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Assimilation vs. Autonomy: the Evolution of Indigeneity in Modern-Day Ecuador

ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical divide that currently persists in Ecuador has long created widespread disconnect between the nation's elites and its numerous Indigenous populations. However, this rift is being continually exacerbated by increased pressure upon Indigenous communities to adapt or even assimilate into surrounding modern societies. While this conflict inspired one of the most successful Indigenous uprisings Ecuador has seen in recent history, I will argue that it also implicitly forced the same Indigenous communities to redefine the very identity they have fought to maintain. As a result of the momentum the Indigenous movement in Ecuador has gained contemporarily, the face of Indigeneity has evolved dramatically. In order to gain insight into the ways in which Indigenous identities have developed, I will examine the intersection of Ecuadorean Indigeneity and modern society by way of analysis of this specific cultural context from numerous perspectives, both historical and contemporary. It is expected that this investigation will suggest that the success of Ecuador's Indigenous movement was contingent on representations and perceptions of Indigeneity within Indigenous communities as well as throughout the rest of the nation's surrounding societies.

“The most important trait you need as a movement leader is resilience. You’re going to make mistakes, and you’re going to be told by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people that what you’re trying to accomplish cannot be done. Those things are a given. What’s not given is your response...” –Emily May

Introduction

The ever-changing face of the Indigenous identity in the South American country of Ecuador has evolved amidst growing pressures to adapt and even conform to surrounding modern societies as a means of assimilation. While the fundamental desire remains to preserve the Indigenous cultures that originally existed harmoniously in the past, Indigenous communities often find sources of support for their fight for plurinationalism on the national stage to be scattered few and far between, leaving resources for their efforts particularly limited as a result. Nevertheless, widespread discouragement from higher sociopolitical elites within Ecuadorian culture has in no way diminished the spirit of resilience that has persisted throughout many different instances of adversity and discrimination against the advancement of Indigenous peoples. Over the last two to three decades, the movement behind the identity of the Indigenous in Ecuador has come to a head in light of recent political happenings that have sought to suppress the development of the nation’s numerous Indigenous populations. Many arguments analyzing this issue suggest that tensions between the state and its Indigenous communities are simply necessary political discourse in attempts to deemphasize the social and political obstacles these conflicts actually create for Indigenous peoples in their everyday lives and the impact they have on the possibility of progression for these

groups in the future. However, there is an equally abundant establishment of evidence that suggests this contention between Indigenous communities and societal elites in Ecuador has neither slowed nor negatively impacted the Indigenous movement but rather motivated its very participants and adversely allowed the Indigenous movement of the 1990s to continue to gain momentum contemporarily. While countries throughout Latin America are often characterized by the vast presence of cultural diversity they possess, there are numerous pluricultural populations that still face neglect, rejection, and underrepresentation within the countries that they exist. This marginalization is strongly represented by Ecuador's current social and political state, in which widespread discontent with governing bodies has taken a hold of the nation as a result of conflict created by the nation's numerous Indigenous populations struggling to maintain a plurinational state. In spite of this conflict, the Indigenous identity in Ecuador has remained resilient in its quest for autonomy amidst internal pressures to transform from within its own communities as well as external pressures from sociopolitical elites to assimilate. This resilience is something that I was able to witness first hand.

Throughout my investigation into Ecuadorean Indigeneity, I will seek to answer the following stated research questions in order to pinpoint elements of society that attempt to encompass the interminable identity of Ecuadorian Indigeneity. Seeing as the Indigenous movement has been characterized by the pursuit for autonomy, my first research question inquiries do Ecuador's Indigenous populations represent themselves entirely? Rather than assuming Ecuador's Indigenous communities are inherently in control of their own identity, this question works to explore the looming possibility that this identity is more multifaceted than appearances and common perceptions may lead

one to believe. This prospect is supplemented by my second research question, which on the other hand poses whether the identity of Ecuadorian Indigeneity is formed by national society as a whole? Moreover, my research questions will also delve into the influences that have allowed the Indigenous movement to flourish both historically and contemporarily by considering how Indigenous life has been resisted against by the state and how sociopolitical elites have either prohibited or promoted equality within Ecuador's Indigenous communities? My final research question will address the state of Indigeneity contemporarily, questioning what are the ways in which Indigenous communities have attempted to assimilate into modern society?

My research is comprised of three separate sections that will work together to develop my argument and support my findings. First, I will present Ecuador's history as a country in my first section titled "Indigeneity Throughout History". Beginning from a broader scope, I will give a brief overview of the historical analysis of the Republic of Ecuador. Then I will explain how the nation's specific history impacted its own Indigenous populations leading up to gaining representation in the constitution nationally in the year 1998. To better grasp the significance of this movement, I will compare and contextualize this happening with Indigeneity throughout the rest of the Andes region. In comparing it with countries like Columbia and Venezuela, I will be able to juxtapose the differing ways in which in which Indigenous populations have faced political repression and the tactics they implemented in order to regain representation.

The second portion, titled "Understanding Plurinationality" will make an effort to clearly and concisely define plurinationalism and why this is one of the essential elements of Ecuador's Indigenous movement. The mobilization of the Indigenous in

order to improve relations between Indigenous groups and representatives of the state is one of the primary reasons why plurinationality is so strongly supported and sought after. Furthermore, I will provide an explanation of what plurinationalism would signify for the movement going forward in an effort to increase social traction and political progressiveness. I plan to back these claims with added support from my own first-hand experiences in Ecuador in which I will call upon participant observations to speak to the overarching plight of the Indigenous people as a whole.

