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# Between Facebook and Boas: Kichwa Indigenous Identity in Alto Napo and Challenges to Multiculturalism in Ecuador

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University of San Francisco

***Between Facebook and Boas: Kichwa Indigenous Identity in  
Alto Napo and Challenges to Multiculturalism in Ecuador***

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
Master's Program in International Studies

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in International Studies

by  
Anna Maria Fernandez-Marti  
December 2012

*Between Facebook and Boas: Kichwa Indigenous Identity in Alto Napo and Challenges to Multiculturalism in Ecuador*

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by

Anna Maria Fernandez-Marti

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines the contemporary Kichwa indigenous identity formation in the Alto Napo region of Ecuador through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Following an extended-case method, I analyze the articulation of *indigenosness* (as an idealized expression of tradition) vis-à-vis the power relationships of the actors involved in such process. A combination between participant observation, daily field notes and twelve tape-recorded interviews during a two-month research allowed me to deconstruct essentialist portrayals and stereotypes of Kichwa indigenous peoples in Alto Napo, and confirm that their identity is hybrid, multiple and shifting. A comparative analysis between urban and rural social dynamics in the region further showed that the indigenous construction of the identity is influenced by power dynamics of recognition. Within Kichwa communities, the need to represent imagined traditional indigenous symbols does not surface on a daily basis in order to gain recognition; instead, other types of cultural capital are used to bind its members. These symbols, however, become dominant in contexts where the presence of nonindigenous peoples or State authorities marks the symbolic power they possess. The mechanisms and symbols used to construct the Kichwa identity thus shift according to the diverse power relationships that exist at the time of the representation. In order to gain value as an indigenous ethnicity and to show a symbolic reluctance to acculturation, the representation of an idealized traditional indigeneity becomes a strategy to *authenticate* their political, economic and cultural demands, which are identity based. This case study helps illustrate the connection between power structures, rights and identity through the analysis of indigenous symbolic capital in an Ecuadorian Amazon region.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank all Alto Napo Kichwas and the rest of Ecuadorians that I interacted and lived with for their assistance and insights as well as the *spirits of the jungle* for protecting me; without them, this thesis would not have been possible. I am especially grateful to Ramiro Aguinda and his welcoming family as well as Fundación Runa for giving me the freedom to share my insights and contribute to their missions. I also thank Dr. Cecilia Santos for her extremely valuable guidance and feedback provided throughout this project, and Dr. Anne Bartlett for her inspiring comments, support and belief in me since day one. I still remember Dr. Bartlett's welcoming speech when she said that we would read like we had never read before, we would write like we had never written before, and it would probably be the only time in our lives that we would have the freedom to think; her words sure proved true. I thank all my MAIS colleagues, especially Ariela Marshall, for allowing me to learn from their wisdom, and Mary Zweifel and Lindsay Arentz for their kindness and support. MAIS is now part of my extended family.

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To all of them, my sincere Kichwa *ashka pagrachu* (thank you very much) and blessings.



*To Pilar Ardanuy Mingarro (1984-2011),  
for her courage, laughter and unconditional love. Hasta Siempre.*

## Preface

Identity, what a complex yet common word! In the United States, I confront a dilemma on an (almost) daily basis: answering the question of “Where are you from?”, as if that could clearly explain *who* I am. And I tend to give the same answer, over and over again: “From Barcelona, Spain” because, after all, I am not an independentist (though concerned about the stereotyping of Catalans) and the Spanish passport is the only one I have. If asked, I identify as a Catalan, Spanish, European, woman, immigrant, student, wife, daughter, sister, human rights advocate, highly tempered, open-minded but stubborn, a shy woman that enjoys sleeping in fresh clean linens, and ultimately, just another human being that hopes for an egalitarian, embracing and respectful environment in the immensity of this universe, where the uniqueness every human being has is what should make us equal. But most of the time, the narrow categorizations we are placed and place ourselves in masks the beauty of our plural identity features. In Catalonia, I am not considered Catalan *enough*; in Spain, I am seen as *too* Catalan. Who can understand these psychotic paradoxes?! But yet they matter. These categorizations have always caught my attention and indeed deepened my interest in social identities.

From early on in my Masters’ program, I considered the possibility of studying the Catalan independence movements that have been (re)emerging in the last few years, especially after the economic collapse of my country. However, rather naively I admit, I thought there was nothing *new* for me to learn; I claimed to understand all these dynamics in place and thought the movement was just taking a more contemporary form. I can still recall all those nights in the Ecuadorian Amazon when I wished I had gone to Spain instead to have an *easier* research time. But I wanted to challenge myself, didn’t I?

I wanted to stretch my brain as far as I could and learn, didn't I? Until one day my lovely Andalusian-born, long retired aunt who does not speak Catalan claimed she wanted the independence and that she *was* Catalan, not Spanish. After completing this research project, I can claim with confidence that all identity studies are always complex, even if one thinks to belong to the group under study. Thus, now I see Catalonia may not have necessarily given me an easier time.

How come I chose to study the indigenous identity in a former Spanish colony?, the reader might ask. My imposed affiliation, by birth and upbringing, to former oppressors of indigenous peoples has been questioned as a challenge to my research and, indeed, it may have had an impact on my findings. But my longstanding (and apparent) intrigue for self-identification and other-identifications allowed me to move beyond this narrow categorization as a researcher. Examining current prejudices (and even some discriminatory practices) in Ecuador against those groups that, for one reason or another, have been *othered* should allow any person, whatever the context he/she inhabits, to critically think about power relations between members of a society and the damaging effects essentialism can have. Furthermore, the speed at which the world gets interconnected may well cause one to think about the increasingly apparent multiculturalism of states. Therefore, while Catalonia has never been colonized, the different power structures that subjugate members of a society can indeed influence and shape the identity of the individual and the collective, and their public appearances. Being in a completely different context, learning every day from the Kichwa experiences, adapting to less comfortable environments than I was used to, and acknowledging where my physical and mental boundaries are, allowed me to not only have a more down-to-

earth experience, but to be better prepared to critically think about identity conflicts, and to (hopefully) contribute to form a better understanding of how prejudices (and discrimination) *lives* among integration, progressive discourses. Furthermore, the failure of some economic development projects in the area under study had been blamed on indigenous people's *lack of commitment* but, though this was not the focus of my study, I interpret it as a form of resistance to imposed economic systems that do not emerge from the community's will and needs, rather than continuing to use the stereotype of "Kichwas are lazy".

Although the stories and experiences presented in this thesis are a tiny fraction of two intense field research months, the richness of the experiences is something that I will carry until I go to mother Earth, as my Kichwa friends would say. At the end of the day, all human rights projects might seem *just* a drop in the ocean, but what else is the ocean than a collection of drops?

## Chapter One: Introduction

*“We women and men, the sovereign people of Ecuador  
RECOGNIZING our age-old roots, wrought by women and men from various peoples,  
CELEBRATING nature, the Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), of which we are a part and  
which is vital to our existence,  
INVOKING the name of God and recognizing our diverse forms of religion and  
spirituality,  
CALLING UPON the wisdom of all the cultures that enrich us as a society,  
AS HEIRS to social liberation struggles against all forms of domination and colonialism  
AND with a profound commitment to the present and to the future,”*  
Preamble to the 2008 Ecuador Constitution

### Introduction

*Once upon a time*, there was a Kichwa man living in the urban area of Tena, in the Alto Napo region of Ecuadorian Amazon. Tena is a small city, but it is located in the Western beginning of the vast Amazon region of South America. Its dense vegetation and diverse fauna in certain neighborhoods, its humid climate and its wood/concrete shacks outside the downtown area make of Tena’s landscape one that combines and integrates buildings, roads (though some are dirt roads, especially in Kichwa neighborhoods), stores, vehicles, etc. with nature wherever you go.

This urban Kichwa man was living in the Paushiyacu neighborhood, which is located uphill from downtown and it is mostly populated by Amazonian Kichwas. While he followed an urban lifestyle, he tried to resist it as much as he could. One day, the interconnectedness with nature in his neighborhood gave him a pleasant surprise: a 2.5 meter boa appeared in his bedroom. Be it for the fact that there were no windows in the house/shack or be it because there was a small river right next to it, the *boa woman* decided to meet him and live with him. His mother, a wise elder Kichwa, warned him: the boa could not stay because she would turn his life into *darkness*. But how could he cast such a beautiful boa out and be such an impolite host to her? After all, he thought,

and according to the Kichwa *cosmovision* or philosophy, his people not only respect nature, but they embrace it in their lives, they become one with it. Even if the boa is believed to be able to manipulate a human's mind, there should be a reason why she came.

So disregarding his mother's advice, he welcomed the boa, offered her shelter and a bed to sleep in; a new, powerful relationship had just begun. He talked to her and she would answer in his dreams, which little by little turned to be sexual. The boa converted into the most beautiful woman he had ever *seen* and they played, kissed, hugged, but never completed the love act or at least, not yet. Seduced by her charm, the connection and dependence on her grew stronger and stronger. He introduced her to his friends and she gladly let the male friends hold her, but she angrily bit the female friends. "She is jealous", he asserted, so he started to spend lesser and lesser time with his friends, and after running his errands in the city, he would run back to the house to be with his loved one since he missed her all the time. At night, they could have a *normal* relationship, man and woman, in his dreams. So like this, the relationship continued for eleven months, him living more and more in the *darkness*, being *alive* only in his dreams.

