

The Rights of Indigenous People in Ecuador

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Abstract: The 14 nationalities of Ecuador were oppressed for more than 500 years before coming together to fight for their rights. By creating CONAIE, the indigenous people have been able to reclaim their territory, protect what is theirs, and continue to support the efforts of their people in order to protect their well-being. The biggest fight that the indigenous people face today is receiving proper compensation for the damages done to the environment and the health problems that the Texaco and Chevron companies have created with drilling for oil in the Amazon. With a continued sense of being united, the indigenous people will continue to protect what is theirs after so long of being denied.

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History of the Indigenous People

The pre-Inca indigenous existence is hard to unravel but is very important to the concept of national culture in Ecuador as it left behind an archaeological records that differentiates its cultures from others in South America. Prior to the invasion of the Inca, the indigenous societies of Ecuador had complex and diverse social, cultural, and economic systems that varied in each region. In the Coast, the indigenous people continued the traditions of their predecessors and grew to specialize in processing local materials into goods for trade. Those of the Oriente focused on extracting dyes from the achiote plant for face paint, making coil ceramics, and extracting curare poisons for blowgun darts from various plants. A complex religious system developed in this region as many incorporated the use of hallucinogenic plants. In the Sierra, terrace farming of maize, quinoa, beans, potatoes, and squash allowed these groups to develop irrigation systems (Wikipedia, 2018). The Incaic period began around 1480 and ended fifty years later when the Spanish conquistadors, led by Francisco Pizarro and Diego Almagro, came to conquer the land. Although the conquistadors introduced their language as they imposed colonial rule, the language of the Andean Ecuadorians, Quichua, continued to spread. During the time of the Spanish colonization, self-liberated Africans and their offspring controlled what is known as the Zambo Republic and during a difficult time, the Spanish were forced to make alliances with the representatives from the Zambo Republic in order to subdue the Quijos in the north Amazonian territory, but not the Jiaroans in the center and south Amazonian regions. During the 19th century, there was a high demand for rubber and many Western countries wanted to obtain a partnership with the Amazonian region as two of the most high quality rubber trees grew in this region. The Mestizos were the group to first get involved and started trade with the western world but as the need grew larger, they sought out to use indigenous people as slaves since they

knew the land the best (Wiki, 2018). This was just the start of a long journey for the indigenous people towards their fight for freedom and for their rights.

Identifying the Groups

Who they are and where they live

There are 14 indigenous nationalities in Ecuador and an estimated 1.1 million people of the total population belong to one of the groups (IWGA, 2017). The 14 nationalities are spread among the three regions of Ecuador: the Oriente (or Amazon) which has Quichua, Shuar, Achuar, Siona, Secoya, Huaorani, Shiwiar, and Cofan; the Coast which includes the Awá, Chachi, and the Tsáchila; and the Sierra which includes the Otavalo of Imbabura-Carchi, the Tigua-Zumbagua of Cotopaxi, the Colta of Chimborazo, the Cañari of Cañar and Azuay, and the Saraguro of Loja. Within the Amazon, there are tribes that live in complete isolation and they are the Tangaeri, Taromenani, and the Zápara. The indigenous nationalities speak various languages that belong to different linguistic families. Quichua is spoken by most of indigenous people of the Sierra as well as by the largest indigenous groups in Amazonia while Barbacoan which is spoken by the northern coastal region. There are a variety of languages spoken by the tribes of the Amazon including Achuar, Shuar, Quichua, Záparo, and Western Tukanoan. All the languages, however, are native to South America and bi- or multilingualism is common in the Amazon as some tribes intermarry. Spanish is a common second or third language among indigenous people while English, French, and German are used by those who were educated abroad or have traveled extensively.

Modern Times

Today, roughly 4% of Ecuador's population is indigenous people with 0.24% coming from Coastal groups like the Awá, Chachi, and the Tsáchila while the remaining 3.35% live in the Oriente among various groups such as the Oriente Quichua, the Shuar, the Huaorani, the Sinoa-Secoya, the Cofán, and the Achuar. In 1986, the indigenous people formed the nation's first political organization: The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). This organization has been the primary political organization since and has been influential in national politics. In 1998, Ecuador signed and ratified the current international law concerning indigenous people, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989. This law recognized the indigenous people as true citizens and recognized the aspirations of these people to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life, and economic development all while maintaining their identities, languages, and religions within the framework of the state they live in (Wikipedia, 2017).

The Fight for Rights

According to Joussemet, although Ecuador today is officially recognized as “a multiethnic and a multicultural country” (n.d.) it has not always been this way as the indigenous people had to fight for the right to be heard and be granted the same rights as any other Ecuadorian citizen. Throughout Ecuador's history, the indigenous people, much like the Native Americans of North America, have been cast aside and used as slaves or killed off in order to conquer their land. In a Postcolonial Ecuador, many colonial institutions and practices regarding the indigenous people of the Sierra continued as Simón Bolívar's dream to create a liberal state where the indigenous people were redefined and included as citizens with equal status before the law appeared. The indigenous people continued to be treated as noncitizens, were legally defined

as minors, and had a separate treatment from the laws that governed citizens of the state. Until 1857, indigenous people were required to pay a tribute tax and abide by the laws that were set in place. After 500 years of oppression, first by the Spanish and then by those who inherited the postcolonial spoils, Ecuador's indigenous people began to organize in the middle of the 20th century. Earlier efforts were frequently initiated by organizations that were not exclusively indigenous and their goal was to reclaim Indian lands, territories, human rights, cultures, and identities. These, however, were not the first uprisings as Mijeski and Beck found a source that counts about 145 uprisings between 1543 and 1972 (2011) but they were the first successful attempts to create long-lasting institutions that represent the wants, needs, and demands of the various indigenous groups of Ecuador.