The third section will work to situate this argument in modern-day society, and is titled “Contemporary Context” accordingly. The ways in which Ecuador’s political landscape has changed most recently have arguably had one of the largest impacts on the state of Ecuadorean Indigeneity throughout the nation’s history. As a result, it seems as though the Indigenous identity is being done away with in favor of conforming to a prejudiced society. For the same reason, there has also been a notable characterization of the Indigenous movement recently by Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador for having risen up as the face of this movement, serving on the front lines for the marginalized Indigenous who may not be able or willing to stand for themselves. The current political state of Ecuador within recent months has also proven to be extremely indicative of the unequal position that Ecuador’s Indigenous peoples hold within their own society. With instances of violence and police brutality on the rise against Indigenous protestors, tensions within the country have unsurprisingly increased significantly as a direct result.

Methodologies

In order to research the complexities of the Indigenous Ecuadorean identity, I plan to utilize specific research methodologies that will capitalize on my personal skillset and knowledgebase while also highlighting my specific academic interests. As a language major, I am familiar with analyzing various text sources in order to develop an argument in support of a specific theme or idea. Through literary analysis, I plan to concretize my argument by comparing the current state of Indigenous affairs to the way in which Indigenous populations are depicted in literary works like Juan León Mera's novel *Cumandá*. While this novel will serve as a fictional representation of various perspectives of the issue of Indigeneity in Ecuador, I will draw numerous parallels that illuminate the complexity of this lasting issue. Additionally, I plan to analyze primary sources like interviews of Indigenous community members provided in Carlos de la Torre's *The Ecuador Reader: History, Culture, and Politics* (2008) in order to ground my thesis with actual first-hand accounts of relevant experiences by Indigenous people themselves. These stories will be key in determining the viewpoint and voice that this movement has developed in addition to shedding light on how the Indigenous people of Ecuador want to be received by their oppressors; Ecuador's sociopolitical elites. After having spent a summer in Ecuador myself, I have gained much valuable understanding from the Indigenous families that I was privileged to live with. However, I will conduct my own interviews with relevant individuals to gather even more information from others who have spent significantly more time not only studying but also living in close contact with Ecuador's Indigenous populations. I will combine my resulting findings from my interview of Sarah Webb, a North American Field Leader who has been living in Ecuador since 2014, with my own inclusions of participant observation from my brief but

impactful time living with the Indigenous families that welcomed me into their homes during the summer. These observations will include notes from my fieldwork with various Indigenous individuals and communities.

Positionality Statement

As a senior undergraduate student at the University of Maryland I have studied Spanish Language, Literatures & Cultures throughout my entire college career, which began almost four years ago back in 2012. While my specific focus within the realm of Spanish is Professional Contexts, I have completed diversified coursework related to differentiated areas within this field of study. This coursework ranged from Practicum in Translation to Spanish in the Media. During the spring semester of my junior year, I completed a Commercial Spanish course in Cross-Cultural Communication. This class required that students form teams to propose their own imagined business ventures. These teams were then paired with teams in a similar course taught abroad at the Universidad Tecnología Equinoccial, located in Ecuador's capital city of Quito. As part of this semester-long project, each business team was to deliberate back and forth with their Ecuadorian business partners to come to a contractual agreement for our virtual international joint ventures. During the same time, I was also enrolled in another Spanish course that focused on the examination of Latin American literatures and cultures from independence to nation foundations, exploring cultural and literary traditions from the eighteenth century to approximately 1900. It was in this course that I was first exposed to many of the histories that characterize some of Latin America's most marginalized societies, including Ecuador's Indigenous populations. Not only did we discuss how these populations existed during periods of conquest and colonization, but we also began

to assess some of the repercussions these particular histories have on Ecuador's Indigenous populations contemporarily. It was this juxtaposition of studying material detailing early Ecuadorian Indigeneity against interactions with Ecuadorian students of a completely different background that sparked within me a great personal interest and desire to learn why such a definite social disparity exists in Ecuador between members of modern society and those who identify as Indigenous natives. The summer immediately following this semester, I flew to South America to spend eight weeks living with multiple Indigenous families throughout various different cities in Ecuador as part of a study abroad program. Over those eight weeks I interned as a Community Consultant for Social Entrepreneur Corps'; an international organization that aims to empower individuals and support community business. My daily interactions with Indigenous community members provided me with invaluable insight that confirmed that the issue of Ecuadorian Indigeneity is one that needs to be further explored. I will detail these experiences in the forthcoming sections.

Literature Review

In the year of 1986, Indigenous natives organized for the first time in order to create the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). A little more than a decade later, the country of Ecuador was declared a plurinational and multiethnic state by the eighteenth constitution in 1998 after the eviction of previous president Bucaram the year before. There is no doubting that the CONAIE coalition played a significant role in the promulgation of Ecuador's declaration of plurinationality. Conversely, findings have

shown that socio-political practices are still restricting the ability of Ecuador's Indigenous peoples to exercise rights to autonomy. This begs the obvious question; has Ecuador truly embraced, much less accepted, its newfound status of plurinationality? This essay will aim to expand upon the history of the Indigenous identity in Ecuador, while also centering on the implications of adopting plurinationalism and how this decree influences widespread change among the political landscape. In exploring the history behind how modern Indigeneity came to be, I will also examine how Indigenous populations of the past laid the foundation for Ecuador's contemporary Indigenous movement as researched and discussed by scholars Becker and Sawyer in their respective books *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* and (2008) *Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (2004). Furthermore I will continue this review by assessing the implications that the Indigenous movement's quest for recognition of plurinationalism has had throughout multiple facets of Ecuadorean society, incorporating literature deliberated by Adolina's *The Sovereign and Its Shadow: Constituent Assembly and Indigenous Movement in Ecuador* (2003), Colloredo-Mansfeld's *The Power of Ecuador's Indigenous Communities in an Era of Cultural Pluralism* (2007), and data analysis from Beck & Mijeski's *Indigena Self-Identity in Ecuador and the Rejection of Mestizaje* (2000). Last, I will note how Ecuador's political landscape has changed as a result of the worsening social climate that has characterized Ecuador throughout recent years by way of literature studied by Becker's *Correa, Indigenous Movements, and the Writing of a New Constitution in Ecuador* (2011) and Jameson's *The Indigenous Movement in Ecuador* (2011).