One day, his mother asked him whether he had already consummated his love with the boa in the dreams and he sadly claimed he had not. "Now it's the time", she told him, "you have to say goodbye to her before it's too late. Otherwise, once you make love to her in your dreams, once you become one with her, you will never have a life again, you will want to sleep all the time, you won't eat, and you will die". He finally realized it was a doomed relationship; though he desperately wanted her, he was a man, and she was *only the woman of his dreams*. Holding her in his arms when he was awake, he talked to

her and asked her to leave, explaining that the relationship could not go any longer because he could only have her in his dreams. He left the house, he leaved her there, alone, in his bed. He could not stop thinking whether he had made the right decision, he missed her, he cried. When he came back, hours later, she was gone, and she never came back. “She understood me”, he claimed with a mixture of relief and sadness in his soul.

The story before explained is real, but paraphrased to fit it in an introduction section in the form of a narrative. The main male Kichwa character, whose name I cannot reveal for confidentiality purposes, personally shared his *boa* experiences with me and his family confirmed them too. By sharing this Kichwa life experience that connects the inhabiting of an urban space with some elements of the traditional Kichwa beliefs, I have presented the reader with one example from which to look at the Amazonian Kichwa identity in the contemporary times we live in.

On my pursuit of identifying how the indigenous Kichwa identity of Alto Napo is being formed, shaped and articulated, I came across the first obstacle: understanding what “indigenous” *really* means. As a preliminary search for its definition, according to the Cambridge Dictionary the word *indigenous* is an adjective used to describe something or someone that is “naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, how come the adjective *indigenous* is still currently used in Ecuador to describe certain groups and not used, for example, in Europe to describe *native* European populations like the Catalans? Through the research conducted, I argue that *indigenous*, as a human identity feature, is a legacy of colonialism and one more method to perpetuate Western notions of *indigeness*. The adjective *indigenous*, as a

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<sup>1</sup> Definition retrieved on April 21, 2012 from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

derivative of “native”,<sup>2</sup> started to be commonly used in Spanish and English by European colonists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to describe the local populations they were conquering in the Americas, versus the (indigenous population) *Negroes* of Africa. However, out of respect for the many Kichwas that identify as indigenous, I adopt such terminology throughout this paper and I apologize in advance to those Kichwas that prefer not to identify as indigenous but rather as simply Kichwas. Likewise, in Alto Napo the spelling of the ethnic group Kichwa is with “Ki” and “w” versus more Peruvian or Bolivarian spellings of “Quechua” or “Quichua”; for the purpose of consistency and respect, I too follow the spelling Kichwa.

In order to provide for a contemporary demographic context of the region under study, I provide here the latest official information available. According to the last census conducted by the National Statistics Bureau of Ecuador in 2010,<sup>3</sup> the country had 14,483,499 habitants in its territory, and 103,697 of those lived in the Napo province.<sup>4</sup> Napo is situated on the border region between the Andes and more remote areas of the Amazon, but it is considered to pertain to the *Oriente* or Ecuadorian Amazon region. There are five counties in the Napo province, which I list in order of more to lesser population living in them: Tena (60,880), Archidona (24,969), El Chaco (7,960), Quijos (6,224), and Carlos Julio Arosemena Tola (3,664). My research is based on the Alto Napo region, which mostly includes Tena and Archidona counties.<sup>5</sup> Alto Napo means *High Napo* in English, where Napo is the river that crosses the province and *high* refers

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<sup>2</sup> Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “11. Of a person or social group. (a) Born in a designated place; belonging to a particular people by birth; *spec.* belonging to an indigenous ethnic group, as distinguished from foreigners, esp. European colonists”. Definition retrieved April 21, 2012 from <http://www.oed.com>

<sup>3</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos del Ecuador, [www.inec.gob.ec](http://www.inec.gob.ec), accessed September 9, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for a list of maps.

<sup>5</sup> I did not visit other Napo counties often enough to make a sound judgment of the Kichwa social dynamics there.



to the highlands of such river. In Archidona county there were 5,478 people living in the urban area and 19,491 in the rural area. In Tena county, in contrast, the population is larger; 23,307 people lived in the urban area and 37,573 in the rural area. However, as of mid-2012, I saw construction signs in Tena city that stated there were approximately 33,000 habitants in the city. In regards to ethnicity, 56.8% of the Napo population considered itself indigenous, and 38.1% mestizo. While the census stated that most of the Napo population has an agricultural occupation, an overwhelming 19.5% were government employees in 2010, but I was unable to find the official percentage of government employees that self-identify as indigenous. Finally and educationally speaking, in urban areas people remain in school for an average of 11.2 years whereas in rural areas the average decreases down to only 8 years, and the illiteracy rate was 6.3%.

Caught in the intersection between maintaining and performing traditional Kichwa life philosophies with the acculturation processes that exist when sharing a space with the dominant mestizo culture, Kichwas in the Alto Napo region that I visited and lived with during a two-month ethnographic research are shaping and resignifying their understanding of *indigenosness*. The reference to and representation of an ideal type of *tradition* in public spheres becomes, I argue, a dual process of resistance to acculturation while simultaneously seeking to gain value in a context where prejudices against indigenous peoples is still highly prevalent.<sup>6</sup> In private spheres, like the scenario presented in the boa story, the reference to traditional Amazonian Kichwa belief systems

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper I use the terms stereotypes and prejudices to refer to negative preconceived notions of the “other” that do not portray an accurate reality. While prejudice and stereotypes can lead to discriminatory practices, I do not use the term discrimination unless the context clearly shows there has been an act of discrimination. Given the nature of this research, I did not deeply analyze discriminatory practices in the region to make an academically-sound judgment or reference to it; during this research, I indeed acknowledged discrimination against Kichwas, but it was not the focus of this paper.

is still somewhat present in their daily lives though it is decreasing, especially for younger generations. Certain symbols however are not idealized within the community; they become part of a cultural capital that is used internally and is not expressed in public spheres where nonindigenous peoples or State authorities are present.

Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, this study attempts to shed light into the social significance attached to holding and claiming an indigenous identity. Aware of the need for more grounded research and less essentialist portrayals of indigenous peoples, I have examined current stereotyping practices in the region herein studied through the lens of the use and recreation of Kichwa symbolic capital. That is, while my research focus is based on understanding the articulation, implications and meanings attached to having and representing an indigenous identity in contemporary Ecuadorian Alto Napo region, I connect these to the centuries-long white/mestizo dominance that shapes the ways in which such an identity is formed and articulated both in private and public spheres. Furthermore, the comparative analysis between urban and rural areas of this research provides for a more in depth examination of the power structures that shape these indigenous identities.

Three major contributions were found through this research and will be extensively analyzed throughout this paper. First, Alto Napo Kichwas construct and perform multiple and shifting identities vis-à-vis the audiences of interaction; restoring to the symbolic capital they possess (which in turn is the product of power relationships), they articulate an essentialized identity in order to gain power in the political, economic and cultural realms of the society. Within the Kichwa community, on the other hand, the articulation of an ideal type of "tradition" does not materialize because they are not

subject to the power relationships of nonindigenous peoples. Second, the performance of indigenusness as imagined traditional systems of belief and practice in public nonindigenous-dominated spheres acts as a form of resistance to acculturation to the dominant white-mestizo culture, while it simultaneously reinforces essentialist portrayals of the Kichwa identity. And last, the prevalence of prejudices against Kichwas further exacerbates internal and external identity conflicts.

In this chapter, the research problem is first explained. After that, the theoretical framework, research questions and purpose behind this study are introduced. I conclude the chapter by providing the background and significance to the existing field of literature on indigenous peoples in Latin America.

### **1. Statement of the Problem**

Over the past centuries, colonialism, post-colonialism, imperialism and religious authorities (see Whitten and Whitten, 2011) in Ecuador have had a crucial impact on shaping indigenous identities in this multiethnic country, which currently has a total of fourteen nationalities and eighteen *pueblos* (peoples or ethnicities, in English) recognized. There are several indigenous groups in Ecuador,<sup>7</sup> some of them even divided by national boundaries, but the largest in terms of population are the Kichwas.

There is disagreement on the percentage of indigenous people that live in Ecuador, but estimates range between 25% and 45% of the population. However, in the 2010 Ecuadorian census, a total of 71.9% of the population considered themselves

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<sup>7</sup> According to the 2011 CIA World Factbook, approximately 25% of the total Ecuadorian population (more than 15 million) is considered Amerindian and 65% is considered *mestizo* (mixed Amerindian and white), but several indigenous associations (like the biggest national indigenous organization CONAIE - Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) claim that 40% of the Ecuadorian population is indigenous.

*mestizo* while only 7% claimed to be indigenous.<sup>8</sup> Given the large indigenous movements, especially since the 1990s, where political and economic demands were made based on indigenous identity claims, it might not be easy to comprehend why only 7% of the total population in 2010 would formally and institutionally accept this identity. However, historian and university professor Guadalupe Soasti explained that “The rejection to a census has colonial roots. For the indigenous person, all enumerations, as it was called in the colony, had tax purposes”.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Selverston-Scher (2001) observed that

Throughout the Americas, indigenous identity is transitional, making census difficult. The history of colonization, the continued economic and religious pressure to acculturate, and the social dominance of mestizo culture continue to confuse attempts to define the specific percentage of the population that is indigenous. (2001: 5).

Therefore, even though many indigenous associations launched local, regional and national campaigns to encourage their fellows to openly express their indigenous identity, I suspect that a combination between fear of oppression and racism, acknowledgement of ethnic mixtures over centuries, and lack of identification with other indigenous groups, brought many Ecuadorians to reject an indigenous identity.

Amazonian Kichwa communities in Ecuador have been oppressed, exploited and discriminated against by elite Ecuadorians and governmental institutions for what is commonly perceived as their *backwardness*<sup>10</sup> and subsistence living in the Amazon, an

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, [www.inec.gob.ec](http://www.inec.gob.ec).

