bishops Conference, held in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. Liberation theologians believed that the church should center the poor’s perspective, doing so by establishing *comunidades de base*, “base communities,” in which priests would work with communities to study the bible, but also assist them in meeting their immediate needs and further create local organizational structures. (Britannica)

In the Ecuadorian sierra, priests began working with indigenous communities to open schools, in an effort to provide catechism as well as train future local organizers. (Becker, 160) (Yashar, 102) Along with education, which proved to be crucial in educating future indigenous leaders, progressive priests began to promote localized structures of organization, through

technical assistance, credit and legal services. (Yashar 103) This structure of organizing made more sense to many indigenous communities in the countryside that still lacked (though improving) much of the basic basic infrastructure, which still depended largely on its own community for effective organizing, and possessed a conception of difference with the dominant culture while also community solidarity, This was set in contrast to rural unions, —promoted by the FEI and FENOC—which often produced its own paternalistic figures in union heads and exclusionary structures. (CONAIE. 34) (Yashar, 102)

Moreover, as these efforts to create organizing structures from within communities were being carried out by Indigenous people with help from the church, the reformist project of Rodriguez Lara (Bombita) brought another point of contention between *campesinista* organizations and the indigenous communities. As a former president of the FENOCIN recounts, tensions arose between *campesinista* leadership and indigenous communities when the military government began to extend ties with them in an effort to expand social rights and infrastructure. To some of the leadership in these organizations, the indigenous community was not committing wholeheartedly to their struggle, and instead were diverting to the right through their connections to the state (Lucero, 98) Though some indigenous activists remained affiliated with class-based organizations, campaigning to have their issues heard within these organizations, many others decided to work with the church and at times the state instead, to improve their material condition, and began to increasingly express their ethnic concerns as well.

This search for self-leadership was fulfilled partly with the assistance of the church. Beyond the aforementioned localized educational programs and organizing structures, some church churches also worked with indigenous communities to strengthen their ties across the region and the country. Significant in this process was the Bishop of Riobamba, in the province

of Chimborazo, Monseñor Proaño. Monseñor Proaño, influenced by ideas from liberation theology, founded several programs that proved pivotal for broadening indigenous networks, such as the Escuelas Radiofónicas in 1960, which would air programs on both Spanish and Kichwa teaching people on different educational and practical subjects; supposedly helping more than 20,000 indigenous people in 13 provinces become literate. (El Comercio, 2020) Beyond these instructional tools, however, the radio also raised shared consciousness among indigenous communities about their shared condition. (Yashar, 105) Monseñor Proaño gave away much of the land and haciendas owned by the Chimborazo dioceses, to indigenous farmers in the region and to the IERAC, even converting the hacienda Tepeyac to a training institute for indigenous leaders. It is in this center where ECUARUNARI would be founded. (Becker, 159)

Monseñor saw the revindication of cultural and ethnic identities as a powerful tool against oppression and the ‘unconscious mass,’ in fact, he argued that there was a “need to create consciousness in popular urban organizations as well, with an economic, educational and political practice that is convergent with the progression of the indigenous movement (...) by way of making collaboration. (Salto Galán, 2001) These views were informative for indigenous leaders which began to see their community cohesion and expressive practices as a strength that could be projected politically, creating networks of solidarity with other sectors. The church would provide encouragement as well as resources for indigenous people to elaborate their own organizing units and creator networks with each other; this would prove an essential tool for the strength of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement.

Building off these networks, along with past mobilizing efforts, Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimuy (ECUARUNARI) emerged, whose name comes from the kichwa phrase of “awakening the people”—‘Runa,’ meaning person, as a signifier of indigenous identity. The

organization rose with well established local organizing, along with veteran leaders who had prior knowledge on more aggressive methods to make their demands to the state. Opposed to the FEI, some scholars refer to ECUARUNARI as the first legitimately “indigenous” organization of the sierra, for its greater emphasis on ethnic issues and truly indigenous leadership. However, both relied mostly on indigenous activism and at their respective peaks, each prioritized indigenous issues, which initially was protection from the *huasipungo* system and gaining national visibility, and later mediating land reform and demanding basic services.

ECUARUNARI’s history is a series of push and pull between classist and ethnic concerns to define its agenda. Though there is disagreement on the nature of its program, its trajectory seems to be vacillating between classist and ethnic agendas; with its early phase (1972-1977) showing greater emphasis on ethnicity, then in 1978 making a significant pivot towards class-based interest and from the early 1980’s returning to express a more ethnic tone though with class interests still central.