History of Ecuadorean Indigeneity

Throughout his book *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* (2008), author Becker claims that Ecuador's Indigenous movement during the 1990's disrupted the entire nation in spite of seemingly originating out of nowhere. Becker insists that this insurgency actually arose from prior years of mobilizing strategies for the advancement of Indigenous rights in addition to chronicling the extensive history behind this specific ethnically charged class-based struggle. In his explanation of how the intersectionality of women, Indigenous community members, laborers, rural activists, and urban leftists worked to promote social justice, he also demonstrates how adept the Indigenous peoples were at responding to exploitation from Ecuadorean elites while also addressing broader societal inequalities. While Sawyer, author of *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (2004), also agrees that Ecuador's 1990s emergence of the Indigenous movement was one of the most strongest Latin America has ever seen, she attributes this success to neoliberal reforms which created a crisis of governance and representation within Ecuador's Indigenous communities thus ultimately spurring the movement. While Becker's acknowledges historical happenings such as the creation of the first local agricultural syndicate in the 1920s and the establishment of a national-level Ecuadorian Federation of Indians in 1944 to be the root of contemporary mobilizations, Sawyer asserts that the source of the modern movement of the 1990s is instead derived from struggles over land and oil operations in Ecuador which profoundly impacted Indigenous communities.

Implications of Plurinationalism

Although what inspired Ecuador's Indigenous populations to fight for plurinational recognition may be up for debate, the effect that their social movements had in doing so is far less contended. Adolina's article *The Sovereign and Its Shadow: Constituent Assembly and Indigenous Movement in Ecuador* (2003) suggests that in order for social movements to be understood, the boundary that inherently exists between cultural politics and institutional politics must be done away with. This same boundary that Adolina argues exists is what he also implicates as the cause of "cultural struggles over the meanings of political institutions, concepts, and actions" which in their most traditional sense have been known throughout history to limit Indigenous progression in the first place. While boundaries were responsible for the invalidation of Indigenous rights and a dire need for a restructuring within Ecuador, Colloredo-Mansfeld purports in her journal article *The Power of Ecuador's Indigenous Communities in an Era of Cultural Pluralism* (2007) that this boundary is far more contrived than simple political interpretation. "In fact, in Ecuador, the Indigenous movement itself publicly marks the beginning of the era in which past polarities that once defined the Indian/white boundary—rural vs. urban, Kichwa vs. Spanish, illiterate vs. educated, peasant vs. professional— become acknowledged internal differences of communities" (88-89). Authors Beck & Mijeski recognize this boundary in a similar manner, purporting in *Indigena Self-Identity in Ecuador and the Rejection of Mestizaje* (2000) that as a result of this boundary and the consequential Indigenous movement surrounding the same issues, the Indigenous identity within Ecuador is now more complex than ever before as a result. This is supported by their analysis of responses from seventy-six Indigenous college students in which they noted that Indigenous students with greater "acculturation

experiences" with mestizo culture were more strident in rejecting elements of that culture than were their colleagues who had had fewer encounters with mestizo elements of Ecuadorian society. Beck & Mijeski assert that identifying this perception of dominant culture within Ecuadorian society is crucial to understanding the intricacy of ethnicity and self-identification for Ecuador's Indigenous peoples after having used the Indigenous movement for plurinationalism to reconstruct their own identity in spite of centuries of repression and domination.

Changing Political Landscape

Becker revisits the issue of Indigeneity in Ecuador in his writing *Correa, Indigenous Movements, and the Writing of a New Constitution in Ecuador* (2008) in which he further explores the evolution of Ecuador's political landscape. Becker points out that current leader of Ecuador Rafael Correa's relations with Indigenous movements have been complicated due to the limitations and tensions inherent in the pursuit of revolution. Within a few decades following Ecuador's notable Indigenous uprising of the 1990s, Ecuador saw the adoption of yet another new constitution in 2008 and Becker reasons that this progressive constitution aimed at curtailing the same neoliberal policies that Sawyer argued spurred the 1990s Indigenous movement actually proved to be more of a point of conflict rather than resolution. Jameson's *The Indigenous Movement in Ecuador, The Struggle for a Plurinational State* (2011) shares in this criticism explaining that plurinationalism still remains a core focus of modern-day Indigenous movements and Ecuadorian Indigeneity under Correa's progressive government. However, scholars have not discussed how to resolve widespread disagreement on how to define and realize the

state's plurinationality in a way that is satisfactory to both sides. This paper will attempt to do exactly that.