<sup>9</sup> Source: IPS News, 22 November 2010. Retrieved March 28, 2012 from <http://www.ipsnoticias.net>

<sup>10</sup> Here I refer to classical, romanticized Western views of the Other, *authentic*, indigenous peoples that have been a-historical, unaltered or unchanged by modern capitalist cultures and societies.

idea that is a legacy of colonialism, and even blamed for the “underdevelopment” of the country. Moreover, since most Kichwas live nowadays in areas that are rich in minerals and oil, they have seen their lands and lifestyles threatened by government-supported foreign companies that are extracting those resources.

While there may have been some animosity between several indigenous groups in previous centuries, they have become increasingly united in moving forward with their demands for equality, recognition and respect. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), which was formally set up in 1986 as a result of a coalition among several other smaller indigenous organizations, is the main organization of indigenous peoples in Ecuador. Its main goals are defined as to “consolidate the peoples and indigenous nationalities of Ecuador, fight for the land and indigenous territories, fight for an own education (bilingual intercultural), fight against the oppression of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, fight for the cultural identity of the indigenous peoples, against colonialism and for the dignity of the indigenous peoples and nationalities”.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, though, most Alto Napo Kichwas that I interacted with do not feel represented by the CONAIE anymore and in some circumstances they feel the organization has become so politicized so as to not be able to effectively change the power structures that keep Kichwas away from enjoying the same rights and opportunities as the rest of Ecuadorians.

President Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado came into power in January 2007 under so-called socialist claims to redistribute the wealth of the country, decrease the inequality gaps that exist between the rich and the poor, and eliminate post-colonial power structures that obstruct the path towards a nation-state building project that embraces all

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved April 15, 2012 from <http://www.conaie.org>. Self-made translation from Spanish.

cultures and brings equality. These claims made him quite popular among the indigenous communities and he gained most of the support from them to win the elections. Once in power, the “Government of the People’s Revolution”, as it is self-defined, was able to pass a new Constitution (2008) that pointed towards a high set of human rights standards and that gave, for example, more rights to the indigenous population. Such Constitution was even the first one in the world to include the rights of the Earth (Art. 10). The 2008 Constitution was thus welcomed and celebrated by the indigenous communities of Ecuador because it is quite comprehensive in terms of promoting social justice and rights for the traditionally discriminated against and makes constant references to the “good living” or *sumak kawsay* in Kichwa.<sup>12</sup>

Reality, however, showed that President Correa had in fact a different perception on how to economically develop the country and achieve that “good living” compared to the understanding of development some indigenous communities have, such as the Sarayaku in Pastaza province.<sup>13</sup> Labeling nonviolent indigenous demonstrators as *terrorists*,<sup>14</sup> *inauthentic*, or agitators against the nation-state by blaming indigenous communities living in areas where rich, strategic resources lay for not be willing to share those resources with the rest of Ecuadorian peoples, President Correa has framed political goals with identity aspects, i.e. identity politics. Or like Mr. Gualinga (indigenous from Pastaza province), Executive Secretary of ECORAE (Institute for the Regional Amazonian Ecodevelopment), claimed in a public speech that I attended in Tena on May

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<sup>12</sup> *Sumak kawsay* is an ancestral lifestyle and indigenous spiritual idea where the human being is in complete equilibrium and harmony with its environment and universe as a whole.

<sup>13</sup> The Sarayaku recently won in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights the lawsuit against the Ecuadorian government for allowing in 2002 an Argentinean oil extraction company to enter their lands without prior informed consent.

<sup>14</sup> According to several media articles reviewed, there are more than two hundred indigenous leaders and activists that have been charged with sabotage and terrorism for peacefully and legitimately demonstrating against resource extraction activities since President Correa came to power in 2007.

24<sup>th</sup> 2012, “We have to use oil and mining resources, but in a sustainable way to guarantee the ancestral lands to the indigenous peoples. [...] NGOs don’t have the right to say no to oil; such decision corresponds to the State”. Similarly, indigenous peoples have tended to make social, political and economic demands based on their understanding of *indigenosness*. Using “traditional indigenous” symbols such as rituals, language and clothing, has become the predominant way through which those claims are made. Furthermore, they have become very savvy in the use of international legal systems to defend their rights, culture and identity, the use of ecotourism projects to secure land tenure, the use of the Internet and social media to gain and maintain support from international activists, and the promotion of English learning among their members.

The current conflict that exists in Ecuador in regards to the proposed ways through which the country should be “developed” is thus linked to deeper questions of social identities and human needs across the different ethnicities that live in the country. While it is not yet an escalated violent conflict, the Ecuadorian elites (through the Government) have used the army and police forces to crack down on indigenous demonstrators as well as enter more remote indigenous-populated Amazonian territories and force them out. Therefore, following Rene Girard’s scapegoat function theory, while there might be some intra-elite disagreements on the specificities of governing and moving forward with their agendas, the elites ultimately resolve those conflicts and unite together against indigenous peoples that seek to preserve their lands, culture and lifestyles and label them as *backward, inauthentic, savage* and/or *terrorists* unless, as I will further show, there is an economic or political benefit to extract from the representation of *traditional* culture. President Correa recently mentioned “We cannot

live like beggars while we are sitting on a mountain of gold. [...] Ecuador has great mineral potential. We cannot negate the development of our country for absurd irrational beliefs. We cannot do away with education and health”.<sup>15</sup> Even though he is considered a socialist and has many right-wing opponents, he still represents the elite’s voice (left and right wings) in the government. But an activist from CONAIE claimed that “The best inheritance we can pass on to our children is not a car, nor a house, nor a checkbook, a savings account or credit card - it is the dignity and rebelliousness we inherited from our grandparents”.<sup>16</sup>

Questions about development clearly show two conflicting narratives that have a direct impact on the perception and (re) creation of identities. Therefore, identity preservation and reproduction are linked to territory and resources (Marti i Puig, 2010; Assies, 2000; Selverston-Scher, 2001). But how does the need for power play in the equation? How are cultural rituals, spiritual beliefs, or language linked to the formation of identity? Do societal actors acknowledge the multiplicity of identities a human being can perform, rather than just portraying an essentialized collective identity? Is representation in the public sphere or recognition sufficient enough to claim there are now the same opportunities for all Ecuadorians? For Alto Napo Kichwas, there is disagreement as to whether President Correa is being able or willing to completely change the power structures in place that they feel always make it harder for Kichwas to advance, but they simultaneously perceive small steps done to improve their life quality. CONAIE, on the other hand, has withdrawn its support for President Correa. Throughout this thesis, I do not necessarily intend to adopt an opposition approach to President

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<sup>15</sup> “Ecuador charges indigenous activists with terrorism”. DW News, September 23, 2011. Retrieved April 30, 2012 from [www.dw.de](http://www.dw.de)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* to 15



Correa, but simply reflect on the prejudices that are masked under the progressive, egalitarian discourses of Correa's Administration.

The indigenous identity, and more specifically the Alto Napo Kichwa identity, is therefore being both created and recreated in a way that stimulates the reinforcement and perpetuation of Ecuadorian elite's and Western notions of *indigenosness* and *backwardness*. The clash between the use of traditional symbolic capital with the use of new, innovative technologies and strategies to make socio-political and economic demands in a global, dynamic world certainly needs further examination if Kichwas are to be taken seriously with their demands and to succeed with their goal of creating a sustainable future, like any other human being that experiences prejudice on a daily basis and hopes for a life with dignity and equal opportunities. In conclusion, the link between the articulation of indigeneity, examined through the lens of symbolic capital, and rights needs to be further researched if the path towards multiculturalism that Correa's government so openly supports is to be fully embraced.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In order to examine the formation of an Alto Napo Kichwa identity through the lens of private vs. public representations of *indigenosness*, I mostly draw from Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital. His theories of taste and cultural and social fields are, to some extent, also incorporated in order to better explain the significance of symbolic capital in this research.

The term *symbolic capital* was developed by Pierre Bourdieu in 1986 and, despite different interpretations that have been given, he defined it as "the form that the various species of capital [economic, cultural, social, etc.] assume when they are

perceived and recognized as legitimate” (1989: 17). More specifically, he claims “it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (1989:23); that is, in essence, the power of recognition. Nowadays, the Dictionary of Social Sciences defines it as “Resources available to a social actor on the basis of prestige or recognition, which function as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value”.<sup>17</sup> And Brysk (200) defines *symbolic representation* as “our distinctive, universal, and perpetual human tool for controlling our environment and each other - language in the largest sense” (2000: XV). When mentioning indigenous symbolic capital, I therefore refer to idealized types of indigenous traditions that Alto Napo Kichwas restore to and represent when trying to gain recognition as well as political, economic or cultural power within a diverse space of power relationships, thus reinforcing their multiple and shifting performances of identity.

The use of Central and South American *traditional, pre-Hispanic* (to some extent) clothing and ornaments, dances, ancestral languages, religious (shamanic) rituals, herbal medicines, etc. are perceived by Alto Napo Kichwas as an identity capital they possess to: 1) mark their distinctive identity and lifestyles when compared to other, more urban, Western-like customs that are not inherently *native* of that land and not part of a historical heritage; and 2) that are also the source of feelings of *belonging* and pride. However, the power component in Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital brings us to suggest that, more than the symbols used to create a certain identity, it is the power structures of the interactions that define such representations.

In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu argues that the different cultural features of individuals act as a distinguishing

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<sup>17</sup>Calhoun, C. (ed.) (2002). "Symbolic Capital". *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. Oxford University Press.

mechanism between groups in a given social space. These differences can be interpreted as symbolic in the sense that there exists a somewhat latent conflict for distinction, for claiming one's group superiority vis-à-vis the opposing group with different cultural values. Using the terms of *taste* and *cultural field*,<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu further argues that those groups in power are able to define what constitutes legitimate and valuable cultural consumptions. In addition, if we apply his *strategies of condescension*,<sup>19</sup> we can observe that this same cultural hegemony is masked under the denial of divisions among groups, a denial which in turn further reinforces these divisions.

