

A Cultural Exchange: Quichua Potters From Ecuador Visit

by *Suzana Sawyer*

Bacha Gualinga Cuji and Leona Inmunda Nango, two Indigenous Quichua female elders from the tropical forest region of eastern Ecuador, recounted the story of how Nunguli, the forest spirit which lives below the earth, entrusted women with clay to sculpt into pottery. Their Spanish bore the distinctive lilt of those whose first language is Quichua. With hands knotted from working the earth nearly daily for fifty years, Miquia Bacha and Miquia Leona molded *mucahuas* (drinking bowls) and told the tales from their mothers and grandmothers. They spoke with pride of their culture, the threat of petroleum contamination and the recent border war with Peru.

The Bay Area was Bacha Gualinga and Leona Inmunda's second stop on a four city Quichua Potter's Cultural Exchange tour organized by OPIP (Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza) and Fundación Jatari, a small foundation established in 1978. Since its inception, Fundación Jatari has been dedicated to enhancing the educational opportunities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The 1995 Cultural Exchange Tour is the second consecutive year in which Quichua women have come to share their cultural knowledge and build interchange with the North. Their visits to Minneapolis, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe have allowed them to forge networks and friendships with Native Americans in the US.

Chosen by their rainforest communities, Bacha Gualinga and Leona Inmunda came to the United States as spokeswomen in defense of their art form and ancestral territory. Quichua pottery is a millennial practice exclusive to Indian women. Through its delicate hand-coil form and intricate designs, Quichua pottery represents the intimate connection between

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indigenous cosmology and rainforest sustainability. The clay, ocher, and resin materials used in their work, building and decorating Indigenous ceramics reflect the need to carefully extract and sustain resources in an uncontaminated environment. The cosmological imagery used in decorating the ceramics retell the numerous stories of forest spirits, or powers, essential to protect and maintain harmony among all forest beings, animate and inanimate. Nunguli, the spirit of fecundity, protects all cultivated plants. Amazanga, the spirit of strength, protects all forest animals.

Tsumi, the spirit of fluidity, controls the worlds of waters and its lives. And there are many more. Cosmological beliefs around these spirits—their temperaments, inclinations, and practices—guide sustainable practices used in agriculture, hunting, fishing, and forest and river management.

Miquia Bacha and Miquia Leona's ancestral territory consists of a 2 million hectares of uninterrupted primary rain forest in the central Ecuadorian Amazon Province of Pastaza. This is the last such expanse in Ecuador and the only place where women maintain the age-old tradition of Quichua pottery. OPIP is the Indian federation and organizational structure which has been fighting to protect this ancestral territory and maintain sustainable Indigenous management techniques for 16

years. Founded in 1979, OPIP represents 20,000 Indigenous peoples, dispersed in 133 communities. While gains have been made, the future of this territory and its people is uncertain.

In 1992, 2,000 Indigenous peoples from Pastaza embarked on a historic march from their rain forest communities to Quito to demand legal title to their ancestral territory (see *Abya Yala News* Vol. 6, No. 3). Miquia Bacha was a key player in this struggle. The only woman to address the President and his cabinet, Bacha Gualinga condemned the government for failing to legalize "the territory in which their ancestors have

Photo: Fundación Jatari/OPIP



Quichua women's pottery represents the intimate connection between Indigenous cosmology and rain forest sustainability.

always lived." While Indians in Pastaza returned to the lowlands after 5 weeks of negotiation with their territory adjudicated, titles included only surface rights to land and its products. Subterranean rights remain solely in the hands of the state to exploit. For twenty years, petroleum development has indelibly changed the social and ecological reality of the northern portion of the Ecuadorian Amazon through the construction of a network of roads and towns and the contamination of water and soil systems. If petroleum development is not controlled, this is the fate looming on the horizons of Indigenous territory in Pastaza. ARCO, the only oil corporation working in Pastaza, has discovered a sizeable reserve in Indigenous territory and hydrocarbon extraction is imminent, if the local communities and international pressure groups are not mobilized.

The struggle for land and Indigenous rights in Pastaza is not simply the concern of a politicized Indigenous elite. Miquia Abigail and Miquia Leona came to the Bay Area in representation of their communities and OPIP to speak in their own voices about their peoples' historical struggle in defense of their culture, beliefs, language, and way of life in the Ecuadorian rain forest. Standing before the San Francisco audience, Bacha Gualinga spoke on the wisdom of the ages: "I don't know how to read or write. Not even sign my name. Yet, I have here, captured within my head, years and years of history. I am here as a seed, as a root, as a tree. Look at me and learn." Tracing the intimate link between Indigenous peoples and a landscape, she added, "If Indians disappear, if our way of life is destroyed, what will happen to the

world? Then there will not be forest. The jungle will not be green."

In 1989, OPIP established a Women's Committee directed by and for Indigenous Quichua women to strengthen disappearing traditions and address women's needs. Female potters in the province of Pastaza currently sell their artware to OPIP's Cooperative store, Yanapuma (Black Panther), in the provincial capital of Puyo. Now, OPIP's Women's Committee wishes to explore possibilities for expanding the marketing of Indigenous ceramics. The US tour aims to provide Amazonian Quichua potters direct access to international alternative trade markets in the United States. The Women's Committee seeks to develop alternative trade networks as empowering opportunities to re-enforce the cultural tradition of the more than 3,000 women potters in the region and extend needed economic support. An example of grassroots organizing initiated and controlled by Indian women, the marketing of the Quichua ceramic tradition re-affirms the dignity their cultural identity by honoring indigenous female art and strengthening female voices. Organized during International Women's Month, the Quichua Potter's Exchange deepens a commitment for dialogue between women across the globe and expands international networks of mutual support and cooperation. ☺

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Indigenous People form an Alliance to counter the Vampire Project

On February 18-19, 1995, a group of 30 Indigenous delegates from the United States, Canada, Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru met in Phoenix, Arizona, to discuss an Indigenous response to the Human Genome Project. During the three days of discussion, the delegates decided to form an International Alliance to counter the Human Genome Biodiversity Project. Many Indigenous peoples call this "The Vampire Project" because its goal is to collect blood, tissues, and hair from about 700 Indigenous groups around the world.

The Human Genome Project is a proposal to collect and study the genetic structures of various ethnic groups. They have targeted populations "on the verge of extinction," and refer to Indigenous groups as "Isolates of Historical Interest." SAIIC and many other Indigenous organizations have taken a stand against this project because it is yet another example of research which North American and European scientists carry out on Indigenous peoples without their consent and without all of the relevant information being provided to them. This is a continuation of colonialism of Indigenous peoples which began 500 years ago.

The delegates at the Phoenix conference decided to make a plan of action to stop the Human Genome Project and its attempt against the biological, spiritual, physical, and psychological lives of Indigenous peoples. They formed a coordinating committee comprised of Indigenous people from North, Central, and South America. They are planning another meeting for next fall in northern California in order to continue this campaign.

The En'owkin Centre and Okanagan Indians in British Columbia organized this conference which Tonatierra in Phoenix hosted. Debra Harry, a Paiute Indian from Nevada, is coordinator of this project.

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