INDIGENEITY THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Country Background

The country of Ecuador, officially known as the Republic of Ecuador, is a representative democratic republic in northwestern region of South America, bordered by Colombia on the north, Peru on the east and south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Ecuador is also home to the Galápagos Islands in the Pacific, west of the mainland. What is now Ecuador was once home to an even larger variety of Indigenous groups that were eventually gradually incorporated into the Inca Empire during the fifteenth century. The territory was colonized by Spain during the sixteenth century, achieving independence in 1820 as part of Gran Colombia, from which it emerged as its own sovereign state a decade later in 1830. The legacy of both empires is reflected in Ecuador's ethnically diverse population, with most of its 15.2 million people being *mestizos* or *mestizaje* (a term prevalent in Latin America used to denote miscegenation), followed by large minorities of European, Amerindian, and African descent. Of the entire population, roughly 7% identifies as Indigenous (Central Intelligence Agency). Spanish is the country's official language and is spoken by a majority of the population, though thirteen Indigenous languages are also recognized, including two of the most widely practiced Kichwa and Shuar. The capital city is Quito, yet the nation's largest city is Guayaquil. In reflection of the country's rich ethnic and cultural heritage, the historical center of Quito was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. Cuenca, the third-largest city, was

also declared a World Heritage Site in 1999 as an outstanding example of Spanish-style colonial city in the Americas. Interestingly enough, European influences in terms of planning in urban areas have been valued in Ecuador above the overwhelming diversity that the nation already naturally possesses. Certainly this provides insight into the ways in which the nation's own ethnically diverse populations are devalued in similar ways.

Expanses of diversity are also represented by Ecuador's unending presence of rich ecology, and the country is home to many endemic plants and animals, such as those that make up the Galápagos Islands. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that this developing economy is highly dependent on its agricultural industry. Not to mention that a significant portion of Ecuadorian citizens tend to work in agriculture as a way to make a living. However, one of Ecuador's number one sources of income is rooted primarily in tourism. While Ecuador's booming tourism industry brings in millions of dollars to the country every year and provides sprawls of travelers, sightseers, vacationers, and expatriates with memories to last a lifetime, the nation's Indigenous populations which undoubtedly help to contribute to the industry's success both directly and indirectly oftentimes exploited in order to serve the country's monetary purposes with very little recognition, benefit, or compensation of their own.

Ecuadorian Indigeneity in the Past

It wasn't until the year of 1998 that the Indigenous peoples of Ecuador saw themselves officially represented in the national constitution. Prior to this point, the rights of the people who make up Ecuador's Indigenous populations were simply up for debate and frequently as well as unsurprisingly violated by sociopolitical elites as an obvious result. This oppressive influence might have easily deterred any hopes for advancement

among the Indigenous community without question. However, instead of being controlled by political injustices the Indigenous were instead able to leverage their disadvantaged position in order to influence the very constitution in which they were struggling to be recognized. This in no way signifies that prior to the late 1990s, the mobilization of Indigenous community members in Ecuador was stagnant or nonexistent. In fact, the complete opposite is true. With the ending of the sixteenth century, Ecuador saw one of its first instances of Indigenous uprising with the legendary Shuar revolt in the Ecuadorian Amazon in 1599. Back then, this marginalized group's attempts at gaining traction were often futile considering the common thread that existed within this specific historical climate that sought the persecution of native Indians. Consequently, Ecuador didn't successfully separate to achieve independence from Gran Colombia until the year of 1830. About a century later, Indigenous insurrections in Ecuador made another resurgence as new agricultural taxes lead to uprisings in Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city, in March of 1920. Less than two decades later, Indigenous communities called for better salaries and an end to abuses with uprisings in Chimborazo on the Licto, Galte, and Pull haciendas in February of 1935. The following year, the *Comité Central de Defensa Indígena* (Indigenous Defense Committee) was founded.

The next thirty years were filled with the similar occurrences of sporadic uprisings from Indigenous communities, until the 1960s when the Indigenous movement took a significant turn. Here it should be noted that Indigenous manifestations began to incorporate more planning and strategy in order to raise the likelihood of future successes. One such example of strategic approach occurred on December 16, 1961, when twelve thousand Indigenous peoples marched on Quito for agrarian reform. In a

similar fashion, protests were held in Cotopaxi, Tungurahua, Chimborazo, and Azuay against the agricultural census in May of 1962 with Indigenous workers striking for higher wages in addition to land for landless workers. Unfortunately these demonstrations still failed in lastingly guaranteeing the freedom and protection of Ecuador's Indigenous peoples and in November of 1977, police officials tortured and killed local Indigenous leader Rafael Perugachi in Cotacachi. A year after Perugachi's brutal murder, Kichwa Achuar, Shuar, and Zápara peoples resiliently formed the *Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza* (OPIP, Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza).

Finally, in November of 1986, Indigenous community members organized to form the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). It is to this confederation that we can easily attribute a large portion of the success of Ecuador's Indigenous movement in the 1990s. With the opportunity that the new decade presented, CONAIE seized this chance by leading a nine-day long Indigenous uprising which began on June 4th, 1990. Three years later, Indigenous Amazonians in Ecuador filed a lawsuit in New York against Texaco for irreparable environmental damages to their lands. This was one of the first cases in which Indigenous groups asserted their position using legal tactics and the international proportions of this lawsuit prove that Indigenous movements have progressed immensely in their methods and campaigns over the years. In June of 1994, Indigenous groups unified in an uprising known as "*La Movilización Por la Vida*" (Mobilization for Life) in protest of new agrarian law. All of these revolts worked together, eventually leading up to the 1998 promulgation of Ecuador's eighteenth constitution which declared that the country of Ecuador was now a pluricultural and multiethnic state. In Carlos de la Torre's

The Ecuador Reader (2008), interviewee Nina Pacari recounts her childhood growing up in an urban Indigenous family. “At school I was taught history of the Incas, the Puruháes, the Caras; everything was in the past I asked myself: And, what am I? I am indigenous, I have not died, how is it that they affirm that all has ended? This was a shock to me” (Torre, 280). The promulgation of this constitution in 1998 was crucial because it was a step closer to achieving full-fledged plurinationality in which misrepresentations like what Nina Pacari experienced in school as young child are not only avoided but done away with all together.