Materializing an imagined tradition to non-Kichwas is understood by Kichwas as a strategy to gain power, even if the symbols used in such performance (such as Kichwa language in urban areas or clothing) are not used in private spheres. Within the community, on the other hand, the need to restore to traditional symbols to create Kichwa identities does not materialize; instead, other types of cultural capital are used to bind its members. These symbols, however, become dominant in contexts where the presence of nonindigenous peoples or State authorities marks the symbolic power they possess. Therefore, "symbolic relations of power tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space" (Bourdieu, 1989: 21). In a dynamic space where diverse actors such as the State, tourists, mestizos, urbanized Kichwas, rural Kichwas, community leaders, corporations, etc. interact with each other, relations of

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the cultural field, see Bourdieu's (1993) "The field of Cultural Production: essays on Art and Literature".

<sup>19</sup> Defined as "strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits of the recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance [...] which implies a recognition of distances" (Bourdieu, 1989: 16)

power and recognition change the sources of symbolic capital used in each scenario and, thus, shape the formation of identities.

### **3. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to understand how local and regional claims of Kichwa identity are being articulated and shaped within contemporary discourses of integration and equality, especially promoted since President Correa came into power in 2007. In other words, how are Alto Napo Kichwas adapting to the dominant Western-like mestizo culture while preserving what they consider to be the most important features that characterize their identity and culture? The use and reference to indigenous symbolic capital provides a lens through which to examine the identity formation in the specific research context of Alto Napo, in Ecuadorian Amazon. Furthermore, I analyze how “tradition” is mixed with innovation, and who decides what constitutes tradition and innovation, or as Van Cott (1994) suggested, “the majority [of Amerindians] retain cultural practices, economic techniques, and languages with links to pre-Columbian civilizations. [...] Most communities have evolved, just as their European-descended counterparts have, often incorporating customs, technologies, and ideas from the dominant society into their culture” (1994:3). Following an extended-case methodology where I analyze those dynamics by looking at three main dimensions (economic, political, and social) of the identity vis-à-vis the formation of individual and collective identities, I intend to disguise the stereotypes embedded paradoxically in daily expressions of respect, recognition and integration.

Therefore, my main research question is: How is the Kichwa identity, as an indigenous social formation, in Alto Napo created nowadays and why? And I answer it by posing the following sub-questions:

1. What are the implications of representing a *traditional* Kichwa identity in Alto Napo today? Here I examine what kind of actions Kichwa communities take in order to preserve or re-create what they understand their identity to be like while guaranteeing themselves a sustainable future in a dynamic, global world and in a context where prejudice is still present.

2. How is the Kichwa ethnicity perceived by nonindigenous peoples in Alto Napo? Do nonindigenous characterize Kichwas as a single-identity group, or do they acknowledge multiple identities in Kichwas? This question will reflect on what it means to self-identify and be framed as belonging to an indigenous group vis-à-vis an Ecuadorian citizen of the larger nation-state. Furthermore, the categorization of a person according to the collective identity that he/she might represent obscures the individual identity features.

3. What are the main similarities and differences between Kichwas in rural and urban areas of the Alto Napo region? The answer to this question is intended to examine whether (and how) the space inhabited, i.e. territoriality, influences the formation of collective and individual identities.

From an epistemological perspective, Ruiz-Ballesteros (2011) observes that “The community provides a symbolic-identitarian framework that links its members around universes of meaning” (2011: 656), but how does the community shape the individual’s identity? As a result of this study, I expect to be able to contribute to form a better understanding of the Alto Napo Kichwa identity, as an example of a hybrid indigenous

identity in Ecuador, in order to allow for new strategies to emerge that these individuals and communities could use to make their political, social and economic demands more effective. Shedding light into the obstacles and challenges that they are facing in a multicultural context and how they are responding to those is the starting point of the critical assessment.

#### **4. Contextual Background and Significance to the Field**

Since the Spanish conquered the Ecuadorian territories in 1533 and during the colonization period, the Spanish authorities favored certain local groups over others and transmitted their religion, governance practices and ideologies especially to the *chosen* minority group. Following a classical colonialist pattern, this group adopted and perpetuated colonial standards to the detriment of their culture and fellow citizens. After the independence of Ecuador from Spain in 1822 and during postcolonial times, these administrative and authoritative structures set up during the colonial period were kept and many still remain. While the elites in Ecuador may consist of both *criollos* (so-called *unmixed* Spanish descendants) and some *mestizos* (mixed Amerindian and white, also known as “colonos” or settlers by the Alto Napo Kichwas), a racial differentiation may not prove accurate enough to identify this group; rather, the elite can more easily be identified through their economic and political power.

Following Bowen’s (2011) rejection to classify elites according to “left” or “right” wing ideologies, he accepts Shore’s (2002:4) definition of elites as

[T]hose who occupy the most influential positions or roles in the important spheres of social life. They are typically incumbents: the leaders, rulers and decision makers in any sector of society, or custodians of the machinery of policy

making ... [they are] groups whose ‘cultural capital’ positions them above their fellow citizens and whose decisions crucially shape what happens in the wider society. Equally important, they are the groups that dominate ... the ‘means of orientation’: people whose ideas and interests are hegemonic. (2011: 459).

Therefore, the overall idea that elites are the small group of people that enjoy a privileged seat in a society and whose ideas and practices are hegemonic<sup>20</sup> proves useful for the purpose of this paper and it constitutes my working definition.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s many indigenous ethnic groups, united under the umbrella of their indigenous identity, started demonstrating across the country creating what came to be known as the indigenous movement. Much of the literature written regarding indigenous populations in Latin America refers to the *emergence* of indigenous movements since the 1990s. However, this begs the question of: 1) what constitutes an indigenous movement, and 2) what parameters define such “emergence”. While Amazonian Kichwas, among other indigenous groups in Ecuador, never failed to demand their social, political and economic rights since the Spanish invasion and to postcolonial authorities, the fact that they became *visible* in the national and international spheres as an organized group of political and social actors creates the illusion that they were previously powerless and followed a *laissez-faire* attitude where their social identity was in fact something else but indigenous, that their *indigeneity* appeared during the 1990s.

It seems, however, that the notion of *emergence* is used to describe the new forms through which those demands are made nowadays. Martí i Puig (2010) claims that “the

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<sup>20</sup> Bowen claims elites can be identified “by their institutional power [...] and their ideological influence.” (2011: 459)

‘ethnification’ of constitutional texts has meant the end of a long period of invisibility at the same time as offering institutional incentives that stimulate the creation of collective indigenous identities at the heart of the state and giving their demands due attention” (2010: 82). However, he suggests that “the tendency for governing elites to adopt the doctrine coming from the international regime of indigenous peoples’ rights but to limit its impact suggests that the visibility of indigenous movements over the past decade has been an unwanted consequence of governance and not the expression of the political will of the new polyarchic elites” (2010: 86), an assessment that allows for an understanding of the perceived contradictions in President Correa’s approaches and the current removal of the indigenous support that led him to power. But how does symbolic capital influence the political, economic and social demands of indigenous peoples?

In order to identify what it means to hold an indigenous identity nowadays and the use of indigenous languages in Ecuador as a way to legitimize an indigenous group’s representation and identity in the political and social spheres, Viatori’s ethnographic research (2007) of the Zápara identity construction serves as a comparative analysis to understand the specificity of the Kichwa identity dynamics. The Záparas were in pre-colonial times an ethnic group of approximately twenty thousand members. Deadly epidemics brought by colonizers, slavery, forced migrations, and cultural assimilation caused the Záparas and their language to almost disappear. They amount today approximately two hundred. However, the fact that a group of Ecuadorian anthropologists declared them extinct in the 1990s prompted the emergence of a well-articulated Zápara movement where an imagined *traditional, indigenous* (though not necessarily Zápara) capital was (and is) used to claim their *authentic and unique*



*indigenouslyness*. That is, the power embedded in recognition processes can indeed influence the performance and adoption of symbols in identity constructions.

While the analysis of indigenous movements in Ecuador is not my research focus, it nevertheless provides for a framework from which to examine the articulation of a collective identity. However, the need for a more grounded research that examines intra-communal relationships and individual perspectives is needed to understand the articulation of indigeneity in public vs. private spheres and audiences; that is, the investigation of multiple identities might allow for a better understanding of Western-perceived dichotomies or identity paradoxes. Furthermore, the literature herein examined tends to refer to aspects of the symbolic capital such as land and language for those articulations, but other cultural realms such as clothing, art, music, rituals, indigenous-made literature, etc. and more contemporary elements such as the use of social media, need to be considered as well when looking into identity formation. Especially when referring to economic purposes in the portrayal of an indigenous identity, most scholars tend to look at land titling because, I argue, there is the Western perception that most indigenous peoples inhabit rural areas. Thus, in Chapter Four I provide a comparative analysis between urban and rural socio-economic dynamics vis-à-vis the Kichwa identity in Alto Napo region in an attempt to more accurately interpret those dynamics.

Finally, indigenous communities have become very savvy about technology and the use of media, the Internet and the political and legal systems to defend their rights. Their struggle to preserve their identity (in whatever form they feel best represents them) given the nowadays more subtle acculturation pressures may have caused them to rethink not only their identity and how to function in their communities, but also how to create a

“porous fortress” that allows for some of their traditions and customs to be preserved as well as take advantage of the positive effects new technologies might also bring. Looking towards future dynamics and calling for further research on the indigenous youth, Jackson and Warren (2005) proposed that

At issue is whether indigenous youth will follow existing forms of indigenous activism, find other movements more compelling, or distance themselves from activism altogether. The younger generation is a heterogeneous category, the members of which see opportunities and constraints from very different cultural and economic vantage points. (2005:567).

