

The Struggle for Autonomy:
Finding a Balance Between Westernization and Tradition
in Sarayacu, Ecuadorian Amazon

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Approved: _____
Dennis Galvan

The Sarayacu are an indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon struggling to maintain they define as their traditions and culture in the face of territorial challenges by outside interests. The influx of modern Western technology, material goods and culture due to globalization has changed the community. To protect their rights, it is necessary for them to incorporate some Western technology, but they have also adopted some amenities purely for convenience. They are now working to limit how this affects daily life, establishing a precarious balance between incorporating aspects of Western technology and culture and maintaining traditional customs and practices. If they incorporate too much from the West, the Sarayacu risk losing their identity. If they do not incorporate enough, they risk not being able to protect their rights. Maintaining this balance is particularly important in their struggle for autonomy because the government is looking for any reason to reject the community's claim for self-determination in their territory. Furthermore, to maintain credible claims with the Ecuadorian government,

Sarayacu officials must try to maintain at least the appearance of a certain degree of traditionality. In this the balance will be discussed in the following six areas: (1) culture and the maintenance of ancestral knowledge, (2) management of land and natural resources, (3) health, (4) education, (5) money, and (6) cultural tourism and ecotourism. All of these areas are important in the establishment and maintenance of self-determination and the struggle for autonomy in their territory.

In the struggle for autonomy, it is necessary to gain outside support. The search for outside support, however, illuminates many problems the Sarayacu face because of their identification as an indigenous group. To cultivate relationships with local indigenous and non-indigenous groups as well as national and international organizations, community officials take advantage of something called “symbolic capital,” described as the resources available to the Sarayacu because of the outside perception of them as “bearers of tradition.” By using symbolic capital, community leaders are employing something called strategic essentialism because of the simplistic nature in which it portrays the community. These conflicts over identity affect everything the community administrators try to do in their struggle for autonomy. Despite these difficulties, the Sarayacu, as a community, provide a good example for other indigenous communities on how to deal with outside pressures to modernize, while maintaining strong ties to tradition and culture.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
PREFACE.....	vi

SECTION	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
Use of the term “indigenous”.....	14
Constructing Ethnic Identity and Culture.....	16
Strategic Essentialism and the Strategic Use of Indigeneity.....	20
Symbolic Capital.....	23
Social Capital.....	24
Modernization.....	27
III. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	30
Sarayacu and the Direct Effects of Globalization.....	30
Case Before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights.....	34
IV. EXAMPLES OF THE BALANCE BETWEEN WESTERNIZATION AND TRADITION.....	41
Culture and the Maintenance of Ancestral Knowledge.....	41
Management of Land and Resources.....	43
Health.....	49

Education.....	52
Money.....	57
Cultural Tourism and Ecotourism.....	62
V. STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY.....	68
VI. CONCLUSION.....	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	78

PREFACE

During the month of July and the first part of August 2006 I found myself in the Ecuadorian Amazon where I thought I would be getting away from the electronic conveniences and material goods that are so prevalent in my life in the United States. However, on my third night there, after eating dinner cooked on a wood fire and lighting candles for light, everyone at the house gathered round and watched “Iron Eagle,” a bad American military movie with Lou Gossett, Jr., on a laptop computer charged by the power from solar panels. Until that moment, I did not really see the extent to which American popular culture and technology could permeate even the most remote communities. Despite the computers, solar panels, and digital cameras, I realized I was still clinging to my biased, constructed and admittedly naïve version of what it means to be indigenous in the Amazon of Ecuador. As proven by this experience and many other experiences during my stay, Western consumer goods and electronic media, like computers and clothes, as well as basic economic principles like the money-based economy, have reached all areas of the world; but how much can communities like the Sarayacu take advantage of these resources and ideas without losing their identity in the process? These are the questions I wrestled with during and since my short stay in Sarayacu.

In the summer of 2005 I traveled in Bolivia and Peru after a study abroad program in Chile. As I visited various indigenous communities around Lake Titicaca, I began to develop the idea that has now become my Honors College Thesis. The manner in which the indigenous peoples reacted to the encroachment of outsiders interested me. The

peoples on the islands on the Peruvian side of the Lake capitalized on the tourist industry, putting on the same show everyday, a display of not only strategic essentialism, but of the commodification of culture,¹ with the principle goal of making money. I wondered how the situation would differ if the indigenous groups did not give in to the economic pressures from outside, making me think of the Sarayacu. Before leaving for Chile, I established email contact with them for a project concerned with their case pending before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and after my experience in Peru, I decided to explore whether I could build on this relationship for my thesis. I continued my correspondence with them in an effort to establish a rapport. After doing a project involving the Sarayacu government's attempt to manage land use in their territory, I introduced the idea for my visit: a research project on their community and how their internal and external relationships affect the success they have when dealing with the government and other outside interests. They approved and I made plans to stay in the community for just under five weeks.

I arrived in Sarayacu on July 8, just in time for the annual general assembly attended by members of nearly every family in the community. Any notions I had of being in an *uncivilized* setting were quickly dashed. Watching the community members debate the future direction of the community was exciting, as close to direct democracy as I have seen. Right away, it gave me insight into the many complex issues facing the community. Though I understood very little because they were speaking in kichwa, their language, some things seem to transcend language barriers. The atmosphere in the room was enough for me to understand the importance of what was happening. Luckily, the

¹ See discussion of *strategic essentialism* and the *commodification of culture* in Literature Review section.

issues at hand were later explained by various members of the community, including the members of the family with whom I stayed.

Because of my project, the community members with whom I had direct contact did not treat me as a typical tourist. Normally, the small groups of tourists who come through the community live in a separate area with a general outline of each day's events, participating in activities designed to give them an idea of what life is like for the Sarayacu. According to two community leaders, tourism provides the Sarayacu with a platform to teach outsiders about their life and their struggles. They said their hope was that the tourists would then take what they learned and pass it on to others outside the community and outside Ecuador.² I stayed in the community center, rather than the tourist lodging, and the people there allowed me the freedom to observe and participate in many normal community activities. But in many ways, I served the same purpose as a normal tourist, a means of promoting the community's message to the rest of the world. Another community leader told me he was glad I had come to do a project on social issues because in time it would show how the Sarayacu change as the world changes. I will be able to present in my thesis what they are currently doing to manage their situation, but he stressed that their plan is not fixed. Therefore, I was and continue to be a resource for the community in their struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

Very shortly after arriving, I was introduced to the family I would be staying with and from whom I would draw much of the information I am presenting in my thesis. The family provided me with a place to stay and food to eat and I thank them for their generosity. Without their help and honesty, many of my questions would have gone

² Interview #13d.

unanswered. Sometimes afraid to ask a question for fear of offending someone, I was able to ask the family members. On days where I did not have a specific agenda for my project I often tagged along doing daily chores or helping to watch the kids (after they warmed up to me). Research was relatively relaxed, most accurately described as participant observation, consisting merely of the conversations I had with members of the community and my own personal observations. To facilitate conversation, I found the best method was to participate in everyday activities. Drinking chicha, a drink made by the women of the community by cooking yucca and then mashing it up—mostly by chewing it and spitting into it—and then letting it ferment, particularly endeared me to the community members. After showing them I could handle the chicha, the people I talked with began to open up and offered most of the information I needed and answered my questions more candidly.

After living in Sarayacu for four-and-a-half weeks,³ the internal and external relationships I hoped to examine proved to be completely inadequate as a basis for analysis. While still important, nothing struck me more than the seemingly contradictory mix between tradition⁴ and the influx of Western material goods, electronics and money. Everyday life is still dominated, for the most part, by customs and practices resembling those of an earlier time, before the influence of modern conveniences, like toaster ovens and cars. From cooking methods, to the very physical nature of necessary activities, to the dominant role of men over women in the household, many aspects of life in Sarayacu appear unchanged with time. However, contrast this with the incorporation of computers,

³ Ideally I would have stayed longer or visited again after the focus of my thesis became clear in order to obtain more information from the Sarayacu, but time and money constraints limited my ability to do so.

⁴ See discussion of *tradition* in the Literature Review section

radios and other amenities only acquired in the last decade or two and it presents an interesting dilemma. How does the incorporation of these amenities influence the current and future identity of the community? Incorporating too much could mean losing their unique identity, but if they fail to incorporate enough, they will not be able to handle the challenges facing them and most indigenous groups in this increasingly globalized world and thus be unable to protect the rights they have already been granted. So far, they have seemingly done well to balance the two sides, but there are signs the scale may be tipping in the future. A delicate equilibrium has been forged and a move either direction could mean the end of their way of life.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sarayacu, a small indigenous¹ community in the Ecuadorian Amazon, are fighting hard to preserve their life of hunting, fishing, and subsistence farming against the encroachment of outside parties. It is becoming increasingly clear this will not be possible without the incorporation of certain aspects of Western technology and culture.

The local administration uses laptop computers to generate and present mandatory reports to the regional and national governments in a format familiar to government officials and radio communication now allows for faster and more efficient responses to local problems and outside threats. But, in addition to the influx of technology, many people in Sarayacu also incorporate other products from the outside, such as clothes, junk food, and most detrimental to local culture and what they consider traditional values,² a money-driven economy. Money has changed everything, amplifying social differences within the community that once relied on only reciprocity, good will, and fair trade. It is important to note that the incorporation of Western goods and technology is not just out of necessity, but also by choice and in many cases because of convenience. Other products have allowed some members of the community, particularly wealthier members, to become less self-reliant, living more at the whim of the market than by producing the goods they need to survive. They choose to enjoy some of these amenities because they make life easier, just like people in the rest of the world.

The Sarayacu are faced with a dilemma: if they do not incorporate at least some Western technology they run the risk of not being able to present a profitable alternative

¹ See discussion of the term *indigenous* in the Literature Review.

² Interview #23.

for land use in their territory, leaving them unable to stave off the threats to their way of life from the government and other outside organizations, like oil companies, who have a great interest in exploiting the rich resources on Sarayacu land. If they incorporate too many consumer goods, too much money and modern electronic devices, they risk losing their identity by changing lifestyle so much that they no longer maintain what they consider traditional customs and culture, essentially assimilating into the more mainstream culture found in the rest of Ecuador. Thus, the Sarayacu must balance the incorporation of certain aspects of Western technology and culture with local customs and practices in order to maintain control over the changes in culture and the overall identity of the community. This will be the true test of success for the community in their struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

A young community leader described the Sarayacu as living in harmony with the land, using the land to get what they need to survive, but making sure they conserve the land for future generations.³ Another leader expressed fear that by incorporating too many outside amenities and practices, they will lose this identity, relying too heavily on outside material goods for survival.⁴ As they have already seen, with the influx of outside resources comes a change in perspectives among members of the community.⁵ Money is becoming more important than kinship to some members of the community and in turn, some people look for ways to better their situation financially rather than trying to advance the cause of the entire community. In stark contrast, however, an elder in the community described Sarayacu as “uncontaminated,” referring to both the natural habitat

³ Interview #13c.

⁴ Interview #19.

⁵ Interview # 23.

in which they live and the manner in which they live their lives. He said, “Sarayacu society is great because money is not the determining factor in most relationships. Rather, kinship is.”⁶ The influx of money, consumer goods and Western technology are beginning to change this. Certain aspects of their culture, like the traditional music, are becoming less prevalent as the young people in the community prefer to listen to boom boxes and the music from the outside, like merengue and cumbia.⁷

Furthermore, community leaders emphasized the importance of maintaining kichwa, their indigenous language.⁸ At the moment, kichwa has been preserved. However, even I was able to notice the greater influence of Spanish in the everyday vernacular of many members of the community, comparing the kichwa spoken by the elders to the kichwa spoken by younger members of the community.⁹ Since language is so closely tied to identity, the loss of kichwa as the primary language of the community would signify a huge change in community practices and identity. Incorporating too much culture from the West, in this case language, will cause a shift in their identity, lending little credence to the claims of traditionality they need to make to maintain the rights they have been granted as part of the indigenous minority in Ecuador.

The other side of the line is just as treacherous. Failure to incorporate enough Western electronics and aspects of Western culture, while allowing the Sarayacu to

⁶ Interview # 28. Translated by author at time of interview.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview #13b.

⁹ Listening to the kichwa spoken by the elders I was unable to determine what they were talking about. However, the kichwa spoken by younger members of the community (roughly 45-50 years old and younger) contained enough Spanish words here and there that I was often able to infer at least the topic of conversation. I attribute this to the more prominent role Spanish has played in the education and the external interactions of this generation of community members. It shows how language evolves over time.

maintain what they consider their traditional identity, may leave them incapable of fighting the incursion of outside parties into their territory. Unable to put together an opposition to this intrusion because of technological and cultural barriers, Western technology would be forced upon them in the form of highways and machinery to better facilitate the extraction of the rich reserves of resources contained within their territory. If this happens, they will no longer be able to maintain their current methods of living. Animals for hunting will be driven away, vegetation destroyed and water contaminated by the sudden change in land use. Waste from oil exploration, which has already hurt many people in the region, will continue to harm the surrounding the habitat, which I will discuss later in Background Information. The land open for cultivation of traditional crops like yucca will become more and more scarce as people move into the areas opened up for industrial and commercial pursuits. People from the “outside world” and companies would soon surround them on all sides, eager to capitalize on the Sarayacu administration’s failure to provide the government with good reason to maintain their current state of separation. With them they would bring money and practices that if allowed to gain permanent hold in Sarayacu, would change the direction of the community.

In the end, this would eventually prevent the Sarayacu from being able to practice their culture and they in turn would lose the identity they are trying to preserve. Because of this, a certain level of adaptation is necessary. Members of Sarayacu need to be able to speak to the Ecuadorian government in words the government will understand. To do so, despite the desire to maintain kichwa, the ability to speak Spanish is absolutely vital and adapting certain elements of Western culture, such as general governmental structure, is

helpful so the distance between the two sides will not be so great. As one member of the community said, “to know the Western world is to be able to combat it and define the place of the Sarayacu in this globalized world.”¹⁰ Community leaders and planners are thus trying to avoid allowing the community to fall too far in either direction in order to avert the seemingly extreme consequences that come with either move.