Indigeneity in the Andes Region

Current political discourse in the Andean countries of Colombia and Venezuela and the inherent problems that exist within those countries has lead to trajectories very different from that of Ecuador. Resultantly, progression for the Indigenous communities within these Andean countries has remained distinctly unique in each case while nonetheless still challenging overall. As a result of these difficulties, the political landscape of these countries is in complete disarray much like that of neighboring Ecuador as well. While the cases of Colombia and Venezuela are strikingly similar to Ecuador’s current sociopolitical plight, they are still worth exploring as they provide a great deal of insight into why Latin America’s Indigenous populations tend to face the same fate no matter what the geographical context may be. Like Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela have also both been victims of authoritarianism, weak party systems, constitutional problems, corruption, and other factors that have deteriorated the sociopolitical foundations of these South American nations. Comparable to Ecuador’s transition to a democratic presidential republic, we must dissect the different trends that

illustrate these countries' transitions to democracy in order to comprehend how they have influenced the tumult that persists in their current political climates and how this impacts these countries' Indigenous peoples.

When it comes to Colombia, it is necessary to recall that Colombia was able to achieve its transition to a final democracy after surpassing one of the most dramatic periods of its history, which was very notorious for its violent era popularly known as "*La Violencia*." After being governed by civilians for many years, the government was overthrown in the 1950s and led by an autocratic regime until 1957, when liberals and conservatives signed an agreement to make a coalition government and overthrow the current powers. Since, the two democratic parties had shared governmental power until 1974 when Colombia's first presidential elections took place. In other words, Colombia's real transition to democracy was initiated in 1957; however, its democracy was not officially established until 1974 (Central Intelligence Agency). It is worth acknowledging that the democratic rule in Colombia has been difficult to sustain because of this influence.

In Venezuela, economic boom in the 1930s was spurred by the discovery of substantial oil deposits, which allowed the country the opportunity to alleviate its dependence on agricultural exports. During this time, Venezuela's leader grew his fortune through the thriving presence of political corruption until his death in 1935. Up until the end of World War II, Venezuelan society could be considered fairly unilateral. This changed with increased immigration to Venezuela by Southern Europeans. The 1960s saw widespread guerilla movements in Venezuela, including the Armed Forces of National Liberation and the Revolutionary Left Movement (Central Intelligence Agency).

UNDERSTANDING PLURINATIONALISM

Misconceptions in Mobilization

Though Ecuador maintains significant differences from Colombia and Venezuela and has made significant strides to recognize Indigeneity more openly, there is still an unstable political climate that persists throughout the Ecuadorian landscape. In June of 2010, the Correa Administration charged Indigenous leaders with terrorism and sabotage after protesting outside of the ALBA summit. The attack against the leaders and their organizations was the culmination of months of government-sponsored attacks on the airwaves that made unwarranted allegations against CONAIE and its leaders, attempting to portray them as violent incendiaries. Correa's campaign of persecution is a bold move from a self declared “progressive” government leading a ‘citizen's revolution’ that is instead carrying out persecution aimed at criminalizing the Indigenous movement that has never before been seen in all of Ecuador’s contentious history with Indigeneity. The creation of the citizen revolution by the Correa Administration is more of a guise to promote the perception of sociopolitical progress within Ecuador amid prevalent discrepancies between the people the citizen’s revolution is slated to help and those whom actually benefit from its social programs. Earlier this year, Ecuadorian Vice Minister Leonardo Arizaga gave talk at Georgetown University where he spoke on the numerous achievements this citizen’s revolution supposedly created for the country’s natives. Among these accomplishments, Arizaga noted that the citizen’s revolution allows for renegotiating foreign debt and allocating funds to social programs that foster community health. What’s more, Arizaga also purported that the institution of the

citizen's revolution in Ecuador has not only doubled the size of the nation's tourism industry but also reduced the poverty rate from 1-in-3 citizens to 1-in-5 and decreased its unemployment rate to the lowest in all of South America while simultaneously raising investment in higher education to the top. Yet, unfortunately these astounding benefits don't necessarily translate as easily for Ecuador's native Indigenous citizens. Although Arizaga claims that this revolution by the Correa Administration has created such wonderful successes like prioritizing care for the vulnerable and disabled and seeking a zero-tolerance policy on all forms of governmental corruption, this "full democracy" proves to be significantly lacking for those that are barred from access due to their ethnicity. Ecuadorian investment in higher education may be the highest in all of South America, but what does this mean for Indigenous community members that can't pursue an education because there aren't adequate schools in their rural towns or even more commonly, they can't afford to spend time pursuing an education because they must support their family through work in agriculture.

Analogous to Correa's accusations against Indigenous leaders of CONAIE are those aimed toward non-governmental organizations that work to support the nation's Indigenous peoples. In an effort to characterize NGOs as foreigners bent on imposing their agenda and threatening the Ecuadorian state, Correa warned Ecuadorians that they only exist to manipulate Indigenous peoples into rejecting oil and mineral extraction projects on their lands, ultimately leaving Indigenous communities poorer than before. Within these accusations is the prejudiced implication that Indigenous people don't possess their own autonomy, are feeble-minded, and according to Correa, must be under the influence of outsiders if they are successfully insisting on respect for their rights.