The 1978 change can be understood to be a response to the overthrow of Rodriguez Lara in 1976 by another military junta, headed by Alfredo Poveda Burbano, which demonstrated latent interest in rolling back the social reforms that the country was going through. With the declared role of creating the necessary conditions for a return to democracy; the new military junta introduced a series of policies that criminalized strikes, and worker’s unions, as well as canceled several benefits some workers enjoyed through negotiation with the previous government. (Heidy Müller, 249)

On October 19, 1977, thousands of workers from a mostly state-owned sugar plantation in the *Costa* region strike and occupy the facilities. Police open fire on the protesters as well as bystanders from the nearby town, with the estimates of the massacre ranging from 1,500 to 120.

(El Universo, 1977) The incident became known as the Aztra Massacre,—after the company name—and it was recognized that the workers were mostly indigenous men that had migrated to the coast for labor, but most originated from the province of Cañar. In 1978, ECUARUNARI mobilized with the FENOC and the diminished FEI to create the United Front for Peasant Struggle (FULC), calling on the government to improve wages, stop its persecution of labor unions, and continue land reform. (Heidy Müller, 249) The organization failed to get justice for the murdered workers, but it created pressure on the junta to continue some of the social programs that had been in place before. More importantly, it demonstrated its capacity to work with other organizations and popular sectors to advance matters of social safety and material interests.

From its inception, up to the early 1980's, ECUARUNARI was in constant tension internally, as factions began to develop to define its organizational agenda. This was a process of accommodating class and ethnic issues. In the process, some ethnic-based organizers were expelled from the organization under accusations of being 'racists' and 'agents of American imperialism' and radical christians alongside some communists pushed for the permanent expulsion of the church in the organization. (Pallares, 163) (Pallares, 153) Even regionally, tensions arose between the more radical provincial organizations, with the Pichincha filial organization taking leadership over the regional platform with stronger socialist views, while the Chimborazo organization suspending its participation of ECUARUNARI in response.

By the early 1980s, however, the situation changed; Ecuador was now a democracy and *Sierra* indigenous organizations began to make greater contact with their counterparts in the *Oriente*.(Pallares, 109) ECUARUNARI was able to reunify its bases, while also creating a platform through which to engage both class and ethnic interests. Through this dual agenda, it

sought to work with other actors on points of convergence, such as through class for much of the popular sector, while engaging in ethnicity while dealing with the government or the rising *Oriente* indigenous federation, the CONFENIAE. (Pallares, 165) Consequently, ECUARUNARI outlined its particular position in Ecuadorian politics, and in a letter to Roldós, expressed their complete independence from any “traditional political sector,” and on 1982, releasing a statement that claimed; “Ecuadorunari is a Movement that brings together the demands of the peasantry as a whole with the specific demands of the indigenous people”. (Heidy Müller 272) This signified for some academics the end of “ventriloquism,” for the indigenous movement, as termed by anthropologist Andrés Guerrero, where indigenous political actors were only ‘puppets,’ spoken for by the traditional left and right. As has been shown, however, this portrayal is overly-simplistic, if not outright wrong. (Ospina, 202)

ECUARUNARI overshadowed the class-based organizations within indigenous communities. Not only did its program enthusiastically embark on a class-based agenda, but it was structured with community bases formed with help from the church, which responded more organically to the interests of the indigenous communities, as it allowed for internal deliberations on local leadership and also created horizontal networks amongst different localities.

### **Oriente**

As mentioned previously, state permeation was far more recent on the Ecuadorian Amazon. Though there were some disparate incursions; such as incursions for natural resources during colonial times, during the rubber boom in the late nineteenth century, and then attempts to militarize the region during the 1940’s, when the state was in war with Peru, there was no sustained development efforts in the oriente, until the 1960’s when demographic pressures and

the 1964 land reform led to the migration of hundreds of thousands of colonizers to the region. The colonization of the oriente brought with it state force and law, and land began to be partitioned with no consultation of the scattered indigenous groups in the region. Moreover, a second wave of state incursion came in the 70's when large oil reserves were discovered. The relative lack of state permeation, along with the diversity of indigenous groups in the region, created a particular set of circumstances that would develop into a very distinct expression of indigenous activism than in the sierra.

### **FISCH**

In 1935 and renewed in 1944, Salesian missionaries agreed with the state to evangelize and 'civilize' the Shuar population in the southern Ecuadorian amazon. (Lucero, 101) The Salesians began their interaction with the Shuar as a way to establish national presence in the context of rising tensions between Ecuador and Peru. (Black, 20) The project can be understood as an attempt to incorporate the Shuar into the national project, through the establishment of schools, churches and other 'civilizing' and 'modernizing' policies.