Based on my research observations in Ecuador, I would add a fourth possible outcome, meaning whether the youth will actually invent a new form of activism for the indigenous identity to be strengthened using contemporary tools and technologies in the process. In conclusion, while identities are complex, hybrid and constantly changing, we need to move beyond the simplistic essentialization of ethnic groups and examine deeply the interconnection between identities, space, time and power structures.

In the next chapter, a review of the literature about indigenous peoples and identities is provided. Chapter Three explains the methodology used to carry out this research, and Chapter Four presents the research findings following a very thick description at some points. This Master’s thesis concludes with an analytical discussion of the findings and major contributions to the existing literature, i.e. Chapter Five, and the Bibliography and Appendix sections.

## Chapter Two: The Complex Formation of Indigenous Identities in Ecuador

*Our own wisdom always existed and will always exist, if we are left to ourselves. But as far as I can recall, they never let us have a belief that was purely our own. What I remember is that we lived with the Jesuits; they taught us religion. If just one day we didn't go to the mission they punished us. They made a two-branched whip using a dried bull's penis and with this they whipped us until blood came out.*

Rucuyaya Alonso (1985), Alto Napo Kichwa [in Muratorio (1991: 94)]

### Introduction

There is an overwhelmingly large literature on indigenous peoples in Latin America. Building from the literature on indigenous movements, I analyze its impact and the use of symbolic capital for political, economic and cultural purposes in order to understand the local, community identity dynamics vis-à-vis the Amazonian Kichwa identity as an ethnic group. Identity, or “social radar” as Glidden (2007) refers to, is complex, but it cannot deter us from examining its implications in the multiple realms of a society. Furthermore, I intend to uncover the formation of individual identities from a literature that tends to focus on the collective when examining the social dynamics of an ethnic group, because “the neglect of the plurality of our affiliations and of the need for voice and reasoning obscures the world in which we live.” (Sen, 2006: XIV). Collectivities are formed by individuals and, thus, the intersection of multiple identities in one context needs to be further examined and comprises one of my main thesis focuses. Indeed, as Jackson and Warren (2005) suggest

What indigenous identity means [...] can become quite unstable when all actors are repeatedly modifying their discourses in response to the ever-shifting terms of engagement. [...] Identity is better seen as a paradox rather than a statement ... for as soon as such statement is made, it blurs and

dissolves. [...] Clearly, identities are not just fluid, nor just multiple, they are fluidly multiple and always relational. (2005: 560-561)

I concentrate here only on some scholarly work done with a general emphasis and also on indigenous peoples in Ecuador. Once in the context of Ecuador, it is important to highlight that the studies tend to focus on the indigenous peoples in the Ecuadorian Andes and those in more remote areas of the Amazon, thus lacking contemporary study of the space in between those two, i.e. the Napo province (see Muratorio 1991, Uzendoski 2010, and Whitten, 2004, 2011, for studies in this province).

In order to answer my research questions, it is crucial to analyze the scholarly work written about several of those aspects that I intend to explore. Given this extensive literature on indigenous peoples in Latin America, this literature review is divided into two main lenses of investigation and a final conclusion. The first two sections examine individual vs. collective identity formations, where the analysis of indigenous movements in Latin America, and more specifically in Ecuador, during the last three decades is incorporated in order to provide the contextual framework for the study of identity formations and articulations. The following three sections analyze the purposes behind these indigenous identity constructions, i.e. political, economic, and cultural, because “whether we are considering our identities as we ourselves see them or as others see us, we choose within particular constraints.” (Sen, 2006: 31).

### **1. Individual Identity Formation**

Many scholars, in their attempt to distance themselves from essentialist perspectives, agree that not only identities are fluid, dynamic and thus changing, but they can also be formed from a ‘bottom-up’, ‘top-down’ and transnational perspectives, thus

hinting the multidirectional influences in identity articulation that is simultaneously created, shaped and recreated; that is, “identities are socially constructed, open to continual negotiation and renegotiation” (Glidden, 2007:7). Furthermore, “any identity is potentially political, because identity is like a filter through which an individual views and is viewed by others. Identities are infused with or subjected to power. [...] Identities are also political as they are the primary means through which someone enters politics.” (Glidden, 2007:2)

Some authors acknowledge there are differences between collective and individual identities among indigenous populations in terms of feelings of belonging to one specific ethnicity (see Jackson and Warren, 2005:557), but many scholars take a collectivist (almost essentialist) approach when analyzing the dynamics within an ethnic group (see especially Selverston-Scher, 2001. Also, Aikau and Spencer, 2007; Becker, 2011; Brysk, 2000; Erazo, 2010). Furthermore, “identity is to be seen as a fluid, dynamic process. The idea of there being multiple ways of being indigenous is the optimal way to look at individuals, pueblos, and organizations. [...] [R]ather than asking questions like ‘What characterizes X identity?’ [we should ask] ‘What are the ways of being X at this time and in this place?’” (Jackson and Warren, 2005: 561); my research helps shed light into this process of (Alto Napo Amazonian Kichwa) identity formation, and I do so in a comparative analysis between urban and rural areas in the Tena and Archidona counties of the Napo province of Ecuador, looking at the intersection between those two areas.

Muratorio (1991) is one of the few scholars that researched the Alto Napo Kichwa identity from an anthropological perspective. Though her studies were carried out in the 1980s and she specifically mentions that a comparison between generations was not the

focus of her study (1991: 228-229), “the issue is that of analyzing the idiosyncrasies of the economic, social, and ideological practices of Napo Runa society in its complex interrelationships with the dominant structures, and their transformations” (1991:5), which proves useful for the purpose of this thesis. Analyzing individual dynamics and practices to then relate them to the collective, Muratorio found that the way in which Napo Runas were confronting missionaries, patrons and state authorities was a source for their ethnic pride. Recounting the life stories of Rucuyaya Alonso, an Alto Napo elder, Muratorio brings the individual experiences, practices and ideologies to the collective ones, finding that there were several resistance strategies<sup>21</sup> used by many individuals like Alonso in order to confront the imposed acculturation processes.

From a Foucauldian governmentality perspective and building on literature that examines global connectedness to indigenous communities, Erazo (2010) analyzes the role of Kichwa indigenous leaders in shaping the identities of their community members and creating what she calls “new types of (politically and community active) citizens” in order to advance those leaders’ political and economic demands for the benefit and empowerment of all members of their communities.

From a collectivist approach, she argues these leaders are encouraging their communities to engage in market-oriented and community development activities, such as ecotourism or cooperative farms, in order to: 1) guarantee their future as organizational and political leaders; 2) in case there are NGOs involved, to continue to receive their

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<sup>21</sup> Given the white exploitation of indigenous peoples in the form of labor and taxes during the mid-nineteenth century, Muratorio (1991) interprets as a form of resistance the indigenous peoples leaving certain areas as soon as they knew white peoples were going to settle there. Other more recent examples include subtle mocking or entire communities not going to “sell” their labor on a certain day (which in turn led to the stereotypes of indigenous peoples not being a “trustworthy labor force”).

support given that there is a current tendency for NGOs to look for local leaders that could manage their projects; and 3) to politically and socially empower individuals and their communities as a whole, according to the leaders' vision of progress and development. However, and referring to past experiences of collectivism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "when indigenous people were organized into concentrated spaces and collective organizations, the state could more easily increase its role in and vigilance over people's everyday lives (Becker, 1999). So could indigenous leaders." (Erazo, 2010: 1027). And it is this juxtaposition of being the defender of indigenous rights and governed by a higher body, with being the sovereign and disciplinary agent on the local level that Erazo refers to the "new power dynamics" of indigenous communities.

Erazo (2010) distinguishes five main strategies Kichwa leaders have used over the past four decades to justify economic collectivism that, in turn, they perceive to allow for the empowerment of indigenous communities: the use of identity-based arguments, the reinterpretation of history to advance their goals, a new understanding of citizenship based on the benefits of working with larger indigenous communities and not just those akin, a communal claim of ownership over land and other resources, and the benefits of attracting NGO development projects.

Therefore, as Erazo suggests, while Kichwa leaders have used several strategies to promote collectivism activities and have also contributed to the perpetuation of neoliberal notions introduced by international NGOs, they have also managed to impose their development views and rationality to fit their local contexts. In fact, "indigenous leaders, noticing the potential value of the symbolic and political capital attained through the resignification of 'indigenous culture', increase their efforts to revive and strengthen

their own institutions.” (Jackson and Warren, 2005: 563-564). The ways in which they are currently bridging national and international approaches to identity preservation with their own understanding of it is one of the focuses of my thesis.

## **2. Collective Identity Formation**

Up until the mid-twentieth century, the indigenous population in Ecuador preferred not to publically identify as such given the negative consequences and stereotypes that identification could further bring. Glidden (2007) explains it in a remarkable pragmatic way:

[A]ctivists wanting to mobilize ethnic identities faced many obstacles, the biggest of which was the centuries-long denigration of the Indian identity. Indians had been an object to be dealt with – by colonial authorities, by the independent state, by the Liberal Revolution, and by missionaries. [...] Although indigenous peoples clearly had cultural or biological attributes by which they could identify themselves as ‘Indian’ or ‘Indigenous’, there were few reasons for them to reorder their attributes and preference Indian over peasant, for example. As viewed by broader society, there was little of value in being an Indian. (2007: 17)

Most scholars attribute the *emergence* of an ethnic-based indigenous movement in Ecuador in the 1990s, where the indigenous identity was re-framed into something desirable and worth of admiration by nonindigenous, to: 1) the nation-state building project that was attempting to solve the “Indian problem” from a paternalistic perspective by incorporating the indigenous ethnicity into the national identity (Jackson and Warren, 2005; Marti i Puig, 2010; Becker, 2012)<sup>22</sup>; 2) to the so-called modernization projects

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<sup>22</sup> Glidden (2007) argues that since the state, holder of power, *de facto* defined with a paternalistic tone what it meant to be an indigenous person and was promoting the indigenous culture as folklore, the image



where the threat of a plurinational (rather than just a multicultural) state was seen by the state and elites as counterproductive to the development of the nation; and 3) to the social movement experience from the agrarian reforms of the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Glidden (2005) identifies four mechanisms employed in those movements (the formation of a collective identity, the cost-benefit analysis of opportunities vs. threats, outside actors' certification, and brokers' politicization of identity), but she rightly calls for investigations on the processes involved in identity shifting.