In the struggle to maintain the balance between incorporation and isolation, “the outside world” (*el mundo afuera*) plays a prominent role. In my conversations with community members, this term was applied loosely to encompass a wide range of people and places. The “outside world” can mean the area and people directly outside of Sarayacu, but can be expanded to include the rest of the world. Depending on the context, the significance of the term changed. When talking with a community leader about the tendency of young people to leave Sarayacu to work for a few years after finishing high school, he spoke of how important it was for them to learn about and experience the “outside world,” in this case referring to the cities and other parts of Ecuador, in order to decide whether they wanted to return and live the rest of their lives in Sarayacu.¹¹

However, on many other occasions, community leaders spoke of the need to know the “outside world” in order to be able to defend themselves against it. In this context, the “outside world” refers to the Ecuadorian government, also referred to as “the state” (*el estado*) or “the government” (*el gobierno*), and the rest of the world. They spoke of the need to know institutions like the Organization of American States and the United Nations and included these and other similar organizations and governmental bodies as

¹⁰ “*Conocer el mundo occidental es poder combatirlo y definir el lugar de los Sarayacu en el mundo globalizado.*” Interview # 5.

¹¹ Interview #11a.

part of the “outside world.”¹² In all contexts, the “outside world” is used to refer to everything outside of Sarayacu and includes everyone from the *extranjeros* (people from outside Ecuador) to the local campesinos.

Interactions between community members also figure prominently in the struggle to maintain the delicate balance. While none of the tensions between individual factions in the community seemed to be leading towards a fissure during my stay in the community, there are definitely differing views on how the community should proceed in the future. One elder expressed concern about the incorporation of technology by young people in the community, specifically referring to the stereos and music young people listen to. He said he and his friends prefer more traditional music played with instruments like the flute and drums, made by community members.¹³ While no one specifically spoke to me of problems they had with the incorporation of computers and digital cameras, most likely because I interacted with mostly community leaders and other people connected with the administration who are currently using these tools for their projects, it is also probable that upon interviewing a larger number of community members, different opinions would arise regarding their use. Tensions also exist between factions of men and women. Women were granted official political equality recently. However, some still feel they are being marginalized within the community.¹⁴ While this political equality was in evidence at the general assembly, with women participating and seeming to carry equal clout as men, the proceedings were still dominated by male voices. Furthermore, in the households I observed, there were still clearly defined

¹² Interviews #5 and 13d.

¹³ Interview #28.

¹⁴ Interview #5.

masculine and feminine roles, resembling the traditional *machismo* seen throughout the rest of Latin America. The other area of tension seems to be between what I will call migrants and non-migrants. In the community I would define three kinds of migrants: (1) Those people who have moved from the community and lived outside Sarayacu for long enough to not be considered culturally Sarayacu anymore; (2) Those people who currently move between the outside world and Sarayacu, undertaking business endeavors; and (3) Those members of the community who have left to work or serve in the military only to return to live the rest of their lives in Sarayacu.

Not much was said of community members who had left the community except for when a group of them were accused of stealing dynamite and trying to sell it to Colombian guerillas, creating major political problems for the leaders of the community because the Ecuadorian government tried to use the incident to label the community as subversive, rather than the individuals involved.¹⁵ The migrants who go between the outside world and the community contribute to the growing gap between rich and poor that I observed in the community. While no one specifically addressed the role of this second kind of migrant in the widening of the gap, the economic plan being developed by some community leaders reflects a desire to reverse this growing trend and avert some of the inevitable tensions that would come with the widening gap.¹⁶ Finally, the migrants who leave the community to work and then return are the most common. A high percentage of men and many women leave around the time they finish high school and experience what the outside world has to offer.¹⁷ In my observation, it often seemed the

¹⁵ Interviews #36a and 36b.

¹⁶ Interview #23.

¹⁷ Interviews #11a, 18, and 31.

members of the community I spoke to who did leave for this purpose were often also the ones who were working hard in the efforts to preserve the culture and historic practices of the Sarayacu. Perhaps their time outside the community left them with a somewhat idealized version of what the community is and thus upon returning they have worked hard to reestablish what they felt they were missing while in the outside world. The tensions discussed above have a great effect on the direction the community goes in the future, but it does seem the community is fairly united in the manner in which the administration and other community leaders are dealing with the problem the community faces in the present and in planning for the future.

The problem facing the Sarayacu can be seen in a variety of different areas. However, the conflict over land use in the Sarayacu's territory most clearly illustrates the predicament they face. The Ecuadorian government owns the rights to the resource-rich subsoil and has opened it up for oil exploration, but community leaders, with the help of outside organizations like the Centro for Derechos Económicos y Sociales (CDES), are struggling to prove this not only violates their rights as indigenous people and citizens of Ecuador, but also that they can use the land in a manner outweighing the financial benefits of oil exploration. If they cannot provide a viable alternative to petroleum extraction, community leaders feel the community risks being overrun by the advances of both the government and la Compañía General de Combustibles, the Argentinean oil conglomerate that owns the oil exploration rights in Block 23 of the Ecuadorian Amazon.¹⁸ To do so requires the use of outside technology so the reports they turn into the regional and national government are comprehensive and will be understood outside

¹⁸ Interview #13c.

the community. Additionally, extensive mapping of the territory was necessary to delineate exactly which areas of land are under deliberation. With the help of outside organizations, the community administration has been able to do all of this and has halted the oil exploration for the time being. Now they are in the process of creating a comprehensive Land Management Plan showing the government how they plan not only to conserve the land for future generations, but how they plan to profit from the resources above the soil. They have also developed programs for education and economics among others that will help to prepare them for the struggle they face in the future to maintain their identity without being overrun by external social, technological, and economic forces, both national and international. Thus far, they have incorporated the necessary modern Western technology to achieve their goals, but with a small influx of technology and other Western goods comes the desire by some members of the community to incorporate more. This is where community leaders now find themselves, trying to determine how much they can allow into the community from the outside without undermining the community's claims to autonomy and self-determination and their desire to remain relatively self-sufficient. In a conversation with another American who had been to Sarayacu a few years prior to my visit, he expressed his disappointment at the change he saw in the amount of trash from western goods, mostly food, he saw in the community.¹⁹ Many people, particularly young people, are intrigued by many of the things they can do with the electronics they have for administrative purposes beginning to use it not just for work, but for pleasure as well. The life of a member of Sarayacu is often physically taxing, despite their relaxed attitude. Hard work is the reality, not the

¹⁹ Interview # 16.

option. Just like in the West, however, many amenities, like chainsaws, boat motors, gas generators, as well as medicines and pre-packaged food, make life easier and some members of the community who have the financial means are beginning to take advantage of them. Signs of change have begun to creep into the community and government officials are working to determine what change is for the better and what change is for the worse, which is why they developed the Life Plan.

There are many areas where the balance between incorporating aspects of Western technology, culture and material goods and maintaining traditional culture and practices can be seen. First and foremost, the Life Plan of the Sarayacu establishes a direction for the future of the community over the next 50 years. Development of the Life Plan started recently and continues to be an ongoing project for members of the community administration. Interviews were done with all of the families in Sarayacu to determine what they felt was needed to better the community in the future.²⁰ After the interviews, members of the local administration began to put together a plan in written form that sets out to “guarantee...health, education, culture, sustainable development, management of the territory and natural resources, and maintenance of ancestral knowledge”²¹ because these were the areas in which the people expressed the most concern. In all of these areas, the Sarayacu balance the use of technology and other western amenities and practices with the desire to maintain and reinforce certain historical methods and practices.

²⁰ Interview #23.

²¹ “*Que garantice...salud, educación, cultura, desarrollo sustentable, manejo de territorio y recursos naturales, y conocimiento ancestral.*” Interview, via email, with member of the community. Received 2/6/2006.

In health, they do not avoid pills and remedies brought into the community by outside doctors, but they continue to practice and teach traditional medicine, practiced by many generations of shamans, or traditional healers, in the community. Education is used to give the young people of Sarayacu the tools necessary to function in both worlds. They focus on bilingual education and environmental sciences, so the students speak both kichwa and Spanish and learn about the area surrounding them.²² Current and future university projects are in development to expand the number of subjects taught, so the education received by the students will be more applicable outside the community as well.²³ In many ways, the maintenance of culture and ancestral knowledge go together. Both cases consist of practices and customs being passed down from generation to generation and mixing these with new knowledge and practices. However, the methods used to pass the information down have changed. Electronic media, like videos and digital photographs, in this case serve to reinforce this culture and knowledge by ensuring its passage to the young people of the community. This also allows the Sarayacu more ways to share their culture with others and provides visual examples for outside organizations to see what they are trying to preserve.²⁴ Finally, under the Life Plan, as briefly discussed above, the issue of land use and sustainability clearly illustrates the balance being forged by the Sarayacu.

Outside of the components listed in the Life Plan by a community leader, there are other areas where Sarayacu leaders are attempting to balance the influence of external resources with the maintenance of customs and practices. Their approach to tourism is

²² Interview # 12.

²³ Interview # 11b.

²⁴ Interviews # 13a and # 32.

one way in which community leaders plan to maintain this equilibrium. Limiting the number of tourists in the community and refusing to put on a show for them allows the Sarayacu's government to incorporate aspects of the market economy, but on their own terms when dealing with the outside world.²⁵ Despite the destructive influence of money in the community and efforts to limit its effects, it is often necessary to have some. The Sarayacu administration saves money within a community fund to help facilitate interaction with outsiders, either through obtaining goods or services or to pay legal fees and other expenses. Individuals in Sarayacu also have personal savings from their interaction with outsiders, for use at community stores or when they go to the city. There are also members of the community who work outside Sarayacu in either personal business endeavors or for wage jobs in order to bring personal monetary capital into the community.²⁶ However, as I will discuss later, community leaders in charge of economic development are attempting to steer people away from using money as a facilitator for interaction within the community. Nonetheless, members of the administration and individuals in Sarayacu are thinking of pursuing other commercial projects within the community because they realize their changing reality necessitates at least small amounts of money.

Possibly most important to the preservation of culture in this balancing act is the pursuit of national recognition of their rights and autonomy in their territory. In this pursuit there is a seemingly inherent contradiction between the methods used by Sarayacu leaders and individual community members in attempting to achieve their goals and the actual goals for which they are fighting. How can they fight for recognition of the rights

²⁵ Interview # 13d.

²⁶ Interview # 11a.

they are granted as citizens of Ecuador by using rights they are granted because they are part of the indigenous minority. In the end, it may not be possible for the Sarayacu to achieve all of their goals, but by maintaining the balance between incorporating aspects of Western technology and culture and maintaining current and historical customs and practices, they give themselves the best chance possible to continue their way of life. It is a question of whether the end can justify the means, even if the final outcome is not exactly what they wanted.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of the term “indigenous”

According to anthropologist Adam Kuper, “in the rhetoric of the indigenous peoples movement the terms ‘native’ and ‘indigenous’ are often euphemisms for what used to be termed ‘primitive.’”²⁷ In other words, the use of the term “indigenous” often locates the people in the past, with a lack of technology and sophistication. This interpretation of the word “indigenous” places these communities at the bottom of the scale of development, with Western culture at the top, creating an idealized and incomplete view of what characterizes such people. In a sense, this traditional indigenous identity has been imposed on these communities by colonizers; for the purpose of this thesis, this definition of “indigenous” does not apply.

Recent movements for indigenous rights have been directed toward this political marginalization, pushing instead for the rights to auto-definition, or as Wilmer states, to “establish control over the label and its meaning.”²⁸ In this vein, I prefer to follow the discourse of anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena. In her discussion of “indigenous mestizaje” in Peru, she rejects the notion that being indigenous excludes people from the economic advantages that come with being non-indigenous and that indigenous people

²⁷ Kuper, Adam. “The Return of the Native.” *Current Anthropology*. Volume 44, Number 3, June 2003.

²⁸ Wilmer, Franke. *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics*. SAGE Publications. Newbury Park. 1993. 36.

develop just like other groups,²⁹ although they may choose a different course for development than the Western world. As the Sarayacu and other indigenous groups demonstrate, being categorized as indigenous does not imply a lack of civilization or the quaint notion of a community untouched by the passing of time. To modernize and to develop are not specific rights of the West and it is possible to do both while maintaining strong ties to current and past indigenous practices.

For reasons discussed above, and as briefly explained in footnote three, the term “indigenous,” as regards the Sarayacu, refers primarily to their self-identification as an indigenous group for legal purposes. In their case, language plays a large role in this identification as well. The Sarayacu speak kichwa as their primary language, a derivative of the language spoken by the Incas, thus providing them with a historical tie to the region, through their maintenance of this very important link to ancient culture. Furthermore, in their case before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, the Sarayacu legal team claims protection under a section of the Ecuadorian Constitution titled “Collective Rights of Indigenous, Black, and Afroecuatorianos Peoples.” In Article 83, the Constitution recognizes the membership of indigenous groups who identify themselves as “nationalities of ancestral roots” in Ecuadorian society and in Article 84 guarantees the protection of certain rights based on their identity as an indigenous group.³⁰ Because the legal defense calls for the protection of their rights under this

²⁹ De la Cadena, Marisol. “Reconstructing Race: Racism, Culture and Mestizaje in Latin America.” *NACLA Report on the Americas*. Vol. XXXIV, No. 6. May/June 2001.

³⁰ *Constitución Política de Ecuador, 1998*.

<http://www.georgetown.edu/pdba/Constitutions/Ecuador/ecuador98.html>

section of the Constitution, they must identify themselves as an indigenous community.³¹

In addition, the Sarayacu are a member of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza, in the region they inhabit, further proving their identification with both the term “indigenous” and some of its uses, at least in the context of rights protection in their effort to control the land use in the region where they live. But, like in other indigenous communities, community leaders expressed a desire to break down barriers related with the term “indigenous,” to allow them to define the term as what they are rather than the idealized version of what they should be.³² This leads to a discussion of the construction of this indigenous identity and culture.