Leftist governments like Correa have increasingly used this discriminatory rhetoric, adopting a discourse virtually indistinguishable from rightist governments (like that of Colombia). As a consequence of Correa's biased discrimination, many NGOs are severely limited in their ability to actually assist the Indigenous peoples they aim to help thus perpetuating a cycle in favor of Correa's skewed ideologies. During my summer in Ecuador as an intern for the NGO social Entrepreneur Corps, I found that many of the projects we were tasked with completing were virtually impossible because of restrictions imposed by the Correa Administration. A project that I personally worked on was aimed to provide curriculum related to promoting health water habits to local schools in surrounding Indigenous communities. Not only did we create curriculum, but we also gave *charlas* or educational talks in person about the importance of clean water and distributed water-filters to families looking for a way to access potable water in communities that lack access to this basic human right. Unfortunately however, it becomes increasingly more difficult to distribute these filters at reasonable costs for working-class families and Indigenous peoples in Ecuador because the constraints that Correa has instituted on importations of raw materials necessary to build them. In light of this fact, one would think that Correa's citizen revolution would make more of an effort to ensure that all communities across the nation, Indigenous or otherwise, have access to potable water but astoundingly this is not the case and countless children and families everyday still risk contracting water-borne illnesses like amoebas from contaminated local water sources because the only other option is dehydration. Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable to this inequality. The large numbers of Indigenous children who fall behind on their educations because they are all too often home sick from school

after having ingested contaminated water represents this fact as a startling reality. It is not as though the Indigenous choose to live this way. It is that they have no choice. In her interview, Field Leader Sarah Webb also refers to and supports the notion that perceptions of Indigeneity have been utterly misconstrued:

“Right now, in particular, the indigenous communities in Ecuador are facing a difficult time in regards to the representation of their identities in Ecuadorian society. Due to recent clashes with the government, they are being painted as violent & war-driven people, which is far from the truth. Restrictions on freedom of the press, however, ensure that most Ecuadorians hear a version of the story that favors the current government. Even prior to these clashes, the indigenous peoples have faced discrimination in their overall societal representation. Most Ecuadorians describe them as "backwards," uneducated, poor, dirty, and lacking of modern knowledge & intelligence. They are, however, respected nation-wide for their hard work ethic, and close relationship with Ecuador's diverse environment” (Webb, 2015).

Implications of Plurinationalism

A plurinational state involves equality, autonomy, diversity, and sustainability for the coexistence of several different nationalities within a larger state where different peoples, cultures and worldviews exist and are recognized. Plurinationalism maintains that Ecuador’s Indigenous communities have a right to their land, a right to express their identity in their own language, and a right to have their languages be recognized as official within the territories where they are spoken. In her interview with Carlos de la Torre, Nina Picari recalls another instance in which the absence of plurinationalism

facilitated discrimination against her as an Indigenous individual. "When riding a bus, we did not speak Spanish. "We spoke Quichua, and the people in the bus said to us, "Talk like Christians." We just laughed, I think they must have been annoyed, as we did not take notice or confront them. We just continued as if nobody had said anything" (Torre, 281). Seeing as there was once a time when Picari was openly oppressed for speaking the language of her own heritage, it goes without saying that movements like these are absolutely necessary and of utmost importance. "*La regeneración cristiana había dulcificado las costumbres de los indios sin afeminar su carácter; había inclinado al bien su corazón, y gradualmente iba despertando su inteligencia y preparándola para una vida más activa, para un teatro más extenso, para el contacto, la liga y fusión con el gran mundo*" (Mera, 17). Similar to how others in society attempted to manipulate Picari and denounce her Indigeneity in the name of Christianity, a similar experience takes place against the native Indians in their reactions to maltreatment by surrounding oppressive societies. The prevalence of linguistic diversity that characterizes the country of Ecuador is one of the many pressing factors that has caused its Indigenous populations to strongly advocate for a revolution that would favor plurinationalism instead of blindly accepting the government's push to negate the existence of the country's multiculturalism.

"Plurinationalism challenged previous governmental attempts to divide Indigenous peoples, de-ethnicize them through labels such as "peasants," or denigrate them with racist terms such as "savages," "naturals," "tribes," "hordes," and "ethnics" (Becker, 54). Similar to how the face of the Indigenous movement is always evolving as a result of constant scrutiny, the definition being assigned to plurinationality has changed in the same way. Plurinationalism confronts the ways in which the political landscape manifests

itself against the Indigenous people, yet “the continued centrality of the Indigenous movement in Ecuador is owed to its constant advocacy of the plurinational state, with all that this implies” (Becker, 64). In a sense, this movement would not have been able to gain traction if it weren’t for its unwavering stance on the promotion of plurinationalism in the face of blatant opposition from sociopolitical elites. Original implications lead many to believe that an acceptance of Indigenous plurinationalism would influence divisiveness throughout the country and create an absence of sovereignty. This misconception aside, it is clarified that “the *indigenas* goal was in reality ‘to transform the nature of the present power of the uni-national, hegemonic, exclusionary, antidemocratic, and repressive State, and construct a New Humanistic, Plurinational, Society” (Sawyer, 217). The conception here is that this distinction would assist in creating more opportunities for Ecuador’s Indigenous peoples who prior to this were undoubtedly marginalized by a lack of visibility in a diverse and complex society. When the diversity of the Ecuadorian nation is affirmed, democracy as well as the ability for the Indigenous populations to mobilize is strengthened consequently.