Waves of migrants from the highlands began to encroach on Shuar territory in the 1960's, exacerbated by the 1964 Agrarian Reform, receiving land titles by IERAC to clear out land for small and medium farms, but particularly harmful was the sale of large plots of land for cattle grazing. In response, the Shuar, especially the younger generation that had been educated in Salesian schools, worked with the missionaries to establish nine centers along Shuar territory, appoint local leadership, establish radio programs on remote territory, through which a network could be created to organize a response, and secure their land claims to the state. (Yashar, 119) (CONAIE 45) With initial credit from the Salesians, along with some development assistance



from European countries, Shuar communities began to invest in cattle grazing, thereby appealing to the IERAC that the lands were not vacant and available to claim. (Rudel, 149) Cattle grazing provided the Shuar with steady earnings, and though they initially tried to distribute land titles individually, they decided that collective titles was more advantageous to assure territorial integrity and communal arbitration. (Yashar, 120)

By 1969, the Shuar federation claimed to have gained independence from the church, and instead adopting an anticlerical stance; remarking on the dualism within clerical organizations they portrayed the indigenous people of the sierra as ‘peasants’ and those of the oriente as ‘savages.’ In their 1976 political manifesto, *Solución original a un problema actual* (An Original Solution to a Contemporary Problem), the Shuar outline two of their principal concerns; “the self-determination of the Shuar group in a new concept of a Pluralist Ecuadorian State,” and the “achievement of economic self-sufficiency, as the basis of a development free of pressures and influences from abroad, (...)” making further remarks that otherwise, “Initiatives of any other nature would not go beyond a less modern and self-directed method of integration and even assimilation into the dominant group. That is to say, it would end in another marginalization and then in the biological death of the group.” (FESH, 1976:129, as cited in, CONAIE, 46) Though the statement clarifies the organization’s adherence to the Ecuadorian state, it emphasizes its search for autonomy; political, economic, cultural and territorial.

The Shuar utilized their ties with the church to create political centers through which they could organize, used their radio program to establish their own bicultural, bilingual Escuelas Radiofónica, while also mediating with the state to have their land recognized and establish an economic system that would grant them autonomy and sustenance. Moreover, their success in preventing the loss of their territory as well as their application of communal land titles, prevent

large land buyouts and give individuals within the community protected access to markets, which has allowed them to recover more horticultural practices. (Rudel, 156) They are the first to organize along indigenous lines in the Amazon and Latin America, and their strategies have been replicated by many other groups in the region. (Yashar, 119) By adopting modes of production demanded by the state and applied by settlers, to outline their own self-sufficient territory, the Shuar carve their own space through a syncretic use of both foreign and internal systems.

### **FOIN**

North of Shuar territory, in the province of Napo, amazonian Kichwa people organized to create the *Federación de Organizaciones Indígenas del Napo* (FOIN) in 1969. Napo is just across the mountain range from Quito, and this proximity can explain its greater connection to *Sierra* organizations and its political developments, relative to other indigenous organizations in the Amazon. From colonial times, even Incan rule, the indigenous people of the region confronted repeated incursions from the highlands in search for resources such as gold and amazonian cinnamon (ishpingo). Though there was repeated conflict, frustrating repeated colonial efforts, the Spanish were able to establish a few outpost towns such as Archidona, founded in 1560. (CONAIE, 21) The indigenous people of the region, formerly called Quijos, adopted Kichwa as a result of colonial efforts to standardize the language among different indigenous groups. The amazonian Kichwas, in turn, were displaced into the lowland mountains and deeper into the amazon forest. Some were forced to work in rubber haciendas, but significant settler and exploitative encroachment did not come until the 1960's, when the state began to build roads further into the territory, and began to give out land to ease pressures from a failing Agrarian Reform in the Sierra and Costa. (Yashar, 121)

The Kichwa from Napo sought the help of Josephine missionaries that had been in the area since 1922. Under the sponsorship of the missionaries, local communities created a workers union in an effort to have their land claims recognized by the IERAC. Initial efforts to create the union failed, because of discord between the Napo Kichwa and the Josephine missionaries, the former suspecting that the missionaries were taking advantage of the situation to expand their own land holdings as well as encouraging inactivity, while the Josephines feared that the organization would contest their evangelical mission. (Becker: 2020,342)

Sensing the immediacy of the issue, however, a group of Kichwa teachers, who were educated in the missions, along with a few sympathizing Josephines, created the *Federación Provincial de Organizaciones Campesinas del Napo* (FEPOCAN) in 1969. The use of *campesino*, as well as the initial attempts to create unions to claim right to the land, shows the partial attempt by the organization to model itself after some of the peasant organizations in the sierra. (Yashar, 123)

During the 1970's the FEPOCAN permanently distanced itself from the Josephines and adopted a more explicitly ethnic agenda. Attempts to organize through unions proved to be ineffective and instead adapted their organizational structure from the organization of communities in the region already in place. (Yashar, 123) During its third provincial congress, in 1973, FEPOCAN changed its name to *Federación de Organizaciones Indígenas del Napo* (FOIN) and advocated for the defense of comuna land titles and decried economic exploitation. Despite this comparative ethnic focus, the FOIN established ties with national labor organizations—such as the FENOC—with the aim of creating alliances that would give it more leverage while negotiating with the state. (Becker, 342)