Constructing Ethnic Identity, Culture, and Tradition

For the purposes of this thesis, while it may often seem ethnic identities are ascribed and immutable or even primordial, they are not. The continuing evolution of the Sarayacu and their struggle to assert their own definitions of who they are shows ethnic identity to be a social construction, subject to change rather than a set of intrinsic characteristics. Joanne Nagel argues, “ethnic identity is *both* optional and mandatory, as individual choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at a particular time and place. That is, while an individual can choose from among a set of ethnic identities, that set is generally limited to socially and politically defined ethnic categories with varying degrees of

³¹ *Resolución de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de 6 de Julio de 2004: Medidas Provisionales por la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos Respecto de la República del Ecuador—Caso Pueblo Indígena de Sarayaku*, translation by author.

³² Interview #13b.

stigma or advantage attached to them.”³³ Ethnicity is both a choice and an imposition. The Sarayacu, individually and communally, can choose to identify themselves as indigenous or as citizens of Ecuador or any other term they choose, but they cannot entirely escape the identity given to them by outsiders and the prejudices inherently attached to these labels of identity. This concept is very important because it is evident in many of the problems being dealt with by community leaders in regards to their treatment by the government and in their interactions with other outside groups. In building relationships with outside organizations, the terms community officials use to define themselves are very important because they determine the nature of the relationships.

Conflicts over territory and resources often have a great effect on how groups define themselves, particularly when, as Nagel puts it, “particular ethnic subpopulations” are designated “as targets for special treatment.”³⁴ When a policy or law gives an advantage to a group for identifying itself in a particular way, especially when it deals with the allocation of resources, it makes sense for the group to do so. Such policies can serve to support the strengthening or reforming of ethnic ties, frequently increasing mobilization of marginalized groups struggling to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. Thus, a fight for access to resources can often play a large role in the continuous construction of ethnic identity for indigenous groups. This is certainly relevant in the case of the Sarayacu, whose fight to control land and resource use in their territory centers on their rights as a self-identifying indigenous people. However, it is also important to note, “Official ethnic categories and policies can also strengthen ethnic

³³ Nagel, Joanne. “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture.” *Social Problems*. Vol. 41, No. 1, February 1994. 156.

³⁴ Ibid. 157.

boundaries by serving as the basis for discrimination and repression,”³⁵ erecting larger barriers for groups like the Sarayacu, who, according to community leaders, want to break these barriers down.³⁶

Culture plays a big role in ethnic identification and is also a social construct. As previously discussed, people in industrially developed societies tend to have an idealized version of indigenous culture: primitive, uncivilized, untouched by the passing of time and the changes seen in the rest of the world. Nagel says, “It is important that we discard the notion that culture is simply an historical legacy; culture is *not* a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods. Rather we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present...cultures change; they are borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted.”³⁷ The Sarayacu provide a good example. Not only have they incorporated some Western technology, practices and material goods into their everyday culture, but also some practices now considered important symbols of their culture were adopted from other indigenous communities in the Amazon. For example, face painting was and continues to be a significant part of Sarayacu culture. Both men and women participate in this tradition, used as a means of self-expression, particularly for the women, and to celebrate special occasions and important community events. However, this important symbol of Sarayacu culture was actually shown to them by another community. By blending and borrowing from another culture, they started a practice that remains a principal identifier

³⁵ Ibid. 158.

³⁶ Interview #13b.

³⁷ Ibid. 162.

and source of pride for the community.³⁸ The Sarayacu are in the process of putting Nagel's argument into practice, involving the "*reconstruction* of historical culture, and the *construction* of new culture."³⁹ History is important to recognize and maintain, but culture is not limited by it. Just as ethnic identities change over the years, the culture that accompanies these identities change as groups adopt and adapt aspects of other cultures until it becomes another part of their identity.

Since the idea of tradition is tied closely to identity and culture, it must also be looked at as a social construction, a choice made by the people defining it and subject to continuous change. Therefore it is unfair for outsiders to judge whether or not a community, like the Sarayacu, are maintaining or abandoning tradition based solely on whether or not they incorporate modern goods and technology. In my discussions with various community leaders and other people in Sarayacu, it was obvious they place much emphasis on history when talking about tradition. Traditions were often described as something passed down from "generation to generation."⁴⁰ However, tradition is not limited by time and it is not maintained in opposition to development and progress. As demonstrated by the history of face painting described above, customs and practices change and thus when referring to traditional customs and practices, they can be preserved in conjunction with the incorporation of modern technology and goods. Thus, the Sarayacu are the only ones who can tell us whether they are maintaining tradition. In this thesis, tradition will refer to customs, practices, and a set of values the Sarayacu wish

³⁸ Interview #39.

³⁹ Nagel. 162.

⁴⁰ Interview #33.

to maintain regardless of when they were adopted, with an understanding that many of these customs, practices and values have a basis in historical Sarayacu society.

Strategic Essentialism and the Strategic Use of Indigeneity

Strategic essentialism, a term popularized by Indian literary critic, Gayatri Spivak, is the practice of using and especially emphasizing certain important or “essential” characteristics, traits or ideas, while de-emphasizing others, in order to gain a strategic advantage in a given situation. Spivak discusses strategic essentialism in its most frequent usage, regarding marginalized groups, also known as subaltern groups.⁴¹ These groups present themselves in a simplified manner, which allows them to achieve certain goals. For this reason, many others, including myself, have found strategic essentialism to be a useful concept in analyzing the circumstances of indigenous communities. For example, Elizabeth Garland describes the situation of the “bushmen” of the Kalahari Desert in Africa. Western representations of these “bushmen” had them living “in a state of pristine, primitive isolation” continuing their economic tradition as hunters and gatherers. However, this was not the case. By the late 1970’s, many of them were employed as soldiers by the South African Defense Force in its fight in South West Africa (now Namibia) and others had assimilated into the wage labor system, showing they no longer represented the more primitive, idealized identity imposed on them by the West. Still, an organization called the Ju/wa Bushman Development Foundation (JBDF) worked to secure land claims on the basis that their “lot” would be improved if they were able to

⁴¹ Spivak, Gayatri. “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.” *The Spivak Reader*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. Routledge. New York. 1996.

continue their tradition of hunting and gathering, a tradition they had all but abandoned.⁴²

It is often easy to idealize indigenous groups in this manner, not allowing for progress, change, adaptation and assimilation.

Adam Kuper, in his article, “The Return of the Native,” questions the essentialist nature of indigenous movements throughout the world, putting the onus on indigenous groups for their return to simplified notions of who they are. Despite claims to the contrary, Kuper argues, “the way of life of modern hunters or herders may be only remotely related to that of hunters and herders who lived thousands of years ago.” Rather, “It is...assumed that each local native group is the carrier of an ancient culture...under threat from an intrusive material civilization associated with cities, with stock markets, and with foreigners” and because of this they should be given special privileges.⁴³ It is also important to note how both progressive activists and conservatives can strategically use indigeneity to justify policy and practice. Not only can indigenous groups use their identity strategically to gain rights and privileges, governments can use it to justify forcefully keeping these indigenous groups separate from the rest of the population, as was done in South Africa with the creation of the Bantustans.⁴⁴

While Kuper raises an interesting point in his analysis of indigenous claims and their often essentialist nature, without basis in reality, I agree with Alcida Rita Ramos, who criticizes what she sees as an oversimplified argument that does not hold up to

⁴² Garland, Elizabeth. “Developing Bushmen: Building Civil(ized) Society in the Kalahari and Beyond.” *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1999. 82-83.

⁴³ Kuper. 390.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 394.

examination when looking at specific instances.⁴⁵ The Sarayacu provide a good case to analyze his argument. While they use their indigenous identity strategically in a number of cases, particularly for legal purposes, they do not fit as nicely into Kuper's simplified world in which indigenous groups seem to claim traditional rights for traditions they have not maintained. As Ramos notes, "In Latin America we cringe at the paper's final statement," in which Kuper says: "The conventional lines of argument currently used to justify 'indigenous' land claims rely on obsolete anthropological notions and on a romantic and false ethnographic vision. Fostering essentialist ideologies of culture and identity, they may have dangerous political consequences." Instead, with less interaction with outside groups than many of the cases he examines, the Sarayacu have not assimilated into Western culture. They depend on certain things produced outside the community, particularly technology, but for the most part, they remain in their historic territory, with a society based on kinship relations and subsistence farming, just as it was centuries before according to a young community leader.⁴⁶ Thus, after being placed under closer scrutiny, Kuper's argument oversimplifies what is really a complex issue for many indigenous groups. If tradition is understood as a product of social construction as well as being rooted in history, indigenous groups should not be criticized for using tradition and other strategic arguments to gain access to territory and resources that may help them become economically stable and secure.

⁴⁵ Ramos, Alcida Rita. Comments on "The Return of the Native." *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 44, No. 3. June 2003. 398.

⁴⁶ Interview #23.

Symbolic Capital

In the search for bonding and bridging social capital, discussed below, and the struggle for control of resources, indigenous groups often take advantage of something Bourdieu labels, “symbolic capital.” They fill the role of “bearers of tradition,”⁴⁷ a harkening back to a time when man lived more in tune with nature rather than in conquest of it. For many, according to Brysk, indigenous groups provide an alternative to modernization and many marginalized groups and disenchanted Westerners throughout the world identify with them.⁴⁸ While the Sarayacu and other indigenous groups, like those examined by Kuper, show this assumption to be inaccurate, indigenous groups are still able to take advantage of this form of capital because of the common perceptions of indigeneity. In part because of the idealized version of indigeneity discussed earlier, indigenous groups benefit from the desire of outsiders to learn about and explore that which they do not know and understand. There is a certain exoticism that appeals to many people searching for answers in a world otherwise full of commercialism and Western popular culture.⁴⁹ Symbolic capital merely refers to the wealth of resources that become available because of the symbolic historical and traditional status indigenous groups are given by outsiders.

The concept of symbolic capital relates closely to strategic essentialism, discussed above. Taking advantage of symbolic capital is, in essence, strategic essentialism. As an indigenous group, Sarayacu officials are able to appeal to a wide base of support to take advantage of rights granted only to them and other indigenous groups because of their

⁴⁷ Brysk, Alison. *From Tribal Village to Global Village: Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America*. Stanford University Press. Stanford, California. 2000. 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

historical and symbolic status in world history. For this, they receive widespread recognition and support from regional and international bodies. In allying themselves with other indigenous groups they are able to take advantage of this form of capital by sharing a history of marginalization. Even though the conflicts faced by indigenous groups throughout the world are numerous and varied, they are able to unite under a common banner because of the public's acceptance of their symbolic bonds and their formation of what Anderson describes as an "imagined community."⁵⁰ In other words, a historically marginalized group in South America is the same as a historically marginalized group in Africa, but the indigenous group's ability to tap into symbolic capital as a resource sets them apart from other marginalized groups throughout the world. Symbolic capital because of indigeneity allows these groups to put primordialist conflicts on hold to embrace a constructivist all-encompassing indigenous identity, playing on the sentiments of those people from whom they are seeking support. As will be explained later, the very nature of symbolic capital can be problematic because of the manner in which it sets indigenous groups apart from society as a whole, limiting them in many ways, including how they are able to identify themselves.

Social Capital

Social capital refers the resources people have or potentially could have because they are part of a particular social group or have a relationship with a particular social group or organization. In this sense, having social capital is generally understood to be good.

⁵⁰ Young, Crawford. "The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism." *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*. University of Wisconsin Press. 1993. 15.

According to Patricia Wilson, “Social capital increases local economic prosperity” because of the “level of inter-personal trust, civic engagement and organizational capability in a community.”⁵¹ Thus, it should follow that traditional kinship groups, like the Sarayacu or other communities classified as indigenous, would be relatively prosperous. However, as in the cases of many of these groups, such as the Ju/'hoansi described by Garland, they are not and continue to be marginalized economically, partly because of the common perception of them as indigenous. As Michael Woolcock points out, “social relationships in general constitute a unique, vitally important, but nonetheless highly problematic resource in terms of effecting positive developmental outcomes, and are thus the basis of major theoretical and policy dilemmas.”⁵² This dilemma will be discussed later as it relates to the specific case of the Sarayacu. However, in spite of the problematic nature of social capital as a resource, it still provides a useful tool for analysis of the Sarayacu and their social relations. Therefore, it is necessary to examine two types of social capital vital to this discussion: bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam, a professor of government and public policy at Harvard University, describes bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is “inward looking” and “tend[s] to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups”, while bridging social capital looks outward and brings together people from a variety of different backgrounds. In other words, bonding social capital is what you would establish in a

⁵¹ Wilson, Patricia. “Building Social Capital: A Learning Agenda for the Twenty-first Century.” *Urban Studies*. Vol. 34, Nos 5-6. 1997. 745.

⁵² Woolcock, Michael. “Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework.” *Theory and Society*. April 1998, Vol 27(2). 170.

close-knit neighborhood or among friends, where bridging social capital is more like the resources that become available when you branch out and does something like study abroad, building relationships with people unlike you. According to Putnam, as in the case of the Sarayacu, bonding social capital is good for “mobilizing solidarity,” but in cases where outside support is needed, bridging social capital becomes the most important type of social relationship.⁵³

Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter supports Putnam’s argument. In comparing strong and weak social ties, he concludes that the “weak” ties (i.e. bridging social capital) are actually more valuable. To spread information or publicize certain issues, “whatever is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and traverse greater social distance, when passed through weak ties rather than strong.”⁵⁴ Getting more people interested in a cause is easiest when a person or group has more bridging social capital. For example, by telling someone whom you have never met a piece of information, there is more chance the information will reach a larger number of people. If you told your best friend the same piece of information, it is likely the information will remain within a smaller close-knit group. Thus, for the Sarayacu, Granovetter implies that while community mobilization is beneficial, it is not as important as establishing strong bridging relationships with people from outside the community in order to generate more interest and support for their cause. However, as I will argue later in the chapter, “Struggle for Autonomy,” both bridging social capital and bonding social capital

⁵³ Putnam, Robert. “Thinking About Social Change in America.” *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster. New York. 2000. 22.