Marti i Puig (2010) claims that since the 1990s Latin America has seen an emergence of various political actors “for whom indigenusness is their basic social identity” (2010: 74). While he acknowledges that the demands of indigenous groups in Latin America have been historically oppressed, the “sudden appearance” term that he uses to refer to the “visibility” processes that indigenous groups are in is indeed problematic; the fact that there was no national or international coverage of these groups in terms of their demands does not mean their political and socio-economic interests did not exist. Throughout his article, however, and noting that many scholars actually use the term *emergence*, Marti i Puig explains how indigenous political demands have become articulated in a new manner and draws upon social movement and governance theories to both understand such “awakening” and its impact on the national and international political spheres. Mijeski and Beck (2011) clarify this emergence by suggesting it can be better understood as the white and mestizo dominant classes not expecting the indigenous uprisings that paralyzed the country.

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that was being portrayed did not coincide with the identity that the indigenous people wanted for themselves.

<sup>23</sup> Please note that land claims continue to be one of the demands of indigenous peoples throughout Ecuador.

Following thus an identity politics strategy, the indigenous peoples tried to transform a political system that was characterized by clientelism and corruption (Mijeski and Beck, 2011). However, this system of populist politics, as Selverston-Scher (2001) refers to, where charisma and endless promises to end poor economic conditions of many, still prevails. Indeed, and referring to the appearance and gradual decline of the Ecuadorian political party Pachakutik<sup>24</sup> (seen as the political arm of CONAIE) especially after President Correa came to power, Mijeski and Beck (2011) contend that

Access to positions of state authority, however, does not automatically result in transformation of the state's institutions and practices. [...] those very institutions and practices are not only resistant to change but also demand that political actors accommodate to them. (2011: 116).

While it has been a historical dynamic for the Ecuadorian government to ignore and oppress indigenous movements unless there is a strong international support, we cannot simply accept the five Cs that Brysk (2005) claims transnational networks have given to indigenous communities: cash, courage, contacts, consciousness, and campaigns. For the purpose of this paper, I find useful to only describe what Brysk understands as *courage* and *consciousness* in regards to international support of indigenous communities. *Courage* is explained as a political coverage to allow for social movements to develop in order to “protect threatened communities, allowing these to defend their legitimate demands that would *otherwise be impossible*”<sup>25</sup> (Brysk, 2005:2, emphasis mine). *Consciousness* refers to “the creation of new ways to understand certain situations, elaborate stories, interpret the reality and make different and critical diagnostics. [...] [It

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<sup>24</sup> Pachakutik means “rebirth” or “the return of our time” in Kichwa.

<sup>25</sup> Self-made translation from the original Spanish text.

also refers to] processes typical of the globalization era that have brought indigenous people to *acquire the conscience of 'being indigenous'*, beyond their strictly local or regional identity”<sup>26</sup> (Brysk, 2005: 2; emphasis mine). How can one assure a certain future outcome without explaining, for example, the role of inter-indigenous support? And, what does it mean to be conscious about one’s “indigenesness”? Is an indigenous person somehow *forced* to adopt and re-create a certain Western understanding of indigenesness in order to *be considered* so or, more importantly, to *be* so? Who has the power and sovereignty to decide what “indigenous” means and who *is* so?

It is doubtful thus that nonindigenous actors (both national and international) could be given the credit for “courage” and “consciousness”, especially because they are simply not rooted in any indigenous community and have, therefore, not been completely exposed to their struggles. The neo-colonialist nature of these concepts where the “white man saves the brown savages” not only obscures collective identity dynamics, but they promote an essentialization of indigenous groups.

Referring to the organization and prevalence of a plurinational state, Selverston-Scher (2005:20) claims that the state must provide certain incentives to its member groups to remain under that system. Providing a discourse about representation and integration, backed by some key figures that signal the group ethnicity (such as indigenous leaders in government posts), is one incentive, but how do Kichwas then react to the overall level of marginalization?

Rather than offering the “right to be different”, Ecuadoran government policies directed at indigenous peoples and general public discourse before the 1980s primarily focused on assimilating this population, that is “[they] discouraged politicized indigenous

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* to 25

identification.” (Jackson and Warren, 2005:551). In fact, “State nationalism associates indigenous communities with the nation’s ‘glorious indigenous past’, marginalizing them in the present – except for museums, tourism, and folkloric events.” (Jackson and Warren, 2005:551). The indigenous social movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Ecuador were primarily based on class and aligned with Leftist ideologies<sup>27</sup> (see for example Brysk, 2000; de la Pena, 2005; Glidden, 2007; Erazo, 2011), but those of the 1990s were based on their common ethnic identity as both a resource for their political and economic demands, and as a re-articulation of their indigenusness. Feelings of exclusion and a stigmatizing *Otherness* prompted the 1990s uprisings to be thus basically identity-based. Clearly, the words self-determination, autonomy, dignity, participation, rights to difference, etc. that continuously arise in the literature reviewed reflect the most basic demands of the indigenous movements.

The idea that a collective identity needs to be framed for an ethnic mobilization to surface is thus a common argument made in the literature reviewed. In sum, Jackson and Warren (2005) conclude that

The politics being pursued by pueblos – demanding and attaining national and international recognition of their identity and the legitimacy of their claims – has shown that adopting an overall strategy of cultural and historical recovery and revival is often the best route for achieving a degree of autonomy and self-determination, as well as convincing funders and legislators of the reasonableness of other kinds of claims, such as titling a traditional collective land tenure system. (2005: 553).

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<sup>27</sup> As a comparative analysis, Assies (2005) refers also to Bolivian peasant unions increasingly adopting an indigenous identity discourse since the early 1970s (p. 363).

However, once recognition is achieved, how do indigenous peoples guarantee that their equal participation in the state and society as a whole is both achieved and strengthened? This is a crucial question to answer if we are to understand the current Kichwa indigenous identity in Napo vis-à-vis participation in society as equal citizens, after the well-known and researched indigenous uprisings of the past three decades. Assies argues that “ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples deploy their identity politics and states respond with recognition policies. While the former seek to transform, the latter seek to manage” (2005:368)

### **3. For Political Purposes**

The indigenous movements in Ecuador, especially during and after the 1990s, sought to have the indigenous peoples incorporated into the power realms of the country and completely transform the weak state institutions. Glidden (2007) defines identity politics as the type that

recognizes oppression, domination and power struggles that can only be understood through the lens of a particular kind of identity. Identity politics consist of a critical process, in which one deconstructs identity, and recognizes the power dynamics that inform and shape identity. (2007: 6)

Much of the literature herein reviewed portrays the indigenous population as one that articulates a certain *strategic* identity through the pursuit of their political demands to achieve more representation, integration and an equal status in the nation-state, where they co-exist with the dominant social ethnicity. The process of “negotiating citizenship in societies that officially proclaim themselves ‘multicultural’” (Assies, 2005: 367) is a common dynamic in many Latin American countries. While these dynamics might vary

greatly between Latin American countries due to the different political and socio-economic contexts, certain similarities are herein shown.

In certain situations where the indigenous population is considered a threat to either the nation-building or the so-often called “development” projects, the portrayal of an essentialist indigenous ethnicity might lead opponents of the indigenous peoples to equal it as portraying a past illusion, an identity that is no longer *authentic*, and thus delegitimizing their culture and ethnic-based political claims (see Bowen, 2011). For example, during the 1980s and 1990s uprisings, the indigenous population in Ecuador did not necessarily want to secede from the state. While the indigenous population rejects promoting a homogenous culture for the state nation-building process, integration is not. Ethnicity and national citizenship are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Selverston-Scher, 2001; Jackson and Warren, 2005; Assies, 2005).<sup>28</sup> Thus, this brings us to acknowledge that “ethnic labels are often politicized in ways that make them indexes for ideological alignments and loyalties that stand outside ethnic identity per se” (Assies, 2005: 562). In fact, Jackson and Warren (2005) conclude presenting the reader with the question of who has the right to decide (or not) what an identity representation should look like:

When culture becomes a form of empowerment, mobilizing around that empowerment may seem fraudulent precisely because it is politicized. State challenges made to indigenous individuals and communities may take the form of claims that they are ‘no longer indigenous’ because of their ‘untraditional’ behavior. More specific political challenges to urban-based activism have been

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<sup>28</sup> Jackson and Warren (2005) define Essentialism as “characterizing representations that freeze and reify an identity in a way that hides the historical processes and politics within which it develops” (p. 559).

used by their opponents in attempts to delegitimize leaders. The argument that individuals do (or do not) represent their indigenous people begs the processual question of who represents whom in all facets of political life. (2005:559).

From the indigenous perspective, it is a political strategy to demand, for example, more autonomy, but seen as “not about isolation but about finding a new place within the state, which allows both for autonomy and for participation in fairer terms” (Assies, 2005: 369). The mobilization against a common “enemy” is indeed articulated in the indigenous movement. However, what if that “enemy” is not so visible anymore? What if that “enemy” uses integration and anti-discrimination discourses and even practices to mask the underlying intentions to stay in power? To answer this question, Jackson and Warren (2005) suggest that “other political threats [apart from factionalism in indigenous groups] include a disruptive stratification within the movement and within the communities themselves. ‘Rights’ granted to pueblos can strengthen the sectors already possessing power and weaken the position of subordinates” (2005: 566).