Further emphasis on ethnic discourse developed within the organization in the 1980's and later the 1990's, changing its rhetoric from 'indigenous classes,' to 'indigenous federations' to 'indigenous nationalities.' The FOIN would later change its name to *Federación De Organizaciones De La Nacionalidad Kichwa De Napo* (FONAKIN), to adjust to the nationality-based ordering of the CONAIE. With clear inspiration from the experiences of the Shuar, the FOIN has stated: "For us it is clear that our people and their culture cannot be maintained without a physical environment that allows us to reproduce, biologically and socially, therefore the main work of the Federation since its inception has been the defense of our territory." And stressing new challenges to access to land; "(...) it is no longer just settlers or companies that seek to seize our territory, the State with an incongruous policy of environmental protection through the Forest Heritage Law and the creation of Ecological Reserves, is limiting our physical space." (CONAIE, 22)

### **OPIP**

Pastaza lies between the provinces of Napo and Morona Santiago, extending far eastward to the Amazon, into Kichwa, Achuar, Shuar, Shiwiar, Huaorani, Andoa and Zápara territory. The indigenous groups of the region experienced the organizing of the Shuar to their south (FISCH) and the Kichwa to their north (FOIN) but the urgency to develop an organization at a provincial level in Pastaza, came largely in response to an added challenge to the waves of settlers; rapid expansion of oil extraction by transnational companies sponsored by the state.

In a similar fashion to how colonizing the Amazon offered an easy substitute for broad land reform in the sierra, so did oil exploration offer the corporatist government of Rodriguez Lara a quick venue to expand its social service and infrastructure project, without properly

addressing its commodity-dependent economy. This seemingly paradoxical situation expressed itself in the Amazon with an increased state presence in the 70's, when the American oil companies Gulf and Texaco discovered large oil fields in the region on 1967, and when Rodriguez Lara rose to power, the government sought to gain more control over oil extraction, creating a consortium with transnational corporations. The state would handle basic infrastructure to facilitate resource extraction, but the oil companies had little regulation or supervision for their operations. Ecuador would join the OPEC from 1973-1992, making oil-exporting a national priority. (Sabin, 149)

With little regulation and oversight, oil companies drilled for oil recklessly in indigenous territory. Though oil exploration in theory did not require the clearing of large plots of land—as was the case with intensive agriculture and cattle grazing—oil drilling had disastrous consequences for the people living in the area around it. Toxic discharge was rarely cleaned-up or properly handled, and much of it ultimately overflowed into rivers, wetland areas and polluted the forest; exposing the people in the area to illness and deprived communities of essential resources. (Sabin, 150) (Yashar, 116)

Though predominantly Kichwa, indigenous groups of Pastaza joined to first create the *Federación de Centros Indígenas de Pastaza* (FECIP) in 1978—10 years after the creation of the other two major regional organizations—in an effort to counteract the two major threats of colonization and oil contamination threatening the region. In 1981, the organization would rename itself the *Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza* (OPIP). Unlike the FISCH or the FOIN, the organization was not built on top of organizational structures and networks built with the help of the church, rather, it applied much of the organizing and networking experience that the two other organizations had developed, with particular help from the FOIN. (Yashar,

126) In fact, OPIP organizers were initially in conflict with neighboring Dominican missionaries, the latter characterizing the former as radicals and ‘communists.’ (Sabin, 152) Evangelical members of the organization would later break away to create the *Asociación de Indígenas Evangélicos de Pastaza y la Región Amazónica* (AIEPRA), gaining material support from international evangelical aid institutions.

While the efforts of the FISCH and the FOIN largely responded to colonization efforts by titling land and creating unions to demonstrate the validity of their territorial claims before the state, largely through appeals to the *Ley de Tierras Baldías* (Law of empty lands) the OPIP engaged in a different strategy for territorial recognition. The OPIP instead vindicated their own claims for territory as “an ancestral space where culture develops,” (Sawyer,77) demanding that the historical use of the land be validated. Communities in Pastaza saw that oil drilling not only polluted their resources and appropriated their land, but it also brought discord to their social life; illness, alcohol abuse, exodus of younger generations, shame about being ‘Indian,’ as well as oil companies bribing leaders for cooperation. (Yashar, 125)