⁵⁴ Granovetter, Mark. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *American Journal of Sociology*. Volume 78. Number 6. 1366.

create difficulty for the community because of what the Sarayacu need to do to cultivate these relationships.

Modernization

Modernization, the process in which societies become modern or industrialized, is often seen to be in contrast to tradition and in the Western world marks progress and an improved quality of life, with greater access to amenities and resources. Because of this, indigenous groups who fight to maintain historical customs and practices are often seen to be in opposition to modernization or anti-progress. However, as Wilmer says, "It would be incorrect to say...that indigenous peoples simply oppose modernization or progress. Instead, they insist on the right to define and pursue development and progress in a manner consistent with their own cultural context...to choose the degree and terms of their interaction with other cultures."⁵⁵ The desire to maintain historic customs and practices does not imply an aversion to progress and modernization. Conservatives in the United States do not seem to be heavily criticized and considered anti-modern if they desire to maintain tradition. The only difference is when indigenous groups want to do so it prevents others from taking advantage of the resources on their land. Indigenous groups are allowed to live peacefully on the periphery of modernization until resources bring them into conflict with the state. As Wilmer states, "It is when the state in its capacity as a manager of resources impairs a particular group's ability to sustain a way of life that it

⁵⁵ Wilmer. 54.

gets into trouble.”⁵⁶ In cases where the state feels it needs the resources to support their process of modernization, the needs of the indigenous groups become secondary. In Ecuador, the process of modernizing and the rich mineral resources in the Sarayacu’s territory create the problems they now face.

In many ways, the indigenous rights movement and its dependence on reinforcing and reviving traditional customs and practices can be seen as a criticism of modernization as a community-builder.⁵⁷ For example, while community leaders claim the Sarayacu do not reject modernization off hand,⁵⁸ there is a certain element of disdain for the effects it has on tradition and culture, particularly in regards to the market economy and the abandonment of traditional values, like reciprocity.⁵⁹ They take advantage of modern advances they can use without abandoning historic customs, practices and culture. Through my many conversations with community leaders it became clear that while modernity is not rejected entirely by the community, evidenced by their incorporation of computers and other Western technology and material goods, they do not “assume that automatic benefits or improved quality of life follow from modernity.”⁶⁰ Thus, groups like the Sarayacu, according to Wilmer, work to present alternatives to Western industrialization and modernization. This outlook allows for the incorporation and adaptation of certain modern Western goods and technology, but also permits the indigenous groups to maintain traditional, subsistence relationships with the land. Continuing with Wilmer’s argument, “their cultures have emphasized technologies of

⁵⁶ Ibid. 48.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 194.

⁵⁸ Interviews #13d and 43.

⁵⁹ Interview #23.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 201.

consciousness and ecosystem management...choos[ing] ways of adapting to the limits of the natural world," rather than "changing the natural world wherever it resisted human manipulation."⁶¹

The incorporation of modern Western technology and goods by some members of Sarayacu, while also trying to limit their effects on everyday life conforms to this argument. In my conversations with various members of the community, I discovered their opposition to modernization is on many levels, but mainly due to what they feel it has done to the United States, the *shining* example of modernization in the world. They feel it has created a society based on individualism rather than kinship and materialism instead of reciprocity and basic needs. In this sense, their entire set of goals can be seen as a critique of modernization. They seem to agree with "The Haudenosaunee Message to World," delivered at a United Nations NGO meeting in 1977: "Western technology and the people who have employed it have been the most amazingly destructive forces in all of human history. No natural disaster has ever destroyed as much...the way of life known as Western Civilization is on a death path to which their own culture has no viable answers."⁶² No one I spoke with took the argument quite that far, but many people echoed the sentiments in this statement during my stay in Sarayacu.

⁶¹ Ibid. 207.

⁶² Ibid. 205.

III. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sarayacu and the Direct Effects of Globalization

The Sarayacu are an indigenous community of roughly 2000 people in the Ecuadorian Amazon, concentrated in 5 villages within their territory. For resource exploration purposes, the Ecuadorian Amazon is divided into blocks for allocation to individual companies. The Sarayacu are the largest indigenous community in what is known as Block 23, with their land making up about 60 percent of the designated 200,000 hectares, roughly one-sixth the size of Lane County, Oregon. The Sarayacu describe themselves on their website as a people who live by farming, hunting, and fishing, with little contact from the outside world.

Sarayacu can only be reached by walking, canoe, or plane because there are no established roads in the territory.⁶³ However, I found soon after arrival they have fairly extensive contact with the outside world. The plane enters daily, carrying both community members and outsiders to and from the community and access becomes easier with each passing year. A young community leader even said he is looking into obtaining an airplane and pilots are currently in training so they will not be restricted by the schedules of the charter services in Shell,⁶⁴ where the airport for all flights into the Amazon in Pastaza Province is located.

Due to this increased access to the outside world, various aspects of modern Western culture and technology have reached Sarayacu, many within the last decade.

⁶³ Official Sarayacu website. www.sarayacu.com

⁶⁴ Interview #1.

However, outside influence in the community goes back 150 years to the Catholic missionaries who established the first school in Sarayacu to evangelize and teach Spanish. Although community leaders admitted they have benefited from learning Spanish, they stressed their overall displeasure with the nature of the missionaries' work, devaluing the community's language and culture and trying to replace it with their own.⁶⁵ From the beginning, Western influences have proved to be both positive and negative for the Sarayacu. Over the years, they have incorporated and adapted many Western amenities, like clothes, cooking utensils and metal tools, along with the modern Western technology that has become increasingly important recently. For example, many families now have radios to listen to broadcasts from Puyo directed specifically at indigenous Amazonian communities. Furthermore, a few stores have popped up throughout the community where the people can buy anything from clothes, to school supplies, to candy. This has led to problems with trash in the community, a problem that, according to a community leader, did not exist before the influx of Western goods.⁶⁶ Some members of the community who have the financial means are moving toward using more materials from the outside in the construction of homes, such as metal roofing. However, while, in my observation, the Sarayacu have obviously benefited from the incorporation of Western goods and tools, they have maintained many aspects of their tradition and culture when they could easily have changed due to the better availability of outside amenities and markets for them to sell the goods they produce.

As briefly mentioned, despite the recent influx of other options, such as the production of cash crops for commercial sale, subsistence agriculture remains the basis of

⁶⁵ Interview #13b.

⁶⁶ Interview #42.

the economy in Sarayacu. To supplement the food supply, the community still relies on hunting and fishing to take advantage of the diminishing, but still rich, resources in the area. Although many people in Sarayacu have incorporated many tools from the outside, methods of doing things remain more old-fashioned by Western standards. Women still cook on wood fires because they lack electricity or gas to power stoves and make chicha in the same way it was made generations before. Land is cultivated without even the help of draft animals and plows. Men work with hand tools in carpentry projects and the machete is a universal tool used by everyone. I participated in a few carpentry projects. We not only had to carry the wood from miles away where the tree had been cut down, but we had to shape the wood with a hand planer just to make it usable, something rarely needed for carpentry projects of this nature in the United States. Aside from the occasional use of a chainsaw, all the work was done without the assistance of modern technology. Partly due to the tools and materials available, dwellings continue to be built in a more traditional and historical style, often with thatch roofs and twine holding everything together, materials found in the jungle surrounding the community. Even though more modern building materials are being incorporated, such as the metal roofing mentioned earlier, they are still used on a limited basis by families. The most obvious departure from the use of materials available in jungle is seen in some of the communal buildings in the city center, which have tile floors laid on top of concrete pads, but even these buildings maintain many elements of Sarayacu culture in their design.

Apart from the goods many people have incorporated, they have also adapted many aspects of Western culture. Starting with the Catholic missionaries' arrival, organization of authority in Sarayacu became more defined, creating a council of

government (*consejo de gobierno*) to handle community affairs, resembling a more Western style of governmental organization with more clearly defined positions of authority and responsibility. Even within this more Western context, the Sarayacu have maintained many of the historical positions of authority, most notably the kurakas or municipal leaders, who still play a prominent role in the decision-making in the community.⁶⁷ Unlike in most Western countries, a young community leader told me the Sarayacu feel it is very important to place young people in positions of authority. As he explained to me: “The flower blooms when young and then wilts, dies, and rots. In order to maintain the fight, the community needs to continue reinforcing it with young people in positions of power.”⁶⁸ The elders in the community act as advisors and work on more external affairs, but are still looked to for guidance in difficult situations.⁶⁹

Adaptation rather than adoption directs the incorporation of other Western ideas and organization. Traditional medicine and healing practices, passed down through generations of shamans, still play a prominent role in the health care of community members, even with the availability of Western medicine. Also, spiritual health and stability is still very much guided by traditional cosmology and its emphasis on living in harmony with nature, despite the influence of Catholicism. While aspects of Christian dogma have been adapted into the spiritual vision of the community, a report written by the Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales (CDES) claims the Sarayacu have not abandoned their belief in the power of nature, not allowing Christianity to limit their

⁶⁷ Chávez, Gína, Rommel Lara and María Moreno. *Sarayaku: El Pueblo del Cenit Identidad y Construcción Étnica*. FLACSO and CDES. Quito, Ecuador. May, 2005.

⁶⁸ Interview #3. Translation done at time of interview.

⁶⁹ Interview #18.

beliefs, but rather viewing it as an addition to an already established spiritual tradition.⁷⁰

As described by LeBaron, in his description of the development of the modern Maya, adaptation does not mean assimilation or integration. Furthermore, indigenous communities, like the Maya, “could modernize but retain their identity.”⁷¹ It seems the Sarayacu are trying to adapt similarly.

Case Before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights

Conflicts over land use in the Sarayacu’s territory, to be discussed in the body of this thesis, stem from the problems created by the push for oil exploration in the region by the Ecuadorian government because of an agreement they have with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The legal case provides the context for much of the involvement of NGOs and other outside organizations and is a catalyst for the incorporation of modern Western technology. The necessity to safeguard the community from further incursions by multinational corporations, through educating the community members and protecting their rights, became apparent in 2002 when the community was forced to defend itself both physically and legally against the attacks of government forces and the Compañía General de Combustibles (CGC) from Argentina. Thus, by maintaining a good balance between incorporating Western technology and material goods and maintaining tradition, Sarayacu officials can prevent this from being a continuing conflict and establish their authority in the region.

⁷⁰ Chável, et al. *Sarayaku*.

⁷¹ LeBaron, Alex. “The Creation of the Modern Maya.” Edited by Crawford Young. *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*. The University of Wisconsin Press. 1993. 271.

After over two decades of environmental abuse by ChevronTexaco during its oil exploration in Block 23, ChevronTexaco pulled its operation out of the region in 1992 as the government bowed to protest by a large group of indigenous people from Sarayacu and other communities to halt oil exploration activities.⁷² When ChevronTexaco pulled out of the Ecuadorian Amazon, they had destroyed 2.5 million acres of rainforest because of contamination from oil spills two times the size of the Exxon Valdez disaster. They also left behind 350 open waste oil pits containing highly toxic chemicals and polluted the groundwater with 20 billion gallons of highly contaminated wastewater, leading to numerous physical ailments for members of the Sarayacu community and other surrounding communities.⁷³ A study by the London School of Epidemiology found that in the region, “cancer rates were many times higher than historical norms and that larynx cancer in particular was found to be 30 times higher than the norm for males,”⁷⁴ thought to be tied to the waste from oil extraction activities.

During this same year, the community finally gained official title to their ancestral land, which should have given Sarayacu officials the right to participate in future land use decisions in Block 23. However, Ecuador adheres to the Spanish colonial principle, codified in Article 247 of the Ecuadorian Constitution that the land belongs to those who live on it, while the resources under it belong to the state.⁷⁵ Thus, after quickly renouncing its previous agreement, in 1996, the government of Ecuador signed a contract

⁷² Handler, Marisa. “The New Amazon.” *Orion Magazine Online*. January and February 2005. <http://oriononline.org/pages/om/05-1om/Handler.html>

⁷³ “Clean Up Your Toxic Legacy in the Ecuadorian Amazon.” <http://www.texacorainforest.org/A0036.chevttox.broa.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Lobe, Jim. “Oil Giant Lawsuit Signals Power of Third World Courts.” *Inter Press Service*. Vol. 11, No. 82 *UN Journal*. May 9, 2003.

⁷⁵ *Constitución Política de Ecuador, 1998*. <http://www.georgetown.edu/pdba/Constitutions/Ecuador/ecuador98.html> and Handler. “The New Amazon.”

with CGC to explore and exploit the oil resources in Block 23. CGC then sold shares of Block 23 to Burlington Resources, an American company, as well as Perenco, a French oil company⁷⁶ and then ChevronTexaco re-entered Block 23 in 1999, becoming a partner company of CGC. With little actual consultation with the community, aside from attempts to bribe local officials, the government and CGC began preliminary exploration in 2000.⁷⁷

Due to this lack of consultation, as well as numerous other rights violations, the Sarayacu community sought legal recourse with the help of CDES, citing their protected rights under Articles 84 and 88 of the Ecuadorian Constitution of 1998. Articles 84 and 88 establish the Sarayacu's right to be consulted and participate in decisions involving resource use and conservation on the land for which they have title.⁷⁸ Exhausting national legal options, they turned to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. Since then the community has consistently received support of the regional courts for the assertion of the rights guaranteed to them by their Constitution and numerous other international covenants, all ratified by Ecuador. However, this has not dissuaded the government and the oil companies from continuing oil exploration in the region, which has had detrimental effects on the health and safety of the community.⁷⁹

The success of the legal team in temporarily halting oil exploration can be attributed in part to the support the community has received from regional and international human rights organizations. Ecuadorian Non-Governmental Organization's

⁷⁶ Handler. "The New Amazon."

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Sarayacu Official Website.

⁷⁹ *Resolución de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de 6 de Julio de 2004: Medidas Provisionales por la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos Respecto de la República del Ecuador—Caso Pueblo Indígena de Sarayaku*, translation by author.