Indeed, during this study in Napo province, I acknowledged communities organizing to acquire legal status before any kind of community-based demands could be made to the state. Therefore, “a community might have to obtain *personeria juridica*, juridical identity, before it can undertake any kind of legal action. [...] [F]or many communities, being officially recognized as indigenous affects, sometimes substantially, member’s sense of who they are.” (Jackson & Warren, 2005:564. See also Bauer, 2009).

Self-identification as indigenous or member of a certain native ethnicity is a type of framing based on historical values and practices, universes of meaning, experiences of

exclusion and repression, ancestral struggles, etc., but in more practical terms it involves distributive issues (Assies, 2005). However, as Assies (2005) asserts,

[The] discourse of ‘victimization’, ‘five hundred years of resistance’, and international legislation about the right to self-determination, [as a strategy] may well have reached its limits and may entail the risk of marginalization. The way ahead is [...] to formulate indigenous proposals in relation to national problems and to forge alliances with popular movements. (2005: 368-369).

#### **4. For Economic Purposes**

Using the term *multicultural market democracy* (as a combination of multiculturalism, economic liberalism and political democracy) and *authentic multiculturalism* (as the toleration of cultural differences and the labeling of more “radical” or sovereignty-threatening indigenous as “inauthentic”), Bowen (2011) suggests that the Ecuadorian elite, regardless of its either left or right wing political ideology, has the *de facto* authority to guide the political and legal framework of the country, setting up and monitoring the preservation of the *rules of the game*, in order to effectively face the obstacles posed by the indigenous people to their sovereignty and the *status quo*. Therefore, the incorporation of the indigenous population into the political system is in fact a way for the elite to show their tolerance of the *multiculturality* of the country (and keep their privileged status), but not the willingness to share the power with such groups. Indeed, “Some scholars believe multicultural citizenship reforms appealed to ruling elites as a way for the state to signal its citizens that it was attending to their interests, despite a decreasing ability to meet material demands” (Jackson and Warren, 2005:552). As Bowen (2011) further claims, “these [indigenous peoples’] movements mark neither a



radical transformation of prevailing socio-political structures nor a simple continuation of previous ideas and practices.” (2011: 453). This suggests that the so-called indigenous movements have been able to make a “crack” on those socio-political and economic structures of the country thus showing an elite’s weakness: the fear of losing power (see also Selverston-Scher; 2001:18).

Linking *civilization* with development, Bowen (2011) also provides for a useful way of understanding the differences in the developmental discourse between the elites and indigenous peoples in Ecuador:

Contemporary elite representations of this contested term [civilization] resolve not around issues of race, religion or class, but around the question of democracy. To be civilized is to respect the democratic process, defined as the holding of regular elections to fill constitutionally designated public offices. Development is another contested concept. The dominant thinking on development among Ecuadorian elites continues to be shaped by the basic premises of economic liberalism. (2011: 455).

Therefore, despite right-wing elites may be more inclined to follow a strictly liberal economic approach, left-wing elites still understand development from a liberal point of view; that is, they may disagree on the intensity and methods of liberal mechanisms, but they still frame the developmental discourse and practices along this ideology, i.e. liberalism. It is in the daily intra-elite conflict and political game in regards to left or right wing approaches that we witness the scapegoat function. The elite ultimately will unite against indigenous peoples that want to preserve certain resources. This methodology and developmental narrative are in fact a characteristic of the cultural

imperialism the elite poses on the rest of the Ecuadorian population. Following Young's definition (2010: 41), "to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it as the Other. [...] Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm."

#### *4.1 Territoriality*

Having the "right to be different" does not seem to be enough in the indigenous peoples' pursuit of guaranteeing themselves a future with equal opportunities. In fact, as some authors like Jackson and Warren (2005) or Martí i Puig (2010) suggest, most indigenous demands need to be performed with references to *indigenosness* (and not just as legitimate citizens demands), which in turn needs to be validated by nonindigenous, if they are to succeed. Referring to the achievement of collective land rights, for example, they suggest that they are "more likely [to be secured] when pueblos successfully convince government bureaucrats and the courts of the validity of indigenous understandings of native identity and practices" (Jackson and Warren, 2005:553), whatever those "native practices" mean nowadays. In terms of land claims, more specifically, "rather than simply the land itself, territory is seen to be a crucial foundation for self-determination" (Jackson and Warren, 2005:553). Through a highly essentialist portrayal though, Selverston-Scher (2001) also suggests that "Indigenous people in Ecuador speak of the *pacha mama* (mother earth) in the same way as countless other indigenous cultures around the world do. Their science, language, religion, history, and customs are all linked to a specific territory with which they identify deeply. The reasons

indigenous communities remain on their lands despite extremely exploitative conditions may have as much to do with these cultural ties as with economic factors.” (2001: 6).

In sum, the recreation of an identity is bidirectional and reflexive in the sense that the indigenous population portrays a certain “native identity” with specific cultural and social practices, which is based on previous nonindigenous acceptance of such, and then the nonindigenous population needs to validate it in order for the indigenous to claim it as their own; by contrast, if the “performance” is not validated, then opponents of the indigenous population can use it strategically to de-construct their adversary, under claims of international actors maneuvering the indigenous population for their self-interests and/or under claims that indigenous demands run counterproductive to the state nation-building and modernization projects. Following this line of thought thus we could argue that indigenous peoples *de facto* lack the freedom to claim whatever form of collective identity they prefer for themselves, without having to have it not only checked, but approved by the dominant ethnic sector.

#### *4.2 Ecotourism: biodiversity conservation and community development*

Especially in the Ecuadorian Amazon region, it is crucial to understand how indigenous communities perceive the benefits and costs of engaging in ecotourism projects as well as how they justify such projects in terms of preserving their identity and sustainable development of their community.<sup>29</sup> Given the rise and expansion of ecotourism in Latin America over the past few decades as an alternative mechanism to improve the livelihoods of their citizens in a way that is also environmentally sustainable<sup>30</sup> and also as a way to claim land tenure in the case of some indigenous

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<sup>29</sup> Tena, capital of the Napo province, is actually one of the main ecotourist destinations in Ecuador.

<sup>30</sup> Also known as “Integrated Conservation and Development Ecotourism Projects” (ICDP).

communities like the Sarayaku in the Amazonian Pastaza province of Ecuador, an analysis of scholarly work related to ecotourism projects will serve helpful for the purpose of this thesis.

Some authors (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Fennell, 2008; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011) suggest that it is a fallacy and even a patronizing Western notion to assume that indigenous people take *de facto* environmentalist approaches in their daily community activities and thus they are not *necessarily* guaranteeing a sustainable equilibrium between humans and nature. In fact, Coria & Calfucura (2012) claim that “a large part of the literature analyzing the links between biodiversity conservation and community development assumes that nature-based tourism managed by indigenous communities will result not only in conservation of natural resources but also in increased development” (2012: 47).

On the other hand, Beahm’s (2011) political analysis of tourism (more specifically, ethnotourism and ecotourism) in Tena reveals that Kichwas in the Napo region have acknowledged the benefits tourism can bring them when those projects are managed locally rather than by outsiders. After a long exploitative experience with outsiders such as missionaries, rubber barons, land colonists, and later non-indigenous, elite tourist operators that would only allow the indigenous participation on the projects in the form of *traditional* practices to please tourists, Tena’s Kichwas managed to gain (after a long struggle that will not be covered here) the license to run their tourists projects. Having such license, however, might not necessarily mean effectively participating in the market, as I will show in Chapter Four. In fact, Coria & Calfucura (2012) argue that, even though there is currently an inability to appropriately determine

whether ICDPs are successful and, if so, to what extent, three main problems may prevent ecotourism projects from reaching their full potential: 1) the even distribution of economic benefits among community members tends to become practically impossible since outside stakeholders and/or community elites get most benefits; 2) in some circumstances, the insecurity of land tenure and the control of other resources can lead to a lack of proper investment in ecotourism projects; and 3) indigenous communities might not have control over management decisions if there are unequal power structures that benefit outsiders vis-à-vis indigenous groups (thus bringing communities to become further disempowered).

Nevertheless, Coria & Calfucura (2012) claim that indigenous communities tend to take better care of their surrounding environment than nonindigenous groups, especially if the incentive to do so exists when their livelihoods benefit from biodiversity conservation. Despite the three problems previously described, there seems to be great potential in ecotourism projects in terms of local economic development and environment preservation<sup>31</sup>, but the way in which ecotourists might influence the indigenous identity needs further investigation. In sum, territoriality and resource management are linked to deeper questions of identity preservation and cultural reproduction (Marti i Puig, 2010; Assies, 2000; Selverston-Scher 2001).