Something of the sort befell the community of Sarayaku, the most influential community within the OPIP, whose leading families came to hold many leadership positions within the organization. The transnational Arlington Richmond Company (ARCO) was given concessions by the Ecuadorian government to explore and exploit oil on Sarayaku territory. For exploration, ARCO used the disruptive method of using explosives to determine oil reserves. The Sarayaku retaliated by confiscating some of the company’s equipment, to which ARCO offered \$5,000 for cooperation, which the community rejected and held government and ARCO representatives hostage. The Sarayaku community compelled the government to sign an agreement, the Sarayaku Accord, which asserted that no further exploration would be conducted until their

territorial claims were recognized by the state, and demanded among other things, compensation for environmental damage, an end to more drilling-concessions, and autonomy over their territory. (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Esap, 18) (Sabin, 160)

Autonomy was especially important because it challenged state dominion over resources; according to Ecuadorian law, the state owns all oil reserves, regardless of who occupies the topsoil. (Yashar, 115) Within their calls for autonomy was their demand to take a central role in regulating and mediating the process of extraction, that the highest environmental standards be met, and that communities be given proper royalties from oil companies. This conception of autonomous development emphasized territorial sovereignty and the agency of indigenous communities in the extraction of resources. Building on previous efforts for territorial recognition and greater autonomy, the OPIP also asked for a 15-year moratorium on more oil concessions, to organize and plan before new projects came along. According to one of the leading founders of the OPIP, Alfredo Viteri Gualinga of Sarayaku, the idea of inserting indigenous organization into the management of energy projects came from previous strategies employed by indigenous activists in North America. (Sabin, 161)

Thus the OPIP applied a different approach to their FISCH and FOIN counterparts, by contesting requirements that the land was 'productive' by state standards, as is evidenced by the case of Sarayaku, where they protested to the state that their land was 'Sacred Territory Patrimony of Biodiversity and the Ancestral Culture of the Kichwa Nationality.' (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Esap, 5) These appeals were possible because of the space opened by previous experiences in the oriente with the Shuar and the Kichwa of the Napo, as well as greater connection to international activism and drawing on changing international law, such as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ratified in 1989 by Ecuador.

Nonetheless, the Ecuadorian government would not honor the Sarayaku Accords, citing that it was forced to do so, neglecting its agreements with many other communities in Pastaza. (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Esap, 18) In 1992, the OPIP mobilized 2,000 indigenous protestors to Quito, breaking from the customary mediation with the state through representatives in the Amazon, and instead marching to the capital to make its demands, with clear inspiration from the experience of indigenous protestors in the sierra.

### **CONFENIAE**

The *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana* (CONFENIAE) was formed in 1980 with the participation of several indigenous organizations of the Amazonian region, with the OPIP, the FOIN and FISCH principal among them. The goal of the organization was to create a ‘confederation of nationalities,’ for the defense of culture and land. This Pan-amazonian organization was also created to provide a platform for smaller indigenous groups, which often lacked proper representation as the Shuar and the Kichwa are by far the largest groups in the region and had organizations of their own; there were several points of conflict, for example, within the OPIP, where smaller groups complained Kichwa interests were being represented. (Lucero, 103) Unlike in the *sierra*, where class and ethnic debates were a central characteristic of the developing character of indigenous organizations, the leaders of what would become the CONFENIAE had to develop a category that addressed the diversity of the groups that composed the organization. Thus they decided on ‘nationalities,’ as Alfredo Viteri—leader of the OPIP and later first president of the CONFENIAE—said, as a “category that includes all of the different Indigenous groups.” (Becker, 172)



The use of the term ‘nationality’ to describe the different groups of indigenous people began to circulate among academics and activists during the 1970’s, when indigenous organizations began to consolidate regionally. ‘National’ characterizations are unusual in Latin America, where people are generally understood within ethnic, racial, class or caste lines. Marc Becker traces the use of ‘nationality’ in Ecuadorian politics back to the 1930’s, where communists imported the term from the Soviet Union. (Becker, 171) However, their use of the term only appears sporadically and it seems to have had little impact on indigenous organizing. Instead, the term seems to have been renovated in the late 70’s, when the philologist Ileana Almeida, student of social science in the Soviet Union, came back to Ecuador and began writing on the Andean Kichwa nationality, as having its own political, economic and social structure. (Lucero, 143) ‘Nationality’ began to gain ground within intellectual circles, both in the *sierra* and in *oriente*. However, the CONFENIAE was key in establishing the term permanently in Ecuadorian politics; first, because it was the first major organization to adopt ‘nationality’ as a form of organizing, and second, because the term was interpreted by the organization as an answer to its question of diverse groups within, as well as its vindication of *territory*, rather than *land* as has been the case historically in the *sierra*.