(NGOs) Acción Ecológica and CDES have arranged for regional government officials to visit Sarayacu and hear about the environmental and cultural degradation, such as the open waste oil pits and the abnormally high cancer rates, caused by the oil exploitation in the region. Amazon Watch has also provided the Sarayacu with materials, such as digital cameras and solar panels to charge the batteries to document their struggle against the oil companies.⁸⁰ This documentation allowed the Sarayacu to present their case before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and the United Nations, where they received support. However, in the grand scope, this has been little more than a moral victory as CGC has continued to exploit resources without the agreement of the Sarayacu. This is in part because the decisions made by the Inter-American Court are not binding, but are instead more like suggestions.⁸¹ Without enforcement power, the Ecuadorian government and CGC have no reason to change their actions in response to the decision made by the Inter-American Court.

Despite these victories for the Sarayacu and their legal team in the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and expressed concern by the United Nations, CGC continued with its program for exploration and extraction in the region. Fourteen hundred and thirty-three kilograms of high explosives, for the purpose of seismic exploration, remain undetonated in the region, causing much concern for the people and recent political problems when members of the community were accused of stealing some of these explosives and trying to sell them to Colombian guerillas. Community leaders see this as a case of the government trying to paint them as subversives to have an excuse to take

⁸⁰ Handler.

⁸¹ *Resolución.*

over their territory.⁸² In 2002, the government and CGC undertook military and paramilitary efforts to force concession on the part of the Sarayacu, attacking and arresting protestors, and trying to intimidate the entire community. For example, the former Sarayacu President received numerous threats on his life and while traveling to the U.S. to testify before the United Nations, was badly beaten in the Quito airport.⁸³ Other community leaders have been subjected to similar treatment. Many were tortured when taken captive by the military and paramilitary forces as described in the *Resolución de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de 6 de Julio de 2004*.⁸⁴

To cope with a lack of outside support and to halt the onslaught by the military and oil company workers, the Sarayacu, as a community, mobilized and attempted to take matters into their own hands. Community leaders declared a state of emergency for almost a year, with women taking care of the children in the community center while the other members of the community spread out into the surrounding jungle to defend the territory, in guerilla fashion.⁸⁵ As a first line of defense when challenges came in December of 2002, twenty-five Peace and Life camps were set up on the border of Sarayacu territory in the Amazon, each inhabited by about fifteen people to form a barrier against the intruders. At one point, outnumbered soldiers surrendered to a group of Sarayacu women, who took them captive just long enough to educate them on “the sanctity of the Amazon.” The encounter was recorded in the documentary “Soy defensor de la selva” and described by Handler in her article “The New Amazon”:

⁸² Interviews #36a and 36b.

⁸³ *Resolución*.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *Soy Defensor de la Selva*. Documentary. 2004.

The women led their captives back to a village, where they requested the soldiers' arms, sat them down, and spoke to them about the sanctity of the Amazon. They explained that the Sarayacu people are connected to the land, that it has held and supported them and their ancestors, that it is alive, that it must be treated with respect, and that oil drilling is an unacceptable violation. Then the women returned the soldiers' guns, each one making an individual statement, a message of hope, as she handed back a weapon. Thus schooled, the soldiers were released.

Like many other groups struggling to assert their rights, the people I spoke with in Sarayacu were very well informed on the business of their abusers. However, in spite of these efforts to educate themselves and others, Sarayacu officials have not been able to keep the Ecuadorian government from selling mineral rights to oil companies like CGC.

Why have the Sarayacu been unable to achieve the goals expressed by community leaders for land use in Block 23? The simple answer is the oil on their land creates an economic interest causing the government to disregard the protections of indigenous groups in the Constitution and other regional agreements. From the government's perspective, oil exploration in the Amazon has been necessitated by the agreement made with the IMF. Surprisingly, after Ecuador's oil boom of the 1970's, overall poverty and Ecuador's foreign debt have increased. Because of this, Ecuador sought the assistance of the IMF to help with its financial troubles. However, the aid provided by the IMF was given on the condition that the Amazon be opened to oil drilling to pay off interest on the foreign debt. Interestingly, the oil exploration has not produced enough revenue to pay back even the interest on the foreign debt, prompting Sarayacu leaders to ask why it is necessary to extract the oil at all. To counter, the local Sarayacu administration has

presented and is still developing their Land Management Plan as an alternative for land use in the region, which I will discuss in detail later.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Sarayacu website.

IV. EXAMPLES OF THE BALANCE BETWEEN WESTERNIZATION AND TRADITION

Culture and the Maintenance of Ancestral Knowledge

Maintaining culture and ancestral knowledge are of principle importance to the Sarayacu, according to community leaders.⁸⁷ Implied in the passing down of culture is a desire to preserve the history of the community. For generations, traditions, practices and community history have been handed down orally. There are many practices community leaders say the Sarayacu give special significance and that they vow to continue for as long as the community survives.⁸⁸ For example, community workdays, called *mingas*, where the entire community unites to work on projects such as trail maintenance, are an important part of the Sarayacu's heritage. The willingness of the entire community to come together for the common good is something they cherish and part of what makes them who they are. According to a community leader, "the *minga* has been a part of Sarayacu culture for generations and will continue generations into the future."⁸⁹ Many people said this tradition of mutual assistance is an important value they want their children to carry on.⁹⁰

While culture was always handed down through generations, the methods the community administration is now using to preserve it is changing. They are using digital media to document and record their culture to give the future generations a visual

⁸⁷ Interview #13b.

⁸⁸ Interview #33.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Translated at time of interview.

⁹⁰ Interviews #23 and 33.

representation of cultural practices. Recent history is also meticulously recorded, particularly the community's struggle against the petroleros. Documentaries, like "Soy Defensor de la Selva" have not only helped Sarayacu officials present their struggles to outside parties, they have allowed them to record the histories for their own memory to share with children in the future. This shows the ability of the Sarayacu administration to adapt technology to their cause. Current and future projects include efforts to show the Sarayacu's traditional relationship with the jungle and the knowledge they have built and preserved. At the moment, the young leader in charge of communications says they have to depend on outside resources for editing equipment and other technical support. However, in the future they hope to be able to obtain the necessary equipment to continue making documentaries highlighting the traditions and culture of the people as well as for use as a political tool outside the community.⁹¹

Further efforts are being made to record important historical events. A book about an historic set of battles with the Shuar nation is in the works because it is seen as a formative time for the community. They are also in the process of recording oral histories of some elder members of the community.⁹² Other books produced by outside groups, such as the Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales (CDES), have helped to outline not only the struggles of the Sarayacu regarding CGC, but also to provide written documentation of certain aspects of Sarayacu culture that previously may not have been preserved in writing. They have taken advantage of the technical support of outside organizations in acquiring certain tools and have used them to protect the traditional culture of the community. Technology is a way of reaffirming their identity. They seek to

⁹¹ Interview #13a.

⁹² Interview #32.

preserve certain events for eternity by putting them in writing or on film (DVD) so no matter where the community goes in the future, there will always be record of what they once were and what they once stood for.

Management of Land and Natural Resources

Land use has emerged as one of the most important elements when it comes to preserving culture. As in many other indigenous communities in Latin America, protection of land is central in the ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-determination. The Sarayacu have decided to take a proactive stance regarding land use and as mentioned previously, are in the process of developing and implementing a comprehensive land management plan to provide an alternative to petroleum exploration in the region and to conserve the land for use by future generations. Conservation efforts under this plan are trying not only to conserve the slowly dwindling resources within the region, but also to replenish the supplies of these resources.

Over the last decade, community leaders said they began to recognize their territory could not sustain them at their current rate of development.⁹³ Thus, within the last year or so, they have developed a comprehensive land management plan to limit the impact they have on the land, placing regulations and restrictions regarding land use on certain areas.⁹⁴ The territory has been divided into zones for hunting, fishing, agriculture, and conservation projects. Some areas have even been left as open jungle because as a

⁹³ Group interview #17.

⁹⁴ Interview #13c.

young community leader said, the Sarayacu understand the “importance of maintaining these biologically diverse regions.”⁹⁵

As the population of Sarayacu continued to expand in recent years, the secondary growth forest (*bosque secundaria*) in direct proximity to the population centers became less fertile because of overuse to accommodate the larger number of mouths to feed, causing less-productive harvests in the nearby chakras (cultivated land plots). To cope with this loss of nearby fertile land, the community pushed further and further into primary growth forest (*bosque primaria*), searching for and clearing land for cultivation. As a result, native animals in the surrounding area, depended on to supplement the nourishment provided by harvested crops, fled deeper into the jungle. Naturally growing medicinal plants and commonly used trees were also becoming more scarce, or at least harder to access and use efficiently. The zonification of the territory is an effort to halt and reverse the land and resource use trends causing so much concern in the community.

The Land Management Plan has dual importance in the community. Not only does it help the community preserve the natural environment for future generations, but particularly because of the organization it provides to show the regional government of Pastaza Province in Ecuador, it aids them in their struggle for autonomous control of the land. However, this organization is not possible without the assistance of modern Western technology and support. First, members of Sarayacu, with the help of outside supporters, used sophisticated mapping equipment to demarcate the boundaries of the territory and the newly formed zones within it. Other than in the area of communications, land use is the area where the Sarayacu administration depends most on Western

⁹⁵ “...la importancia de mantener estas regiones biológicas tan diversas.” Interview #13c.

technology to achieve success. Computers allow them to record their progress in all aspects of the Plan in a manner and format familiar to outsiders. At the time I left the community in August the administration was working to produce their report for the government in Quito regarding their management of resources on the land. If the Plan proves successful, it will be a key to achieving the other goals expressed by the leaders for the community's future.

While the Land Management Plan is still in its infancy, community administrators have already begun to see concrete results in many areas. Most obvious is the growing population of native animals in the area. In addition to the overall goal of land and resource conservation throughout the territory, there are three specific major projects on which community officials are focusing: Proyecto Tapir, fish farms, and the cultivation of medicinal plants and heavily used species of tree. The wildlife conservation project, Proyecto Tapir, with the financial and logistical support of the German non-governmental organization, PROCREATUR, demonstrates how the community is trying to repopulate the land in closer proximity to population centers with native animals. The tapir is a large animal, often referred to as the "cow of the mountains" by the people with whom I spoke, whose population has dwindled in recent years, representing a larger decline in the overall animal population around Sarayacu. In the process of zonification, one zone was dedicated to reestablishing the population of tapir.⁹⁶ No hunting or agricultural activity is allowed in the zone, with forest rangers (*guardabosques*) stationed to ensure the regulations are followed. Even in the few years since the project was established, a noticeable rise in the population of tapir was seen. Other animals also thought to be on

⁹⁶ Interview #13c.

the decline in the community began to show up in greater numbers and spill over into the nearby hunting zone, reestablishing a vital source of food for the community that had been declining along with the local animal population.⁹⁷ Because of the success of Proyecto Tapir, the community administration is thinking of establishing conservation projects focusing on other large native animals that have all but disappeared in the areas directly surrounding the community.

According to a member of the community working with the Land Management Plan, the establishment of fish farms is of particular importance in the immediate future for the Sarayacu. Even more than with Proyecto Tapir, for this project the administration has relied on outside assistance and is still searching for more. Similar to the declining population of animals in the area, the people of Sarayacu observed a declining population of fish in the local rivers. At the urging of environmental groups, officials decided to give the rivers a rest from high yield fishing to replenish the fish populations. However, they also realized this would eliminate a large source of nourishment for the entire community. Determined to rectify the situation, the administration settled on the idea of establishing fish farms to provide the needed food, while also allowing fish to return to the rivers.⁹⁸ With the support of outside organizations, including the regional government of Pastaza, pools have been established in each of the five population centers and more were being added during my stay. The progress of the pools is monitored by the specialists in the community administration and managed by a member of the community with the help of another man from Peru.⁹⁹ After the fish population is replenished, a

⁹⁷ Group interview #17.

⁹⁸ Interview #42.

⁹⁹ Interview # 24.

community leader says they hope to continue harvesting fish as a sustainable resource and market them to the outside in order to bring income into the community.¹⁰⁰ This would allow the Sarayacu to enter the market without commodifying their culture and identity.

The type of project described above, bringing capital into the community without commodifying their culture represents one of the best chances the Sarayacu have of not succumbing to the forces of the global market as it affects their identity. Any economic endeavors they can pursue that do not involve essentializing their identity for financial gain can be seen as a means of entering the global market without allowing the global market to dictate their behavior. If, as community leaders claim, the Sarayacu want to maintain current customs and practices, these are the types of projects community officials need to pursue. Another example, to be discussed later in the section on cultural tourism and ecotourism, would be to add an adventure tours branch to their already existing tour agency. If external economics can be kept without ties to the culture of the community, the Sarayacu should be able to continue their cultural customs and practices without feeling the need to essentialize to appeal to customers.

The final major project of the Land Management Plan is the cultivation of medicinal plants and important trees, used in the construction of canoes, houses and other things vital to everyday life in Sarayacu. According to community leaders, like other resources in the territory, the Sarayacu were finding it more difficult to harvest these resources because the supplies had been diminished in the areas directly surrounding the

¹⁰⁰ Interview #42.

population centers.¹⁰¹ For example, in some cases, a full day or two of travel was necessary to acquire the materials to build a house, particularly the roof, whereas before the materials were more readily available.¹⁰² In a trial run, a number of families were selected to participate in this project, reserving pieces of their chakras for the specific cultivation of these important resources. According to a leader working with the project, all of the families are happy to be participating and the results support a further expansion of the cultivation of these important resources. Moreover, success in this project may also lead to another commercial enterprise, the marketing of natural remedies. However, this is not a priority of the Land Management Plan at this time because the resources being produced are now just trying to keep up with the demands of the community.¹⁰³

While the most obvious example of the delicate balance being struck in the area of land and resource management deals with the use of modern technology—an overdependence on technology could lead to further reliance on Western material goods, while not using it enough could result in the Sarayacu being stripped of their land rights—the most interesting way this demonstrates the balance is in the manner in which community officials and other members of the community are thinking of the problem and solutions. While conservation of resources cannot be considered a Western concept, the zonification of the territory very much resembles land management plans in the United States, with parks designated for the conservation of forest and wildlife, specific regulations regarding hunting and fishing, and specific areas set aside for residential and commercial use. Furthermore, many of the concepts and ideas behind their major projects

¹⁰¹ Group interview #17.