In 1986, CONAIE was formed by two regional indigenous groups from the Amazonian lowlands and the reason for creating this organization was to represent all the indigenous groups of Ecuador. CONAIE continued to focus on the protection of indigenous lands and territories but also began to bring about an intensely ethnic agenda which included the promulgation of a number of demands to the Ecuadorian state. The creation of CONAIE in 1986, according to Mijeski and Beck, "represented a sharp turn in the course of the larger indigenous movement" (2011) as many countries were following suit. Today, some of the the main objectives of CONAIE are: consolidate the indigenous peoples and nationalities of the country, fight for the defense of lands, indigenous territories and natural resources, strengthen bilingual intercultural education, fight against colonialism and neocolonialism, and promote community self-legislation and develop integral communitarianism (CONAIE, 2017).

Current Fight

The history of petroleum development in Ecuador dates back to 1878 and in 1937, Ecuador allowed Shell Oil the first oil concession in the Oriente region of the Amazon. The government of Ecuador, at one time, sought to strengthen Ecuador's economy by developing the petroleum, fishing, and agricultural sectors. Together, Petroecuador and Texaco Petroleum explored and produced oil in the Oriente. This lasted for 15 years and during such time, the indigenous people made their voices heard that the government was encroaching on their territories and that the oil extraction process could be detrimental to the surrounding environment. In 1993, a group of Ecuadorian citizens of the Oriente region, filed a lawsuit against Texaco claiming that the oil mining operations "polluted the rainforests and rivers in Ecuador...resulting in environmental damage and damage to the health of those who live in the region" (author/yr). This lawsuit went on for years with Texaco claiming that they did their share to clean up the sites and had extensive remediation measures in place should a problem occur. In 2011, a court ruled that Texaco had to pay an \$8.6 billion fine and another \$8.6 billion to the Amazonian people for damages but the bill could be lowered if they issued an apology within 15 days. Of course Chevron (Texaco is part of), refused to pay the fine and believes that the charges are fraudulent. This case was a very historic one because it is the first case where a multinational corporation was being sued by the indigenous people of the country where the crime was committed (DemocracyNow, 2011).

Health Implications of Oil Contamination

In northeast Ecuador, oil contamination has had a direct impact on the lives of many people in the area. For over five decades these people have struggled to survive as a result of the contamination on their living conditions. Indigenous people have been strongly influenced by the

oil waste left behind by petroleum operation. Oil waste causes pollution that contaminates water supplies of the communities in the area. Discarded petrochemicals such as formation water have been released into the environment and have leached into the Amazon Basin's headwaters which serve as the water supply for many communities (Gay et al., 2010). The water is used not only for human use (drinking, cooking, bathing, washing clothes) but also for livestock to drink. With an increase in contamination, humans, livestock, and wildlife (mainly fish) have suffered the health effects. Skin rashes, cancer of the skin, stomach, rectum, soft tissue, kidney, cervix, and lymph nodes, and sores have been reported in people within proximity to the oil fields and contaminated areas. For women living in the area, miscarriages were more common in women who lived in close proximity to oil-contaminated areas (Gay et al., 2010).

In response to the effects of oil contamination on the health of those that live there, peasants and indigenous people from the Amazon have presented their complaints to various administrations of the national Government of Ecuador. Through their own organizations and with support from national environmental groups, these residents have demanded that the companies clean up the pollution and that the people are compensated for the damages caused by oil-related contamination (Sebastian & Hurtig, 2004). Some small things that have been done to help include covering some waste pits, building schools, and constructing roads. All of which do not face the root causes of the problem but instead "patch" the problem. It is argued that oil is of importance to Ecuador's development however, despite the revenues, improvements in socioeconomic conditions in the country have fallen short of expectations (Sebastian & Hurtig, 2004). In order to fix the problem at hand, measures for cleaning up contaminated sites should be put in place and enforced. Future development planning should have strict environmental controls and careful long-term monitoring of oil activities.

Conclusion

The indigenous people of Ecuador, much like the indigenous people of any country, have faced a long standing fight for their rights and their territory. Although modern Ecuador is more welcoming of their indigenous people and continues to show support for their platforms, the relationship has been built up over years of strife. The 14 nationalities continue to protect what is theirs, educate the rest of the country and world about their goals, and continue to fight for protecting their people. From the domination of the Incas to the oppression from the Spanish conquistadors, the indigenous people of Ecuador have shown that through uniting, rather than dividing, more can be accomplished.

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