Ampam Karakras, a Shuar activist and academic, remarks on the usefulness of the term; “In the face of such confusion [over names], we, the Indian organizations, the Indian *pueblos*, want to give ourselves our own names, maintain our identity, our personality. And to the extent that we want to encompass the different Indian *pueblos*, whatever their particular historical development... we have opted for the term of Indian nationalities. This resolution has been carefully considered and obeys no outside influence. Rather, we understand that the category ‘nationality’ expresses the economic, political, cultural, and linguistic aspects of our *pueblos*; it

situates us in national and international life.” (Karakras, 1990, as cited in Lucero, 143) As Lucero correctly notes, ‘nationality,’ had been a term widely used in Europe and other part of the world, and described by nineteenth century European thinkers from across the political spectrum such as Marx, Engels and John Stuart Mills as ‘nostalgic and tragic.’ (Lucero, 143) However, its application for the Ecuadorian indigenous people was ‘carefully considered’ as capacious; rhetorically questioning hegemonic understandings of the liberal white-mestizo nation, capable of encompassing groups of people with shared concerns while accounting for diversity, and creating a space where the economic, political, cultural and linguistic aspects of these groups are negotiated from within while locating in position to act from without.

The creation of the CONFENIAE made organizing against the state and oil extraction in *oriente* possible on a different scale. Indigenous communities in the region worked with missionaries to develop localized structures that would help them fight their loss of land to settlers, and appropriated their networks in the region to create indigenous organizations independent of Church interests. These interactions with the Jesuits and the Josephines demonstrate the use of the instrumental, organizational and expressive coordinates of collective action; the successive development of the FISCH, FOIN, and OPIP into regional actors capable of challenging state interests demonstrate their use of the tools provided by the Church, to advance—and transform—their interests. The CONFENIAE brought with it its own set of challenges for collective action, but the adoption of the term ‘nationality’ as a mobilizing, organizational, and discursive tool provided the Pan-amazonian organization with a new horizon.

### CONAIE

Throughout the late 1970’s and the early 1980’s, indigenous leaders from *Sierra* and

*Oriente* began to meet with each other with the interest of creating a national federation. Though there were some misunderstandings during these encounters, organizers of ECUARUNARI and CONFENIAE willingly exchanged with each other organizing experiences and understood that a national federation would require a formulation of a shared identity which in no concrete sense existed. (Yashar, 131) Networks established with help from the Church were crucial here; both regional organizations had developed much of their local structures and gathering spaces alongside the Church, who in turn facilitated these networks to develop across regions, allowing for an articulation of a shared struggle as indigenous. To a lesser extent, labor organizations provided some networks as well, as FOIN leaders worked with FENOC alongside indigenous activists from the *Sierra*. ECUARUNARI's experience in organizing along both class- and ethnic-lines, through strikes and marches, was passed on to CONFENIAE activists as an effective way of pressuring the government to meet their promises and gaining visibility from the rest of society. (Selverston, 134) (Becker, 10) Meanwhile, CONFENIAE's articulation of 'nationality' was adopted by many members of ECUARUNARI, though with caution; *Sierra* conception of land as "productive resource to be secured" was transformed into the idea that land is the "base on which indigenous communities had survived." (Yashar, 132-133)

Luis Macas, head of the CONAIE during the 1990 *Levantamiento*, ascertained; "No one can escape it. If there is a land conflict, this is a community problem. The central issue, therefore, is how to *recover the lands* and strengthen the *comunas* so that power is returned to the communities... It is important, therefore, to maintain the concept of the territoriality of the community. (Yashar, 133) Macas is referring to the *comunas* as they were ordered by the *Ley de Comunas* in the *Sierra*, when this form of economic and legal organizing was questioned by the consolidation of neoliberal reform in the 1990's. It demonstrates the importance of cultural

renovation in the face of new threats; adopting the extended understanding of land, into ‘territoriality,’ as a space of cultural deliberation. Much like how *Ley de Comunas* gave indigenous communities in the *Sierra* a legal opportunity to organize in culturally beneficial ways, and later the Church helped it reinforce its structure in times of mass urbanization (between the 1960’s and 1970’s), so did the innovation of territory brought the possibility to rearrange the structure of organizing in a time of precarization and growing numbers of people within indigenous communities migrating abroad.

Leaders from both organizations agreed that it was, “indispensable to unite the double dimension of our struggle,” and what was needed was to recognize and address the “double character of our problems: as members of a class and as part of different Indigenous nationalities.” (CONAIE, 150) It is this ‘globality’ of issues that must be addressed holistically, and it is what compelled the CONAIE to represent Indigenous interests, while engaging with other popular sectors.