¹⁰² Interview #54.

¹⁰³ Interview #42.

come from projects developed in the West. Yet, the balance within the area of land and resource management is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that success in this area allows the balance to be maintained in all other areas because without control over land use and the preservation of resources to sustain the community in the future, none of the other balancing acts would be possible or necessary, something which community leaders continually stressed. The customs and practices of the Sarayacu would not be able to be preserved, at least not in their current form.

Community leaders were the first to admit they cannot rely on only the resources they have at their immediate disposal to solve the community's problems for the future. They are constantly looking for outside support in their various projects.¹⁰⁴ This support often comes from European NGOs. While much emphasis was continually given to the importance of ancestral knowledge in deciding the future direction of the community, community leaders were not opposed to or ashamed of looking outside for new knowledge and ideas. They bring in outside resources to see what options are available and then decide what is best for the community. Only if they are convinced the community's best interest is at heart do they choose to pursue a project.¹⁰⁵

Health

The Sarayacu still look to their surroundings for remedies when they are sick or hurt, but due to their increased access to the outside world, in more serious situations, they are becoming more dependent on Western medicine and doctors. On a number of occasions,

¹⁰⁴ Interviews #21, 23, and 52.

¹⁰⁵ Interview #23.

I witnessed mothers boarding the small airplane to fly to Puyo seeking medical attention for their young children, sometimes for what seemed to be no more than a bad cold. In many of these cases it seems some members of Sarayacu have abstained from using more traditional remedies passed down for generations in favor of modern medical attention and prescriptions of pills or at least they have determined the Western remedies to be better. There were also a few elders in the community going to Puyo for the same reason. This practice probably has something to do with why the life expectancy in the community has been rising recently. The population is growing as old people live longer and more children survive infant illnesses, putting further stress on the resources in the territory, including the natural medicines.

Within the community itself, one also sees the influence of modern medicine. When I was in need of care because I fainted in Puyo and cut my head on the tile floor in my hotel room, I was assured there would be many people able to take care of me either with traditional medicine or more Western methods. For example, among the women in the community are a few who have been trained as nurses in the city and the Catholic Sister living in the community, among other responsibilities, runs a clinic with the necessary medical equipment to cope with many minor ailments. She took out my stitches from the fall I took in Puyo. Many times I saw members of the community requesting aspirin, decongestant, or pills to help with a stomach ailment and for a small fee she gave them what they asked for. The reliance of members of the community on the Sister to provide basic medical care reflects a willingness to use Western medicine when it is available. Western doctors also pass through the community from time to time to

check on the healthcare situation and help some members of Sarayacu advance their knowledge in the area of modern medicine.

However, just because some people in Sarayacu have taken advantage of Western medicine to better their health, they have not abandoned traditional, natural medicine. In fact, they are trying to reinforce the use of natural remedies and produce more so they will be available more readily when people are ailing. Part of the Land Management Plan is to actively cultivate plants used for traditional medicine by the shamans. Many of the natural remedies I saw being used were for simple ailments such as a stomachache or a cold. For stomach problems, yucca is recommended, for according to the members of the family I stayed with, it contains nutrients that help to settle the stomach. The chicha, since it is made from yucca, is said to have the same affect. For the common cold, the members of my household would snort a mixture of ground up tobacco leaves and water. They also talked of many other simple remedies easily found in the surrounding jungle for maladies from a cough to a serious insect or spider bite. In serious situations, traditional medicine is often what keeps people alive until they can seek further medical attention. A community member spoke of a man out in the jungle working who was bitten by one of the many poisonous snakes in their territory. Usually, this would almost certainly mean death. However, using a natural remedy containing plants and materials he and the people with him were able to find in their immediate surroundings, he was able to keep the swelling down and survive long enough to make it to Puyo where he received treatment.¹⁰⁶ While traditional, natural medicines may not always be able to save a life, they help to prolong it long enough to get the necessary medical care.

¹⁰⁶ Interview #54.

Traditional medicine does not consist only of remedies to heal the illness of body. The health of the soul is just as important. Shamans, in addition to preparing medicines and remedies and teaching others how to prepare them, participate in ceremonies of spiritual healing or cleansing. While some may consider this more an aspect of religion than medicine based on Western standards, I was given the impression that it was both for the Sarayacu. If the soul is burdened, the body and mind are not clear and cannot function properly. Thus, like some Native American tribes in the United States, with whom some members of Sarayacu feel a strong connection for their perceived marginalization because of their indigenous status,¹⁰⁷ the healers aid in cleansing the spirits of community members, ingesting hallucinogens to encourage a vision allowing them to help the person seeking it to leave with a “clear mind” and pointed in the right direction for the future. It will be interesting to see how the balance between traditional and Western medicine changes in the future and if the natural remedies become more of a novelty like homeopathic medicine here in the United States, where Western medicine dominates but people can choose the homeopathic remedy as an alternative.

Education

Much of the burden for maintaining the balance between incorporating modern Western technology and goods and maintaining tradition in Sarayacu has been placed on

¹⁰⁷ Group interview #48. A few members of Sarayacu are familiar with the practices of the Navajo after they visited a member of the community living in New Mexico and spent time with members of the Navajo nation. They said they felt a strong connection with the Navajo that overcame the distance between the two groups because of what they thought was a shared cultural experience, colonialism.

education. Through education, young people in Sarayacu not only learn about the West, but they use education to reinforce tradition.¹⁰⁸ First and foremost, to maintain the balance, maintaining kichwa as the primary language in the community is vital. More and more Spanish is used in everyday kichwa, particularly among younger members of the community. If the community ever decides to abandon kichwa, at least as a primary means of communication, it will mark a tipping of the scale towards assimilation from which the tradition can probably never really be recovered. However, the students do not learn Spanish until they enter primary school and thus at an early age kichwa is established as their primary language for the community. In all aspects of education in Sarayacu there is a focus on maintaining their bilingual status, learning Spanish to help with outside endeavors, but continuing to use kichwa as both an everyday spoken language and the official language of the government of Sarayacu.

Community leaders said the Sarayacu put a premium on learning from and about the West, from typical governmental structures and processes to the lifestyle.¹⁰⁹ I was asked to talk to the students in the high school to give them a better perspective about what an average person from the United States is like and allow them to ask questions about U.S. society and culture. According to a community leader, by knowing the West the Sarayacu are “able to combat it.”¹¹⁰ Because I was only in the community for a short time, I was never able to talk with the students in a class setting, but many spoke with me individually. They understand learning and speaking Spanish for this purpose could bring an influx of more aspects of Western culture, but they are careful to try to limit its effects

¹⁰⁸ Interview #23.

¹⁰⁹ Interviews #5, 8,

¹¹⁰ Interview #5.

on the community. In three separate educational settings, the Sarayacu balance the two sides: the High School, the University, and a class taught by an organization from Quito dealing with scientific investigation. While I was unable to personally observe the high school or the university settings because both were nearing the end of their school terms upon my arrival, I did sit in on the class, watching and participating as the instructors emphasized over and over the importance of self-reliance rather than relying on the external resources for everything, including knowledge.

The high school has long been a cornerstone for bilingual education in Sarayacu, with some classes taught in kichwa and some in Spanish. While children learn about politics and history, the primary focus of education in Sarayacu at this moment is in fields directly applicable to the community. There is an emphasis on ecology and resource management and in other areas that will allow them to confront the problems they may face in their community in the future. To graduate, each student must do a thesis project, often dealing with issues directly related to the community and how it functions. This demonstrates that the primary purpose of education in Sarayacu is to properly prepare the youth to be able to handle the changing world around them and its direct effects on the community.¹¹¹ To teach subjects such as math and science, the Sarayacu administration brings in teachers from Quito and other areas, at least until they are able to train enough of their own community members to teach these subjects, a project they are currently undertaking. The teachers, while paid a living wage, are usually only committed for a short time, one to two years, in the schools making it difficult to maintain consistency for

¹¹¹ Interview #55.

the students.¹¹² While according to Brysk, the Ecuadorian government has taken steps to support bilingual education among the indigenous communities,¹¹³ much of the onus has still been placed on the individual communities, at least in the case of Sarayacu, to ensure this support is actually carried out. Plus, government support always comes with strings attached.

To further reinforce the importance of education and expanding the knowledge of the next community leaders, the community has established a university with the partnership of a university in the Basque Country of Spain.¹¹⁴ Again, the primary focus is on bilingual education.¹¹⁵ While I was given the impression it strayed more from bilingual education than the high school, it still focuses on this and gaining further knowledge to solve local issues. At this point, the university relies heavily on the logistical and financial support of the partner Basque university for learning supplies and testing. However, the goal for the future is to develop their own professors and expand the university to allow for students from other communities in the Amazonía to come to Sarayacu to study.¹¹⁶ The hope is to eventually become a nationally accredited university so if students decide to or need to leave the community to pursue outside endeavors or deal with community matters, they would leave with a degree that is acknowledged by

¹¹² Interviews #4 and 11b.

¹¹³ Brysk. 258.

¹¹⁴ This is ironic given that the Basque Country has been trying to establish its independence from Spain for a long time, sometimes resorting to terrorism. In contrast, numerous Sarayacu community leaders emphasized their desire to exercise autonomy in their territory, but said their goal was not to secede and create a state within a state. Perhaps this relationship with the universities in the Basque Country is part of why the Ecuadorian state seems to be so fearful of recognizing the autonomy of the Sarayacu in their territory.

¹¹⁵ Interview #12.

¹¹⁶ Interview #13c.

the national university system, granting them greater options.¹¹⁷ This would allow students who, for instance, may want to study law in order to help the community with inevitable future legal issues, to be able to apply and attend schools outside the community with the goal of using their newly gained knowledge to protect and preserve the future of the community. While both the high school and university increase the students' interaction with more Western concepts of education, learning many of the same things learned by students in the West, the continued use of kichwa and the stress on relating the concepts to local issues help the Sarayacu maintain the delicate balance between incorporating aspects of Western technology and culture and maintaining tradition within the institutionalized parts of their education system.

In addition to the education provided by the high school and university, community leaders also actively seek out people and organizations willing to visit and teach selected members of the community new ideas and techniques in a large variety of areas. While many members of the community admitted to me they do not always use the information or techniques taught to them by outsiders, they expressed a strong desire to continue to increase their knowledge base, if for no other reason than to have a better understanding of the information and techniques being used by people outside of the community.¹¹⁸

During my stay in Sarayacu, I was lucky enough to participate in one of the seminars conducted by two women from a non-profit organization in Quito, teaching the basics of scientific investigation and how it was possible to do simple studies using many common everyday materials. While the focus of the seminar was on teaching selected

¹¹⁷ Interview #11b.

¹¹⁸ Interview #30.

community members simple processes like experimental design and data collection, interpretation, and presentation, the overall message remained clear: nothing was more important than the profound knowledge the people of Sarayacu already possessed regarding their surroundings. The seminar was not trying to change the way they do things, only giving them more tools to help them in their presentation of information to the Ecuadorian government regarding land use and resources within their territory. This provides them with a common language for their interaction with the government, increasing their chances of preserving their rights to the land.

As illustrated by these three cases, education plays an important role in maintaining the delicate balance in Sarayacu. While it often involves bringing in Western technology and resources, it is also used as a foundation for the survival of local knowledge and practices. With an emphasis on the continued use of kichwa, the community is taking necessary steps to maintain one of the most important demarcations of culture: language. For the future of the community it will be important to make sure the teaching of ancestral knowledge continues, not only in the schools, but also in the homes. Traditions such as the making of chicha will continue to be passed down from generation to generation, maintaining the most important traditions in Sarayacu through their continued practice.

Money

The manner in which Sarayacu administrators manage the economy of the community will also help to determine whether they can maintain the balance between incorporating

aspects of Western culture, in this case economic practices, and maintaining tradition, which they are so desperately trying to preserve. According to a young community leader, the increased monetization of the economy in Sarayacu has created some growing inequalities within the community.¹¹⁹ In my observation, the growing gap between more wealthy and less wealthy families in the community is often demonstrated by how many modern amenities the family has incorporated into everyday life, from the building materials used to construct houses, to the utensils being used to cook and the food being eaten, to the presence or lack of a radio in the household. Seemingly wealthier families, like the one with whom I stayed, seemed to have more outside tools at their disposal, like a chainsaw, and seemed to use more food products brought in from the outside, like cookies and fruit drink mix, but especially rice.

This growing gap between rich and poor and the concerns it raised among community leaders led to an investigation to find out what the people in the community felt they needed for the future. They surveyed members from every family in the community to gain their insight. One particular family said the thing they needed most was more money. However, their reasoning was not because it would make them happier or so they could buy more amenities that would make their lives easier. They were not greedy. They needed the money to be able to provide for the basic needs of their children: food,¹²⁰ clothing, etc. This story demonstrates how the increased monetization of the economy has pushed the Sarayacu away from the traditional values of fair trade and

¹¹⁹ Interview #23.