First-hand Observations

An exploration of recent political events in Ecuador would reveal a widespread prevalence of discontent held by many of the nation’s peoples. However, this discontent runs much deeper than simple disagreements among political parties. The turmoil that has been experienced in recent history can be traced back to a far more complex history regarding relations between the country’s racial populations and its correlation to the complexity surrounding the state of Indigenous rights. Presented with issues facing the decision to assimilate into the rest of modern society while simultaneously resisting and

being resisted against, the Indigenous people of Ecuador are forced to live their lives much differently than the rest of the country. I witnessed this disparity first hand while living in an Indigenous community outside of Riobamba called Pulingui.



Figure 2: Maldonado, Camilo. The Cayambe Family. n.d. Photo. Pulingui, Chimborazo, EC

Every morning, my host-mother Teresa Cayambe (pictured above with her husband Luis in Figure 2) was up at the crack of dawn to walk her livestock up the mountain to the fields where they graze. Every morning she was back home in time to start preparing breakfast for her kids before they'd even awoken to get ready for school. My very first morning in this rural Indigenous community, I decided to help Teresa with this chore. I figured the fields couldn't possibly be too far, considering that this is something she must do *every single morning*. I quickly learned just how wrong I was. This daily ritual was no easy task and the journey was treacherous to say the very least. Down unyieldingly muddy roads and up rock-laden hills we walked with three sheep and two pigs, all while Teresa's infant nephew was swaddled in a blanket tied securely to her

backside. Eventually we had arrived to the fields, but the work to be done had only just begun. I'd incorrectly made the assumption that the animals would be able to roam freely and graze as they please, but feeding the animals actually requires harvesting large quantities of grass with what one might call a 'handheld scythe' and bringing it to where the animals are tied in order to prevent the animals from consuming someone else's crops. Cutting the tall grass from the ground is backbreaking in itself. Trying to carry an entire bushel across the field on that same back is nearly impossible. Trust me, I myself have tried... and failed miserably. Of course I certainly wanted to help provide a significant contribution to this family, but unfortunately I was literally physically incapable of doing so. One bundle of grass was heavier than I could have ever imagined. So, I was completely astounded when I watched Teresa quickly pick up the bushel with ease and sling it over her back with her nephew still in tow (An Indigenous woman in the same community can be seen carrying a similar bushel of grass as pictured on the next page in Figure 3). This anecdote may raise the question, why would anyone subject himself or herself to such laborious work? Teresa was skilled in many different forms of artisanry and could find much less strenuous work in the nearby city. What must be realized is that agricultural labor is what this Indigenous community thrives on as it allows for Indigenous peoples to maintain their Indigenous identity in a society that struggles to respect its ancient roots. This work is not only how Teresa provides for her family, it is just one of the many ways that Teresa exercises her right to maintain her Indigenous identity. Often times the choice between assimilation and autonomy is presented as less of a dichotomy and more of a balancing-act between both concepts, as explained in the following excerpt from my interview with Field Leader Sarah Webb:

“The indigenous populations in Ecuador have done an amazing job at maintaining their own identity, in spite of external efforts to assimilate or adapt into a modern/mestizo society. Most Ecuadorian indigenous populations wear their traditional indigenous dress (varying region to region), and they wear it with pride. While technology & modern advancement have changed their culture slightly, the Saraguros (and other indigenous populations) have done a beautiful job of using those advancements to project & reflect their culture & indigenous identity. New eco-tourism projects & educational advancements have also furthered the expression of indigenous identity, specifically within Saraguro” (Webb, 2015).



Figure 3: Atkinson, Ellen. Indigenous Woman Carrying Bushel. n.d. Photo. Pulingui, Chimborazo, EC

It was in this moment that I realized just how much Teresa embodies the strength of her Indigenous community, not only as an Indigenous individual, but also as a woman and mother. When telling me about the way of life in her community, she would often say to me, "*La vida para la gente Indígena es muy dura*" ("Life for the Indigenous people is very hard"). But I understood that this wasn't meant to be a complaint about the struggles they faced as a people, but rather a source of pride as it is a testament to the resilience they possess.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Changing Conceptions

"Being urban indigenous we lived a double exclusion-exclusion from the indigenous rural world because we did not live in a community, and exclusion from the nonindigenous world. In those times, we were almost the first indigenous students to go to school. My brother and uncle were forced to cut their braids during the first year. By the second year, when they transferred to the Franciscan nun's school, they made their first communion with their complete attire and full braids. [This change] was a result of the parent's struggle. An issue that had a very deep impact during school was a book reading contest, and the school had to be represented by the best student. In those times, I was their best student; nevertheless, I was not chosen to represent the school in the contest. I felt this was racism. It was a world where excellence was not acknowledged." (Torre, 280).

This was once the nature of Ecuadorian Indigeneity, as told by Nina Pacari. By addressing these injustices and allowing Indigenous peoples to reclaim their identities from the unjust grip that society's prejudices hold on its expression, a shift is made in which Indigenous persons can no longer be dominated by the control of elites. "At stake here is the power to define what it means to be identified as indigena and the ability either to dominate the other group or to assert one's dignity and autonomy as a member of a proud ethnic group" (Beth & Mijeski, 120). The autonomy of the Indigenous community is represented as a complete independence for the Indigenous peoples as well as from external control and influence of sociopolitical elites and freedom to exhibit agency and governance over their own communities. Not to be misconstrued with a form of secession, modern autonomy reasons that all of Ecuador's multiple ethnicities and nationalities regardless of Indigeneity are entitled to equality in domain and access to the resources necessary to maintain this sense of self-sufficiency. In doing so, Indigenous Ecuadorians are fighting to take back the representation of their identity from elites who have taken it and distorted it in an effort to insinuate that the Indigenous identity is everything but their own. While other societies may implicitly shape the way in which this identity is not only expressed but interpreted due to the ways in which Indigenous populations naturally must adapt to the evolving world around them, this in no way suggests that the Indigenous identity is to be done away with in favor of a society deemed more favorable or dominant. In fact, thanks to continued advancement of the Indigenous movement within the political realm, the Indigenous identity is stronger than ever.