The CONAIE articulated 16 demands to the state during the *Levantamiento del Inti Raymi*:

- 1) Declaration of Ecuador as a “plurinational state.”
- 2) Grants of land and legalization of territories for the nationalities.
- 3) Solutions to the problems of water and irrigation.
- 4) Absolution of debts to FODERUMA and the National Development Bank.
- 5) Freezing of consumer prices.
- 6) Conclusion of priority projects in the communities.
- 7) Non-payment of rural land taxes.
- 8) Expulsion of the Summer Language Institute, in accordance with the 1981 decree.
- 9) Free importation and exportation of commercial and artisan products for CONAIE members.
- 10) Control, protection, and development of archeological sites under the supervision of CONAIE.
- 11) Legal recognition and funding by the state of Indigenous medicine.
- 12) Cancellation of decrees that created parallel institutions to local governments.
- 13) Immediate granting of budgeted funds for Indigenous nationalities.
- 14) Permanent funding of bilingual education.

- 15) Real respect for the rights of the child, without demagoguery.
- 16) The fixing of fair prices for farm products and free access to markets.

(Marc Becker, citing Hoy, 1990)

The bases of the movement primarily mobilized in response to rising inflation, gradual loss of social services, and as a response to insufficient land reform. It is important to re-state that the collective mobilization was decided on a local level, emphasizing the strength of the organizational structure and networks. Material interests take a large portion of the list, however, and the CONAIE emphasized its cultural component in its set of demands. (Black, 31) Calls for a ‘plurinational state’ as one of its principal demands demonstrates the CONAIE’s insistence that a space be opened for indigenous communities to articulate their own concerns within the national political, economic and social arena. The fact that the protests were put in action during *Inti Raymi*—the Sun Festival, indicates the value cultural practice was placed on the development of its political platform and its praxis. The FENOC and other popular sectors joined the protests, indicating that the CONAIE’s influence was not limited to the indigenous minority, but that their struggle encompassed country-wide interests. The protests would not result in concrete victories for the CONAIE, but movement itself, in its size, coordination and breadth of demands, caused a radical shift in the Ecuadorian imaginary, and though it was met with some hostility by certain economic and political sectors, it was generally received with cautious approval. (Yashar, 146)

The CONAIE would continue being a major player in politics during the 1990’s. A month after the *Levantamiento*, July 17, the CONAIE hosted the ‘First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance’ in Quito. The date was chosen in anticipation of the 500 year mark since the arrival of Columbus. Indigenous people throughout the Americas joined the gathering, calling for the end to discriminatory practices in the region, the ‘rejection of

capitalism’ and the right for greater autonomy, such as applying traditional forms of justice within their communities. (Becker, 180) With a certain degree of essentialization, the CONAIE and other indigenous actors of the region sought to gain more international recognition and create common ground with each other. It also sought to dispel the historic idea of the ‘passive Indian,’ historically prevalent in Latin America along with its counter portrayal of ‘savagery.’ (Pallares, 111)

Another mass protest would hit Borja’s administration, this time organized by the OPIPm but with the support of the CONAIE. The state would not deliver on their promises made to Sarayaku and other communities in Pastaza, and in April 1992, building on the momentum made with the *Levantamiento*, the OPIP orchestrated their own march from Puyo to Quito. 2,000 Kichwa, Shuar and Achuar went on a 13-day march from the Amazon and across the mountains, after years of government neglect to their territorial claims, to demand that these be recognized. President Rodrigo Borja initially denounced the protestors as attempting to ‘dismember the national territory’ and attempting to create a ‘parallel state.’ The vice president of the CONAIE at the time, Luis Macas, supported the mobilization, and declared the march came from the wish to “develop our communities in a collective form.” (Becker, 181) Protestors walked 240 kilometers, invoking symbols of historical protests such as the revolt of Jumandi in 1578. (Sawyer, 66) The march was unusual; this sort of mobilization had not been seen in Quito, and it demonstrates the use of tools by the OPIP, adopted from their *Sierra* indigenous counterparts.

This time, the protestors also enjoyed international support, and along a confluence of pressures, chief among them constant pressure by the CONAIE, Borja agreed to meet some of the OPIP’s demands. Borja agreed to legally recognize Indigenous land claims—their principal claim—with 1,115,175 hectares of indigenous territory in Pastaza, from the 2 million originally

asked for. (Sawyer, 67) However, the land allotted was not distributed along its member associations, as requested by the OPIP, but rather was divided along 19 territorial blocs that later coincided with government concessions to oil companies. This would become problematic for the OPIP in the future, as oil companies began to negotiate with communities most willing to cooperate within these blocks, and it substantially fragmented the organization. (Yashar, 128) Nonetheless, Sawyer regards the 1992 Caminata—as is referred to by its participants—as a pivotal “challenge (to) the Ecuadorian state, (...) a crucial juncture in the process of indigenous nation building. (Sawyer, 65)