¹²⁰ Mainly rice, which needs to be brought in from the city because the Sarayacu have yet to find a way to cultivate it. However, cultivating rice is a project they are looking into for the future to further their chances of becoming completely self-sufficient, although I am not sure whether their climate will sustain the cultivation of rice.

reciprocity. The young leader said the people are increasingly equating money with economy and that they need to work to educate them. They have to reestablish the values of trade and reciprocity because the term economy refers more to the “exchange of goods and the harvesting of these goods” rather than “the exchange of money for these goods.”¹²¹ They have been working with a Belgian non-governmental organization, Bollings, on an economic plan to revert back to the older economic values to “bring a more socialist-style equality to the community because if capitalism truly arrives to the community, they are finished as economic inequalities will drive them apart.”¹²² The young community leader said they do not want the community become like the United States, a society they see as being driven by money and the desire to make more money, with too much emphasis on individuals rather than community.¹²³

Another important aspect in being able to maintain current customs and practices in Sarayacu is prevent a highway from being built in the region. The highway would make it difficult or nearly impossible to keep the market from taking over in the region and the community. Because of the increased access to the region, the community leader felt the building of the highway would only increase pressure to extract the mineral resources in their territory. Not only would a highway increase the access to resources for corporations, but it is also likely people from outside the territory would begin to move there as has often happened when highways are built in the rainforest, according to the community leader and the professor from the United States. Thus, arguing on the basis of their rights to prior consent (*consulta previa*) granted by the Constitution of 1998,

¹²¹ Interview #23. Translation at time of interview.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Interview #59.

community leaders and their legal support team are fighting to keep the highway out of their territory.¹²⁴

While trying to reestablish communal values to the economic relations within the community, community leaders stressed they do not want to be put at a disadvantage in the global market. By failing to incorporate at least certain aspects of the market economy into their community, they realize they will be left behind and the market will consume them.¹²⁵ Thus, as discussed in previous and subsequent chapters, they are pursuing a number of commercial endeavors, from the fish farms, to tourism, to the possibility of producing natural remedies. There are also many community members who bring in outside capital, changing relationships and furthering the influence of the market on the community. Some community members have businesses outside of Sarayacu, spending part of their time in the city and part of their time in the community, bringing money with them upon their return, allowing them to buy more goods at one of the local stores that have been established and to bring more Western amenities with them. Many other people leave the community for a time to work, earning both money and life experience, before returning to the community to live out the rest of their lives.¹²⁶ It is common for young men in particular to leave the community after graduating high school to go to the city to work for a number of years or to join the Ecuadorian military, which has mandatory conscription, although it is possible to pay a \$16 fine to avoid serving and receive the necessary papers. According to a young community leader, to graduate high school, community members need these papers, so some choose to serve in the military

¹²⁴ Group Interview #14.

¹²⁵ Interviews #13c and 13d.

¹²⁶ For more complete discussion of the effects of migrants on the community, see the Introduction.

and others pay the fine.¹²⁷ Also, because of the influx of money in the community and the increasing need to have it, particularly in hard times, the local government has established a community credit union in which people can deposit money for use in case of disaster or for their children's futures.¹²⁸

In many ways, it seems community leaders I spoke with are presenting conflicting ideas for how their economy needs to be run in the future. While professing a desire to reestablish the values of fair trade and reciprocity, they are quick to express their need to keep up with the global market, albeit on their own terms. It seems, on one hand, they want traditional values to govern the economic relations within the community, but on the other hand to incorporate the market economy into their interactions with outsiders, almost a necessity in today's global economy. But, if community leaders allow the incorporation of the market into their external relationships, how long will it be until this market drives their internal relationships, signs of which are already becoming evident? An elderly member of the community expressed his pleasure that relationships in Sarayacu are still determined by kinship, unlike in the United States, where money dictates many of the relationships between people.¹²⁹ However, is this still true in Sarayacu as greater disparities between families can be seen in the construction of the houses and the kinds of food they have to eat?

While it is still true that money is not the greatest determining factor in relationships in Sarayacu, I am skeptical whether "traditional" economic values can be reestablished and maintained, particularly with projects designed to bring more income

¹²⁷ Interviews #18 and 31.

¹²⁸ Interview #13c.

¹²⁹ Interview #28.

into the community. One would think bringing more money into the community would only perpetuate the inequalities and eventually widen the gaps between families that are now forming. While community leaders claim to want to revert back to traditional economic relationships, it seems that by establishing things such as a credit union and planning projects designed partly to bring more income into the community, they are preparing for a future where money plays an increasingly important role. In a sense, their actions seem to speak louder than their words.

Cultural Tourism and Ecotourism

Tourism in Sarayacu provides an interesting example of the balance and possible consequences of losing the balance between incorporating a market economy and maintaining traditions of separation. The global market reaches Sarayacu. Cultural and particularly ecotourism give the Sarayacu a means to enter this market on their own terms, according to community leaders.¹³⁰ Quoted by Brysk, one indigenous leader in Ecuador's Pastaza province said, "The tourists were coming. Our only decision was how to control it (tourism) ourselves."¹³¹ During a meeting with a group of students from the United States, leaders were questioned on whether allowing tourists into the community was a mistake. The leaders expressed the same feelings as their peer. They said tourism was going to be a fact of life in their territory and they would rather control the experience than have a group of tourists brought in by a large tour agency who would

¹³⁰ Interview #13d.

¹³¹ Brysk.186.

say, “Look, Indians,”¹³² then leave without any cultural exchange or role for the Sarayacu in the tourism. This would be a sign the global market had absorbed them rather than incorporated them. By playing a role in the tourist experience, not only can the community gain financially, but they are also able to have some say in what the tourists take from the experience.¹³³ Rather than a zoo-like tour, with a high level of separation between the tourists and the main attractions, community leaders said the Sarayacu want the tourists to have more interaction with community members, which they see as mutually beneficial. To do so, the community has established its own tour agency, Papangu Tours, and they control all outside access to Sarayacu.¹³⁴

Papangu Tours limits the number of people allowed to enter the community as tourists. At most, the tourist facilities in Sarayacu have the infrastructure to support 18 tourists at once, something they plan on keeping that way. By limiting the number of outsiders in the community at any specific time, community leaders hope to minimize the impact of tourism on the daily lives of other community members. Thus, tourism has yet to become a central part of life for the majority of the community, a pattern community leaders vowed to maintain.¹³⁵ Tour groups tend to be smaller than the 18-person capacity, allowing for greater individual attention to the tourists who are in Sarayacu and ensuring their experience will be personal and that they will have opportunities to ask many questions. The community leaders expressed their desire to engage in a form of cultural exchange in which the tourists are not the only ones to benefit from their visit. They feel they can learn about people from other parts of the world and also make some money that

¹³² “*Mira, indios.*” Interview #13d.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

they use in the struggle to protect the community and its culture so tourists in the future will still have reason to want to visit.¹³⁶

At this time it is expensive to visit Sarayacu as a tourist. A five-day tour costs close to 400 US dollars. This is another way the community can continue to limit the number of tourists who visit the community. Obviously a large enough number of tourists are willing to pay that much to visit, but the price is high enough that some people will be turned away simply for this reason. According to the community leaders, the Sarayacu get the economic benefits they feel they need while continuing to allow only a small number of tourists through the community at one time.¹³⁷ Furthermore, they can usually be assured the tourists who do enter are generally interested in learning about them and their struggle. The money made from the price of the actual tours goes toward the community fund for fighting their legal battle and obtaining more outside resources. However, some individuals in the community also make a little money by selling a few goods only as a side endeavor.

In many areas of Latin America, tourism has turned into the livelihood for indigenous groups. While traveling on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca, I took a tour to visit the islands of Amantaní and Taquile and the floating reed islands in the middle of the lake. On the floating islands, the community was split between the desire for tourist money and the desire to maintain separation from mainstream Peruvian culture, showing the conflicting opinions on the influence of external contact. On the other two islands, tourism was the primary source of income for the majority of the people. On Amantaní, the family with whom I stayed expressed their gratitude because the tourists' visit was

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

going to be their only source of income for the next several months. As catering to tourists became a greater and greater part of everyday life, the people changed their routines. Particularly on the island of Taquile, the people's lives were dedicated to the tourist industry. In the town center, the people put on a show every day for the tourists to portray a community cultural festival, while the rest of the community tried to sell the tourists handicrafts. I remember asking the guide if the people would be having this festival every day if it were not for the tourists. He replied sadly, "No." Upon describing this scene to some members of Sarayacu, they were aghast at how the people of Taquile had allowed the tourist industry to commodify their culture. Succumbing to the forces of the market, the people of Taquile chose or in many ways were forced to essentialize who they are for financial gain, which has left them one-dimensional. Community leaders expressed their desire to avoid this fate at all costs, which is why they refuse to put on a show for the tourists. Granted, the routine will change slightly with the influx of tourists, but to this point the Sarayacu have not commodified their culture for the purposes of tourism, like the community on Taquile. If the tourists happen to be there during a festival or other community event, they are welcomed to watch and participate, but the daily life and traditions of the community are not going to be changed for the financial gains tourism can offer.

The issue of strategic essentialism comes up a lot when examining the effects of cultural tourism. To attract more tourists, communities are often forced to depict themselves in an essentialist nature so the tourists will think they are getting a truly "indigenous experience," competing with other groups in the area to provide the best experience. If they find out many indigenous groups live and think similarly to them,

their desire to visit is diminished, and the indigenous communities lose what in many cases is a vital source of income. Thus many groups choose to portray themselves in an overly traditional and simplistic manner. So far the Sarayacu seem to have avoided this fate, but as more people want to visit the community, it will be interesting to see how this situation plays out in the future. To a certain extent, cultural tourism of any kind can be considered a form of strategic essentialism, but there are varying degrees which separate the strategic essentialism of groups like the community of Taquile, which can be categorized as commodification of culture, from groups like the Sarayacu, who are trying to establish and maintain a less invasive and total version of strategic essentialism.

Much like the calls for cultural tourism in the Amazon region of Ecuador, there is increasing pressure to open up the indigenous territories for other forms of tourism. In the Pastaza province, large tour agencies are beginning to show interest in establishing adventure tour outfits specializing in rafting and trekking tours, among many possible activities. Also similar to the situation with cultural tourism, members of Sarayacu along with members of other indigenous groups are taking the initiative in establishing these types of tour agencies. Assuming adventure tours will eventually be established regardless of their participation, the indigenous communities of the region want to have control over the activities so they can put similar regulations and limits on the size and nature of the tours. As I was leaving, a young community leader was beginning to make contacts to learn about what it takes to run a rafting company and explained to me the preliminary design for the tour agency. Limiting access to rivers on their territory, while incorporating a more limited amount of cultural exchange, is something that is very

important community leaders.¹³⁸ Like fish farming, this form of tourism could provide a means for the Sarayacu to avoid commodifying their culture for economic gain.

While tourism is inevitable because of the desires of outsiders, particularly Westerners, to see how indigenous people live because of the misconceived notions of indigeneity discussed in the Literature Review, cultural tourism creates problems because of the pressures it places on the community to perform for the visitors. Market forces are very strong. The draw of money often can lead to culture being commodified, as evidenced by the situation of the villagers on Isla Taquile in Peru. If a community allows the market to overtake them and dictate how identity is expressed on a day-to-day basis, it would seem to be very difficult to ever regain any of the autonomy and self-determination the community may have had in the past. Therefore, if the current pattern of tourism is maintained in Sarayacu, limiting the influence it has on the everyday lives of the people in the community, it is and will continue to be a prime example of the balance between incorporating aspects of Western culture and maintaining tradition. By incorporating tourism, they are entering into the global market, dominated by the West, but if they are able to remain true to their identity, they will not be sacrificing tradition and culture for financial gain. Furthermore, if they are able to incorporate more tourism, like rafting, separate from cultural tourism, they will be able to bring more income into the community without the pressure to represent themselves in an essentialist manner. The way the Sarayacu handle tourism will continue to be representative of how well they are managing the delicate balance at the heart of their struggle for autonomy in their territory.

¹³⁸ Interview #51.

V. STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

As I have tried to demonstrate, the balancing act between incorporating Western technology, materials goods and culture and maintaining tradition is tenuous and marked by consequences if a move too far in either direction is made. But why is this balance so important for the community? Why are community leaders fearful of being too conservative, rejecting all Western technology and amenities in their efforts to maintain tradition, but also of incorporating too many Western amenities into their everyday lives? Because many of the projects being undertaken by the local administration and the entire balancing act described in the body of this thesis support the achievement of one goal stated by community leaders: autonomy in their territory, recognized by the state of Ecuador, something affected greatly by outside perceptions of how they live their lives. And in this struggle for autonomy they are bound by restrictions as they search for support both nationally and internationally, for it seems that in some cases the means of getting support contradict the end goal. Before discussing the issues at the heart of this contradiction, it is necessary to further explain the goals described by community leaders and what the community needs to do to achieve these goals.

Despite the rights the government has granted the Sarayacu and other indigenous communities in Ecuador in the new Constitution of 1998 and by signing numerous regional and international agreements supporting the rights of indigenous communities to self-determination, they feel these rights are only superficial, symbolic at best. They claim the Constitution, while acknowledging and legislating their rights as an indigenous community in Article 84, contradicts itself in numerous other articles granting subsoil

rights to the government and giving the government the right to determine land for public use, stripping people of their rights to it. Thus, according to community leaders, they are being given rights and having them taken away at the same time. They have also been given the right to vote in national elections, but it does not mean they are heard. Based more than on a sheer lack of numbers, they feel they are being relatively shut out of the legislative process. They are being allowed to assert their rights as citizens of Ecuador.¹³⁹ Instead, they remain marginalized, on the periphery in national politics, even though they have attained support and recognition from regional and international human rights organizations and other advocates for indigenous peoples.