Frontlines of Movement

Ecuador's Indigenous movement is widely considered one of the strongest in South America, if not the hemisphere. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) – comprised of regional and local Indigenous federations from the Amazon, Andes, and Coast – is a major player in Ecuador's political history, having toppled several governments and led uprisings that have paralyzed the country in response to legislation, international trade agreements, and extractive projects that threaten their rights. One such powerful uprising occurred recently due to the negotiated Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2008. To Ecuadorians, the FTA meant that the U.S. would have inundated Ecuador with inexpensive goods, potentially destroying the agricultural sector and Indigenous culture along with it. Countrywide protests and Indigenous roadblocks expressed outrage over these negotiations. Subsequently, the Ecuadorian government declared a state of emergency in. When former President Palacio repudiated Indigenous demands to stop negotiations, CONAIE promised to shut down the capitol city of Quito, and did. The government ultimately backed away from the FTA. CONAIE and its president stress the ever-growing danger that Indigenous cultures face with increased pressures from surrounding societies to assimilate, which in this case presented itself in the form of developments like the FTA.

Current Sociopolitical State

Predictions about the improvement of Indigenous relations with the Ecuadorian state under President Correa have unfortunately proven overly optimistic, even in light of successful Indigenous movements and previously instituted constitutions reflecting potential signs of progress. The government has pursued contradictory policies, promoting widespread natural resource extraction in reference to the development

proposals that will negatively impact the nation's lands. Government efforts to expand extractive industries in Indigenous territories have sparked widespread protests, to which the government has responded by efforts to criminalize legitimate social protest and crack-down on Indigenous organizations and their supporters. This past August, there was serious violence in the Indigenous Saraguro community in the Loja province in southern Ecuador. Approximately 1,500 legal officials entered Saraguro and began raiding houses and beating and arresting Indigenous peoples. This all came as an oppressive response to a peaceful blockade of the Pan-American Highway created by Indigenous community members as a form of protest against proposed constitutional amendments, the expansion of the oil frontier, mining projects, changes to water and education policy, labor laws and pensions, increased repression of freedom of speech, etc. Sarah Webb, Social Entrepreneur Corps Field Leader, works closely with Indigenous members of the Saraguro community and shared how she learned of this instance of overt human rights violation and police brutality in our interview:

“Working as a Field Leader in Ecuador this past year allowed me to observe, first-hand, many of the issues that indigenous communities in Ecuador continue to face in the 21st century. While the past 60 years have led to increased collaboration between indigenous & mestizo communities, indigenous peoples still face substantial discrimination & racism in Ecuadorian communities today. They are among the most impoverished populations in the country, and often lack access to basic health services or government assistance. Working with the Saraguros in particular, though, I learned so much about the resilience of these inspiring communities. The Saraguros are among the most gracious, compassionate, and

kind people that I have ever had the opportunity to work with. They maintain a beautiful & thoughtful relationship with the environment, an egalitarian approach to government & leadership, and a very community-focused relationship with their friends, families, and neighbors. The Saraguros, while progressing into the modern world (via technology, advances in medicines & farming techniques, etc.), are careful to hold tight to their tradition, heritage, and identity. They beautifully weave together their indigenous festivals and celebrations with new technologies, community tourism, and opportunities to improve the quality of life for their communities. The protest was not of violent nature -- at all -- but aimed to make a point about the Saraguros' dislike for the current government, specifically in regards to the new inheritance tax & the government's desire to amend constitutional term limits, so that the current president could again run for office when his current term expires next year. The government responded by deploying about 1,500 police officers to Saraguro, a town of about 4,000 people. The officers fired tear gas (excessively) into the peaceful crowd, and chased protesters into their homes, dragging them out into the street to either use excessive force or make un-warranted arrests. (It is also important to note that several indigenous officers were deployed, and faced intense internal conflict about how to respond. They would lose their jobs, and likely be jailed if they didn't participate in the arrests and excessive force that had been ordered of them, but agreed with the Saraguros who were protesting.) The government had 26 Saraguros detained for about 3 weeks, without charge, and used tactics in prison that have questionable legality. They withheld food, for example, or played loud

& violent music or sounds when the prisoners were allowed to eat. The Saraguros have now been released, but continue to face legal problems with the government over the protest. Even people who were not arrested have since been charged for the role that they played in the protests. None of this was conveyed in Ecuadorian papers, and only one source wrote about it internationally.” (Webb, 2015).

Conclusion

In brief, this research aimed to explore the development and reformation of Ecuador’s Indigenous identity in the presence of prosperous movements toward plurinationalism and simultaneous sociopolitical repression of that same objective. By reflecting on research questions surrounding the contention between assimilation and autonomy for Ecuadorian Indigeneity, it was uncovered that in the presence of either there is still much to be done in order to ensure that plurinationalism is consistently upheld nationwide and the rights of Indigenous community members go undisturbed. While Latin American countries like Ecuador are often celebrated for their ethnically diverse populations, this investigation has delved deeper into how these populations that are deemed so valuable on the surface must still organize in order to gain the same rights as their non-Indigenous counterparts. Identities inherent to one’s nationality should not be criminalized while others are deemed superior. Marginalization of ethnic minorities still exists the world over in many shapes and forms, however this in no way suggests that this ostracism can’t be combatted. In providing awareness to injustices such as these against Ecuador’s Indigenous peoples, opportunities for change become a welcomed possibility in the future.