The *Movilización Por la Vida* (“The Mobilization for Life”) in June, 1994, was the fourth and perhaps more impressive than the 1990 uprising in terms of capacity to mobilize, as well as state compromise. It came about as a response to the attempts of president Sixto Durán Ballén to privatize water rights, cancel many of the ongoing land reform distribution disputes and reform communal land rights so that they could be sold. (Pallares, 20) (Yashar, 148) The CONAIE retaliated by blocking roads and paralyzing the economy of the country for 20 days. (García Serrano, 57) State of emergency was declared and the president threatened protestors with military repression. Despite this, the government was forced to negotiate with CONAIE, and together made a commission to review the reforms. After an arduous back-and-forth, the state agreed not to privatize water resources, proceed with limited land reform, and implemented the conditionality that communal land could only be sold if two thirds majority within a community decided so. These compromises, though far from ideal from the CONAIE perspective, still posed serious constraints on the privatization of communal land and water resources, both considered essential for the protection of culture and its reproduction within a territory.

Nina Pacari is one of the first indigenous activists in the *Sierra* to formulate the territorial integrity in the region, and a leader of the CONAIE during the negotiations of the 1994 uprising. She remarked on 2020—on an interview commemorating 40 years of uninterrupted democracy in Ecuador— that despite its faults, democracy had to be valued, always to its highest degree;

“We know what is the value of freedom of expression, of freedom of assembly. But then you have to appreciate it in all its dimensions. And for the same reason we would say the positive aspect is the power to develop ourselves presenting our own proposals, our dreams, and initiatives. And that it is not limited only to believe that it lies in the electoral process. But rather it has to do with the mode of living, the nature of living that we are able to have. We should not think that is a question that comes to us from an apparatus such as the state, but has to do with society.”

## **Conclusion**

Indigenous communities have engaged with different social actors to create the broad movement that the CONAIE is today. In 1996, the organization would create its own political party, in coalition with environmentalists and other sectors of society, the Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik (MUPP-18). (Selverston, 148) This was a big shift in how politics was done for indigenous communities, but Pakakutik and CONAIE kept relative autonomy from each other. On January 21, 2000, the CONAIE along with a segment of the military coordinated a coup after the president Jamil Mahuad experienced very high inflation and a failing economy. (Becker, 186) Mahuad had been considering changing the national coin to the dollar, and when



the military and the CONAIE obtained power, military officials under Gustavo Noboa outmaneuvered CONAIE representatives and took full control for themselves, going along with the conversion that left many in catastrophic situations. After this humiliating event the CONAIE suffered a partial inter-division, and was weakened throughout the early 2000, such as under the 'pink tide' leftist Rafael Correa, who routinely clamped down on CONAIE dissent.

As has been traced historically, the indigenous movement of Ecuador has consolidated itself as a major player in Ecuadorian politics, in large part because it was strengthened by the different tools from interacting with other social actors. Early organizing in the *Sierra* involved alliances with leftist activists for the struggle for land. This situated the *Sierra* indigenous people within a class, that of *campesino*, which allowed them to create alliances and also develop tactics that demanded more equitable treatment from the state or private landowners. A national campesino federation was created and this also allowed Indigenous activists to engage in wider struggles for the country, which induced in these communities a sense of affiliation with the *campesino* understanding. Meanwhile, the Church bases created a powerful network, structured along the *comunidades base*, where local, regional and national deliberation has been facilitated. This is important because it's the strength of the bases and their connections that is what gives CONAIE the numbers; other minority groups in Ecuador have not been able to make such a great turnout. Perhaps the symbolic acts of ritual, such as making a national protest during the Sun Festival, or a long march in homage of a colonial indigenous revolutionary, helps create a culture that frees itself from a state of 'dominations'

Moreover, the Amazon had a remarkable development where communities with completely different modes of production, political, and social structure began to interact with the hegemonic culture, first as mysterious 'savages' and later as important political actors, if not

at times with essentialized visions painted over. However, as is the case with the FISCH, with the FOIN, and the OPIP, they are actually quite pragmatic actors that develop syncretic modes of culture and doing politics, as is evidenced by the cattle grazing with the Shuar, which could seem counterintuitive yet it has allowed them to develop a strong voice in the south of the country. The church has also created networks in the region and in part, this was used as the basic template of ordering the larger organizations for groups in the *Oriente*. Moreover, even territory, in the Amazon where land is not set by boundaries, was developed through contact with blanco-mestizo settlers, because it meant a delineated territory was the only way from preventing further incursions.

Finally, *Oriente and Sierra* met and exchanged experiences. From the CONAIE lies not only the possibility that the indigenous movement picks more tools when attempting to carve up more space for itself, but also that others can learn from this experience. This could bring about the understanding that self-autonomy does inevitably lead to isolation, but rather the formulation of larger categories capable of encapsulating divergent situations. Perhaps this is how democracy can be improved; where the hegemonic center becomes more and more centralized, the solution may be to carve a space for oneself and for others.

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