Community leaders said the Sarayacu feel autonomy in their territory would solve many problems, allowing them to act as stewards of the land, governing its use and the lifestyle of the people living on it. Granting them autonomy would allow them to maintain their current traditions and culture in whatever manner they see fit.¹⁴⁰ It was stressed a number of times that “they [the government] must legislate autonomy”¹⁴¹ or else it will not hold any merit. However, the government is hesitant to do so because they claim it will create a state within a state, which is unacceptable and untenable. Numerous times, community leaders exclaimed their frustration with the government’s position because it does not represent what they want. They want autonomy in their territory, but within the framework of the Ecuadorian state, creating an area much like a large municipality. One community member used the example of Guayaquil, Ecuador’s largest city, as an example of an area with its own government, working in conjunction with the

¹³⁹ Interview #13d.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ “*Hay que legislar la autonomía.*” Interview #50.

national government, but granted a lot of leeway in the manner of local governance. They claim a situation of this nature would only be asserting their rights as citizens, breaking down barriers of identity and rejecting the stigma often attached to the term indigenous of being *unorganized* and *backward*. They continued by complementing the federal system in place in the United States, where states have relative autonomy within a set border, while maintaining the population's citizenship under the national government. The states are granted high levels of freedom to govern their populations based on their individual needs and desires.¹⁴²

While these goals do not seem unattainable, the means of achieving these goals create problems and a seemingly inherent contradiction. As is the case for many indigenous groups throughout the world, community leaders have turned to international groups for support and advocacy in their fight for the right to continue practicing their culture on their ancestral land. They have also joined with other indigenous groups in Ecuador to create a "united voice" in opposition to the government's treatment of indigenous communities.¹⁴³ By gathering support both internationally and locally, they appeal to their rights as indigenous peoples, but if their goal is to break down barriers of identity and be considered as citizens, claiming their rights as indigenous people, separate from the rights of the rest of the citizens, seems to hurt their argument. They want to be regarded as citizens by appealing to rights other citizens do not have. In this sense, they are contradicting themselves. However, it is probable that without these international and local appeals, the Sarayacu would not even be given the rights they have, as Ecuador's

¹⁴² Interviews #44 and 50.

¹⁴³ "...una voz *unida*..." Interview #37.

government, like many others in Latin America, until more recently has had a history of ignoring the rights of the citizens with historic ties to the land.

Many of the problems community administrators are dealing with are created by the process of building both bonding and bridging social capital because it often forces them to engage in a kind of “strategic essentialism” in order to gain support, emphasizing their indigeneity before everything else. In the Sarayacu’s case, bonding social capital extends beyond the borders of their territory to include other indigenous Amazonian communities because they want a united indigenous voice fighting against marginalization by the state. In this fight, they call attention to a common history of oppression and thus act, in a way, more like kin groups, with a tight, interconnected network of contacts and organizations pushing for rights to be recognized. In doing so, they ostensibly cement themselves as indigenous in the eyes of the government, ending the chance the government will see them and treat them as merely citizens, with the rights to self-determination within their territory, as in municipalities throughout the rest of the state.

In pursuing bridging social capital through national, regional or international support, the essentialist nature of their self-characterization is further amplified. The Sarayacu and other indigenous groups are cashing in on what Bourdieu (in Brysk) calls “symbolic capital” for their “role as bearers of tradition.” By presenting themselves as strict adherents to tradition, they give Westerners what they search for, a communal alternative to Western individualism. Courting this foreign support may force them to play “identity politics.”¹⁴⁴ In order to appeal to this nostalgia, they must present

¹⁴⁴ Brysk. 41 and 120.

themselves, to a certain extent, as a traditional indigenous group in opposition to Western progress. This is inconsistent with their true identity because to maintain their struggles they are often looking for the technical and financial support the West can provide and they admit to supporting progress as long as it does not *force*¹⁴⁵ them to change.

While Brysk characterizes these actions as “symbolic as much as strategic behavior,”¹⁴⁶ I find they cannot be categorized as anything but strategic. While initially questioning the entire premise behind the strategic use argument presented by authors such as Garland because it did not seem to allow for any expression of indigeneity without it being strategic, the strategic use of indigeneity has become a useful tool for evaluating my experience in Sarayacu after ridding myself of the notion that strategic use does not have to be seen negatively. While I maintain it is possible, particularly in the case of the Sarayacu to continue to practice their culture—merely an expression of who they are—without it being strategic, there are many cases in which community officials have used their indigeneity strategically, especially when lobbying for support from outside organizations and through their appeals to regional and international legal bodies under their rights as indigenous people. A member of the community even admitted they use the rights granted them as indigenous people strategically, but only to “advance the cause” with the goal to be recognized as a *people*, given the rights of self-determination.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ I emphasize the word “force” because they are not opposed to change, just to change being imposed on them by outsiders. One community leader expressed these sentiments when he said, “*Sarayacu cambia como el mundo cambia*,” or “Sarayacu changes as the world changes.” Interview #43.

¹⁴⁶ Brysk. 39.

¹⁴⁷ Interview #50.

While the goal of autonomy in their territory through strategic use of their indigeneity is very achievable, it will probably hurt their argument for being characterized as merely citizens because their strategic use of their indigeneity will keep them forever separate from the rest of the population in the eyes of the government. While in the long run it may not matter very much if they lose this argument, it would seemingly be a blow to the perception the Sarayacu have of themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Despite these inherent problems and contradictions created in trying to maintain the balance between incorporating aspects of Western technology, culture, and material goods and maintaining customs and practices, it may be the only means available to community officials in their fight to gain autonomy in their territory and be able to practice their culture and tradition freely, without restriction. The success of the Sarayacu should not be measured in whether or not they win the battle with the government on how to categorize Sarayacu, but rather on whether they achieve and maintain self-determination and autonomy in their territory. Control over what they do in the territory empowers the Sarayacu to be able to choose the future direction of the community whether that means maintaining strict adherence to current customs and practices or changing direction completely and doing something entirely different.

VI. CONCLUSION

What are indigenous groups supposed to do when faced the choice of how to handle the changes brought on by the increasing spread of Western technology, culture and material goods due to globalization? The Sarayacu provide an example of how indigenous groups can deal with these changing realities brought on by increased contact with outsiders, from those who merely want to visit the communities to the multinational corporations who have a vested economic interest in the territories of these indigenous groups. By incorporating modern Western technology and tools while refusing to modernize entirely and vowing to protect and maintain tradition and culture, they show there is another option: maintain a balance between incorporating Western technology, goods and culture and maintaining tradition. Incorporate just enough to keep modernizers at bay, while not letting the new technology and availability of goods dictate the lifestyle of the community. The Sarayacu have been able to do this in many areas so far, but it is and will always be a delicate balance.

In the fight for rights, many dilemmas await indigenous groups. Choosing how to present themselves is the first dilemma. Groups can pick any term they want to describe who they are, but to an extent, they cannot escape the labels given to them by outsiders. The perspective of indigenous people as *primitive*, *backward*, and *uncivilized*, discussed in the Literature Review will continue to exist regardless of what indigenous groups do. Members of Sarayacu claim they want to be viewed as ordinary citizens of Ecuador asserting their rights to self-determination and autonomy, the same as any municipality, as well as asserting their cultural rights, protected by the Constitution of Ecuador as well

as numerous regional and international agreements Ecuador has signed, like the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 169. But if their ultimate goal is to break down the barriers of identity, then using their identity strategically to take advantage of rights granted only to indigenous groups seems to be contrary to this desire. Not only does it separate them further from the rest of the Ecuadorian population, it allows the government to perpetuate this separation, continuing the historic marginalization of indigenous groups in the country.

What does this mean for future possibilities? How can indigenous people fight for their rights without using their identity strategically? It seems as though indigenous groups are in an impossible situation, where any and all action they take can in some way be portrayed as strategic and even expressions of identity and culture can be considered essentialist. In some regards, indigenous groups, like the Sarayacu, are being punished for taking advantage of the most powerful tool they have to fight for their rights: symbolic capital. To gain national recognition of their rights, it is necessary to court both local and outside support. To appeal to these groups, it is often necessary to cash in this symbolic capital by presenting an essentialist identity, either to create a common bond with other indigenous groups or to play on the sympathies of Westerners in search of exoticism and traditional culture. In employing strategic essentialism, Sarayacu officials are using the best tools at their disposal to solve their problems because cultivating these relationships is vital in their struggle for control of their territory and community empowerment.

I am left with a cynical view of the possibilities for the indigenous rights' movement. Many gains are possible, particularly in the area of land rights, but the barriers remain high for indigenous groups to achieve these gains. Conflicts over

resources will continue to hinder indigenous people in their struggle maintain or reclaim historic lands. Unexploited oil reserves in the Ecuadorian Amazon, needed to keep up with the demand for oil in the Western world, will keep pressure on the Sarayacu administration to provide a profitable alternative regarding resource use in the region. In addition to the conflict over resources, simple differences in understanding between Sarayacu officials and the government will perpetuate conflict over land use and the rights the community has as citizens of Ecuador. For example, in kichwa, the term *alpa*, meaning land is understood in a much broader context. *Alpa* means not only the physical surface of the land, but everything above and below it, unlike the term the Ecuadorian government uses: *tierra*. To the government, *tierra* refers to only the surface of the land and nothing more.¹⁴⁸ Simple discrepancies in concepts or strategic interpretations by the Ecuadorian government make it difficult for Sarayacu officials to reach an agreement with the government regarding their land and rights.

The Sarayacu provide an example for other indigenous groups struggling to maintain customs and practices while holding back the onslaught from outside interests to exploit resources in their territory. They currently have control over the land in their territory and are trying to work within the system to ensure the rights of future generations. The balance they have struck, while tenuous, allows them to maintain the important aspects of their culture and identity without losing their place in the globalized world. Despite the inherent problems associated with promoting and taking advantage of their indigenous identity, Sarayacu officials have enjoyed relative success. Given the circumstances, their efforts are admirable and show what can be accomplished when a

¹⁴⁸ Interview #13d.

community comes together and adapts to fight for a common goal. In my experience in Sarayacu, I learned that being indigenous does not mean *primitive* and *uncivilized*, a rejection of modernity; it means wanting to control how they want to live, no matter what that means. They can choose to maintain culture, practices and values that constitute community or they can go another direction entirely. The important thing is that they have the power to make the decisions that affect their way of life.

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- 2) Interview with member of community. 7/9/06. Centro-Pista.
- 3) Interview with young person from Sarayacu. 7/9/06. Centro-Pista.
- 4) Interview with man from Quito. 7/9/06. Centro-Pista.
- 5) Interview with community leader. 7/10/06. Chontayacu.
- 6) Interview with young community member. 7/10/06. Chotayacu.
- 7) Group interview/Participant Observation with young member of Sarayacu and community leader. 7/10/06. Centro-Pista.
- 8) Interview with community leader. 7/11/06. Centro-Pista.
- 9) Interview with young person. 7/12/06. Centro-Pista.
- 10) Group interview/Participant Observation with two members of community. 7/12/06. Centro-Pista.
- 11) a. Interview with community leader. 7/13/06. Centro-Pista.
b. Interview with community leader. 7/13/06. Centro-Pista.

- 12) Interview with professor from the United States. 7/12/06. Centro-Pista. Conducted in English.
- 13) Group interview with community leaders and student group with professors from the U.S. 7/14/06. Centro-Pista.
 - a. Young community leader.
 - b. Two community leaders.
 - c. Young community leader.
 - d. Two community leaders.
 - e. Community leader.
- 14) Group interview with community leader and two professors from the U.S. 7/14/06. Centro-Pista.
- 15) Interview with young man visiting relatives in Sarayacu. 7/14/06. Centro-Pista.
- 16) Interview with professor from the U.S. 7/14/06. Centro-Pista. Conducted in English.
- 17) Group interview during el taller de indagación científica. 7/18/06-7/27/06. Centro-Pista.
- 18) Interview with young community leader. 7/18/06. Centro-Pista.
- 19) Interview with community leader. 7/19/06. Centro-Pista.
- 20) Interview with young community leader. 7/19/06. Centro-Pista.
- 21) Interview with two community leaders. 7/20/06. Centro-Pista.
- 22) Interview with community leader. 7/21/06. Centro-Pista.
- 23) Interview with young community leader. 7/21/06. Centro-Pista.
- 24) Interview with project manager. 7/21/06. Centro-Pista.
- 25) Interview with elder community member. 7/21/06. Centro-Pista.
- 26) Interview with community leader. 7/23/06. Centro-Pista.
- 27) Group interview with members of community. 7/23/06. Centro-Pista.
- 28) Interview with community elder. 7/23/06. Centro-Pista.
- 29) Interview/Participant Observation with community leader. 7/23/06. Shiguacocha.
- 30) Interview/Participant Observation with young community leader. 7/23/06. Centro-Pista.
- 31) Interview with young community leader. 7/24/06. Centro-Pista.
- 32) Interview with young community leader. 7/25/06. Centro-Pista.
- 33) Interview with community leader. 7/25/06. Centro-Pista.
- 34) Interview with project manager. 7/25/06. Centro-Pista.
- 35) Interview with member of Pakayaku. 7/26/06. Centro-Pista.
- 36) a. Group interview with one community member and two people from Quito. 7/28/06. Centro-Pista.
 - b. Interview with community leader. 7/28/06. Centro-Pista.
- 37) Interview with community leader. 7/28/06. Centro-Pista.
- 38) Group interview with one community member and two people from Quito. 7/28/06. Centro-Pista.
- 39) Interview with community leader. 7/28/06. Centro-Pista.
- 40) Group interview/Participant Observation with various members of the community. 7/29/06. Kali-Kali.
- 41) Interview with man from community. 7/30/06. Kali-Kali.
- 42) Interview with community leader. 7/30/06. Sarayaquillo.

- 43) Group interview with several members of community. 7/30/06. Shiguacocha.
- 44) Interview with community leader. 7/30/06. Shiguacocha.
- 45) Interview with member of community. 7/31/06. Centro-Pista.
- 46) Interview/Participant Observation with Shuar visiting Sarayacu. 7/31/06. Centro-Pista.
- 47) Group interview with Shuar and community members. 8/1/06. Centro-Pista.
- 48) Group interview with several members of an extended family. 8/1/06. Centro-Pista.
- 49) Interview with member of CDES. 8/1/06. Centro-Pista.
- 50) Interview with community member. 8/1/06. Centro-Pista.
- 51) Interview with community leader. 8/1/06. Centro-Pista.
- 52) Interview with community leader. 7/30/06. Sarayaquillo.
- 53) Interview with member of community. 8/3/06. Centro-Pista.
- 54) Interview with young community leader. 8/5/06. Sarayaquillo.
- 55) Interview with member of community. 8/6/06. Centro-Pista.
- 56) Interview with community leader. 8/7/06. Centro-Pista.
- 57) Interview with community leader. 8/7/06. Centro-Pista.
- 58) Interview with member of community living in Puyo. 8/7/06. Puyo, Ecuador.
- 59) Interview via email. 2/6/2006.