



Culture, Identity & Plurinationality

"... in my case I am first of all Schuar and then I am Ecuadorian."

(Ecuador) On June 29, 1991, Ampan Karakra of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) made the following speech at a conference on Communication Among the Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador.

We all talk about 'culture' and 'Latin-American identity' and 'national identity' and all of our different identities. It is important for us to talk about this. I believe it is easier for indigenous people to talk about identity, because it is of great concern to us. As workers and Indians, we are told that we are peasants and as such, to be incorporated into the greater society. We are from the country and the city and we are all told that we are Ecuadorian. What does this mean? Some times I have asked myself, and replied that in my case I am first of all Schuar and then I am Ecuadorian.

When talking about identity, some say that it is our clothes, others say it is our language. Up to now, the question of how many Indians are in Ecuador is not known. The state provides one figure; CONAIE provides a different figure. The state says that if one is dressed in Western clothes, then one is no longer an Indian. Just because I am wearing Western clothes, I lose my identity. Another part of identity is values. We always talk about values, but which values are the real ones? The only thing I can say is that I was taught that national values are the ones we have to follow. It is for this reason that we have to learn Spanish and struggle to act as the national society does, to eat as they eat. It's as if our Indian culture has no value. We are taught one history, the history of the arrival of the Spanish, their civilization. The Catholic religion is the only one to follow and we Indians exist only to be conquered. The Catholics arrived first, and thought: 'those pagans must be baptized. They must be made Christians....' Then the Protestants arrived, and they began to fight over our communities.

We have become strangers on our own lands. In the Amazon, for example, in a province which was created in 1964, we are required to have land titles. While we have been the owners of these lands for thousands of years, others come along and say they own them because they have lousy pieces of paper! It is for this reason that we say we must have more authority.

In South and Central America, we are called 'Hispanics' or 'Latin Americans' even if we don't have a trace of European blood! Not so long ago we Indian people had no defined organizations. We called each other brothers. The linguists, missionaries, historians, anthropologists, called us 'peasants,' 'ethnic groups,' 'aborigines,' 'natives.' Then they gave us specific names, endless denominations.

We Schuar were called *Quiwan* or *Jibaro*, the Húaorani: *Aukas*, the Chachis: *Kayapas*, the Yumas: *Canelos*, the Tsachilas: *Colorados*. Just because the Tsachilas paint themselves red, they were called *Colorados*, but that color is not their identity! Even so, we indigenous people always knew who we were. In the case of the Schuar, one says 'I am Schuar.' Then what does the term *Schuar* mean? It means *human, an equal. That is identity.*

Our compañeros of the left tell us that this issue of identity will disappear when the social classes disintegrate, when we all become equal. I have my doubts about this. I think that identity will disappear only when humans disappear. I've seen this issue of identity playing a big role in the Soviet Union. Seventy years of socialism and look at the confrontations taking place over the issue of identity. That is why I get nervous when we talk about a 'plurinationality society.'

Within the indigenous movement, we must analyze identity and class. Obviously, we identify with the poor, exploited class. However, within this class, we Indians are the most marginalized and racially discriminated against. The government claims that it is illegal to discriminate, but in reality, racism is everywhere. In the market, you can hear talk of 'the ugly Indian.' We have to fight against this. We are told that the indigenous movement will displace White people. Many times we have said that we are going to talk about identity and class, but many of our compañeros do not want to, because they think that we are going to hurt their feelings and this will create enmity. And so we do not talk. We've had so many years of

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Ampan Karakra speaking about identity.

Photo by Melina Selverston



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There are many people who are powerful. There are powerful gold miners... and authorities too, like Romero Juca, former president of FUNAI. He is responsible for letting the gold miners invade our territory and... for lots of killings of Yanomami... Something must be done to solve our problem because Romero Juca will not solve it. He does not like us...

Do the international authorities and people from the United States think it is true what they always say that the demarcation of Yanomami land is a matter of money, that they do not have money to do it?...

I am very worried about people abroad who... are giving money to Brazil... but not to help the Indians. This money that comes from abroad is helping the Brazilian government to oppress Indians. I am very worried about that.

Non-Indians are like ants. I know that non-Indians like our resources. They say that we have gold, we have lumber, and they say that they need that to help the people who live in the city. Well, we do not want them, and we do not want them here.

What we want is respect for our rights. We want them to leave us alone. We need help with regard to the health situation. In the beginning we did not need any help. We did not need any doctors, any medical doctors, any nurses or any medicine. But now we need doctors and nurses to help the Yanomami who are sick. We also need medicines because we used to cure ourselves only with 'shabori' [shamanism]... But that is not enough anymore. And we need medical doctors and medicines and help from non-Indian people.

We are worried because the non-Indians are not very much worried about us. They think that we are a different race. Therefore, they want to isolate us. They think we are bothering their work. We are preventing them from working here, so they would rather have us isolated. They do not worry very much about what is going on with us.

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They are a strong force in the economic survival of our communities. This is because of their involvement in the production of "molas," which is the art of the Kuna. Because the "molas" are being sold at national levels and exported to the US and Europe, they are achieving economic success at international levels. In many respects, the women have a greater capacity to organize themselves in cooperatives and to contribute to the economic survival of the Kuna family than the men do. This is why, when we speak of the Kuna economy, we speak of men and women as equals.

We have strongly safeguarded our spirituality and traditions. For example, we hold the *General Congress of Kuna Culture*, which unites the spiritual guides of all of our communities. They are highly respected by all Kuna people. They promote teaching and learning amongst the youth so that our rich traditions are not lost.

We, of Kuna Yala, are confronting serious problems along the Colombian border, where gold prospectors are invading our lands. We are also indirect victims of the confrontations which take place in Colombia between the guerrillas and the army. Violating all laws, both sides invade our region while the Panamanian authorities do nothing to stop them. The same thing occurs with the Yanqui (United States) army which often crosses our territory to go to the Panamanian border with the excuse of filling the vacuum created by the dissolution of the Panamanian army in 1989, following the invasion.



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domination, everybody is afraid that we will take a racist stand and that this will lead to a racial confrontation. For this reason, there has not been enough dialogue amongst the poor class. In meetings with laborers, peasants and intellectuals, it is important for us to talk so that we feel equal. We must, if we are from the same class, talk so that we can find a solution...

Plurinationality will only be possible with the total transformation of society. This is possible if, as in Switzerland, there are well-defined and recognized sectors. We understand that the problem is not exclusively indigenous. It is a problem which concerns all of us. In order to form such a state we must think carefully what it would be like. How would it be governed at the political, economic, social and cultural levels? If we find that the workers are on one side, the indigenous on another and other sectors on other sides, then it will not be possible... We must continually reconsider our struggle and include long-term goals in our strategy. We must work together and make compromises. We must coordinate our endeavors in this way or we will not succeed, even if we are united.