## **5. For Cultural Purposes**

Most scholars argue that by achieving the political and economic purposes, the cultural goal is *de facto* fulfilled. Given the link between cultural discrimination and the economic and political spheres of the struggle, “art and cultural consumption are

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<sup>31</sup> Though not ecotourist oriented, Fundacion Runa that I interned with uses this approach in their already successful fair trade guayusa project.

predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.” (Bourdieu, 1984:7). Selverston-Scher (2001) assesses this cultural discrimination by claiming:

Exclusion of indigenous peoples is cultural, economic, and political. Exclusion is cultural in the sense that a colonist mentality of Spanish domination of indigenous peoples laid the foundation for the development of a European-style nation-state that would include economic and political integration as well as projects of forced cultural assimilation. Indigenous models of societal organization were considered inferior to European models, and the indigenous people, likewise, were considered inferior. The resulting relationship was one of cultural domination. This history still influences the views of many political authorities. A high-ranking political representative of one province [Loja] said in an interview, ‘The reason Ecuador is so poor is that we have too many Indians’. (2001: 76)

Referring to Fischer’s study in Mayan Guatemala (1996), Jackson and Warren (2005) assess that “Maya leaders work to appropriate elements of Western culture and re-appropriate elements of their own history to create a cultural identity that is viable in the global political economy, and marked as uniquely theirs.” (2005: 559)

### *5.1 Language*

Abstracting from the territorial issue before exposed, a large body of literature draws from and links the need of territory or land titling directly to the maintenance and reproduction of an ethnic identity. While territory creates a sense of belonging both to space and ethnic identity, further connections and references need to be made to the meaning of less tangible capital vis-à-vis the indigenous identity, or “as with territory,

ways in which language is seen to signal, confer, and validate indigenusness continue to require examination.” (Jackson and Warren, 2005:557). More specifically, for example: 1) having to (re)learn how to speak an indigenous language in order to show the authenticity of one’s indigenous affiliation or belonging; 2) being able to speak a native language but claiming ignorance of it; or 3) seeing nonindigenous people either speak indigenous languages or deliberately use references to indigenusness as one’s own while distancing themselves from common negative stereotypes of the indigenous population,<sup>32</sup> might at first glance disturb the researcher’s mind in trying to understand the importance of language in the maintenance and strengthening of an indigenous identity, but the need for such analysis becomes indeed crucial.

As Jackson and Warren (2005) suggest, “various institutional authorities try to require some form of link between cultural markers, such as language, and cultural identities.” (2005: 557). One of those ‘markers’ or defining characteristic of an indigenous group is considered thus to be a common native language. The use of a common language though not only plays the role of a signifier towards nonindigenous peoples or the state; it also acts as a unifying ethnic mechanism, a form of capital that bonds individuals together into the group membership, “[something that] delineates where the imagined community ends” (Glidden, 2007:24).

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<sup>32</sup> See Olson (2010), for example, for a fascinating read on the appropriation of indigenous lexicon and symbols by mestizos while portraying their higher social status in 1886. At that time, the emergence of mestizo identity pride as a separate ethnicity had not been developed yet. Their goal was to seek help from the central Ecuadorian government after a natural disaster in the Andean city of Banos, but the articulation of a paternalistic discourse (like the government was used to doing with indigenous populations) provides for a better understanding of strategic language usage. More recently, Bauer (2009) provides with a case example of traditionally identified *mestizos* in an Ecuadorian coast village re-articulating their identity towards an indigenous one in their pursuit of negotiating with the state over land disputes, which is considered politically an “indigenous issue”.

Some authors such as Glidden (2007) even claimed it is relatively easy to differentiate between a mestizo and an indigenous person in rural areas because of the traditional attire the indigenous wear (referring to the Andean region of Ecuador), or because one could tell Spanish was their second language. However, as it will be discussed in Chapter Four, I could not tell such difference (though Kichwas were unsuccessfully trying to teach me) because they did not wear any “traditional” dress code regularly and many of them spoke Spanish as their first language.

In order to pursue my interest in identifying the meanings and the implications of holding an indigenous identity in Napo nowadays, and in order to understand the use of indigenous languages in Ecuador as a way to legitimize an indigenous group’s representation and identity in the political and social spheres, Viatori’s ethnographic research (2007) of the Zápara identity construction will serve as a comparative analysis to understand the specificity of the Napo Kichwa identity dynamics.

The approximately two hundred members that constitute the Zápara nationality make this indigenous group one of the smallest in Ecuador and are nowadays mostly based along the Conambo, Pindoyacu and Curaray Rivers in the Pastaza province (part of the Ecuadorian Amazon). In pre-colonial times, the Záparas were living in the region that is nowadays located in the eastern parts of Ecuador and northeast Peru, and amounted to approximately twenty thousand inhabitants. Cultural assimilation processes by other neighboring indigenous groups (or “acculturation” as Viatori refers to) and death caused by diseases, slavery and forced migrations, prompted the Zápara to almost disappear as an *authentic indigenous tribe*. The rise of oil extraction companies in Ecuador on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the development of the construction and agricultural



economic sectors, moreover, brought many Zápara men to migrate to other parts of Ecuador in order to bring cash back to their communities. These patterns of internal migration in turn caused Zápara members to lose their original language and use Kichwa (indigenous language most spoken in Ecuador) as their native language and Spanish as their second language.

As Viatori assessed, “Particularly in Amazonia, anthropologists have focused on how indigenous representatives have consciously performed and constructed their identities in ways that accord with Western views of authentic indigenous ‘cultures’ as a-historical and unaltered by pressures of modern capitalist society” (2007: 105). Therefore, “Indigenous leaders have cast their identities in ways that embody romanticized Western notions of the indigenous Other in order to garner support from domestic and international advocates who value such depictions of Indianness” (Viatori, 2007: 105-106). Following this argumentative line, it comes as not surprising that Zápara leaders, who are not fluent in Zápara language and can even invent Zápara words in their attempt to keep a language alive, use Kichwa (and Zápara to an extent) in their interactions with non-Záparas in order to claim legitimacy of their authenticity and, thus, create and preserve their representation in the national and international political spaces; this concept of *linguistic essentialism*, as Viatori refers to, implies that the Zápara language is considered the most distinct and tangible symbol of their identity, but it can also potentially hide the real history and practices of indigenous groups that do not fall into the Western interpretation of indigenusness (as non-culturally polluted or as “pure”) in order to *just* advance their political and socio-economic demands. Identity politics

carried out by Zápara leaders is thus a process of both creation and re-definition of cultural practices and identities based on the power and authority of such members.

In sum, there are two main contributions that I consider most relevant to extract from Viatori's work for the purpose of this thesis. First, the fact that a group of nonindigenous Ecuadorian anthropologists declared the Záparas extinct in the 1990s prompted the emergence of a well-articulated Zápara movement. The fact that not only the nationality but most importantly the basic existence of a group is publically, politically and socially rejected can create an urge to seek recognition and to claim one's space in the system. Second, the efforts to preserve and promote the Zápara language as a uniquely distinct symbol of their group, the use of Kichwa, "traditional" clothing and "indigenous" cultural discourses as a feature of their indigenosity, and the reluctance to speak Spanish (unless highly needed) to avoid being labeled as "culturally contaminated" or Westernized and thus undermine their "value" as a nationality, they all conform a specific narrative where language is equated to the possibility of legitimizing and recognizing a particular ethnic group. Precisely this dynamic carries in itself a substantial message since it is the condition *sine qua non* a culture, heritage and therefore rights cannot be "granted"; it implies the continuation of an ethnic existence and, thus, the possibility to *be*, regardless of practical and discourse contradictions. As Bauer (2009) contends, "the shifting nature of identity and the way in which ethnic discourses are increasingly being adopted by marginalized groups in their attempts to negotiate with the state" (2009: 170) sheds light into the understanding of the use of symbolic capital by indigenous groups in their pursuit of attaining an equitable space in the nation-state.

## Conclusion

This literature review reveals the different political, economic and social dynamics that can actually condition the processes of forming, shaping and recreating an identity. Furthermore, I have provided several examples on how indigenous communities use references to symbolic capital to claim an identity preservation while recreating Western notions of indigenusness. This paradoxical mix of *traditional* practices with the adaptation to *modern* discourses and activities provides for a first understanding of identity shaping.

However, most scholars see the binary “traditional” and “modern” to classify populations is not successful anymore. A redefinition of what is perceived to be traditional and modern is needed, especially when technological advances and the speed at which information can travel nowadays, can greatly and rapidly change these perceptions. Further investigation on this middle ground that many indigenous peoples find themselves in is needed for a more contemporary analysis of the indigenous population, such as the Amazonian Kichwas of the Alto Napo region. In this respect, the ways in which youth and intellectuals are adopting (or not) an indigenous identity is not researched enough, and my thesis (hopefully) helps shed light into these processes.

In addition, the literature herein reviewed tends to analyze the formation and shaping of the indigenous identity as a whole. While it acknowledges the multiple identities a person can have, it focuses merely on the creation of a single, essentialist community or group identity and its impacts on the larger scale, such as regional, national and international spheres. My research tries to link this group identity formation with smaller group identities (urban vs. rural) to better understand the processes of a larger

ethnic group identity formation. More “microscopic” analyses thus need to be made in order to analyze an ethnic identity from a macro perspective.

Most scholars claim indigenous peoples portray an identity (to other indigenous groups, nonindigenous actors, national, international, human rights, etc.) for political and economic purposes, but when referring to economic purposes they mostly examine land titling (also related to their perception of or interest in indigenous peoples living in rural areas) as the most basic symbol of their identity, and language as a cultural feature. There is a need thus to focus on other realms of the identity such as art, guayusa rituals, oral stories, the impact of telecommunications and social media, the mixture between traditional indigenous beliefs with Christianity, etc. as well as an examination of the power structures that shape the formation of identities.

Finally, the possibility of dual public identities could provide another lens from which to examine perceived dichotomies or paradoxes in identity articulations or, as Jackson and Warren (2005) have asked for, to lessen the emphasis on identity validation in order to better analyze contemporary states of exclusion. This thesis paper arose from the need for more grounded research.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

*It is by participating in terms of the color bar that the color bar is reproduced.*  
Michael Burawoy (1998:18)

#### **Introduction**

Following my pursuit of understanding the symbolism and implications attached to holding a Kichwa and indigenous identity nowadays in the Amazonian Alto Napo

region of Ecuador, I conducted a two-month qualitative research during the summer of 2012. To answer my main research questions and sub-questions, I looked at the similarities and differences found in the discourses and actions of Kichwas in the region through an ethnographic methodology; not only I paid attention to the verbal messages produced (i.e. a discourse analysis), but also to the nonverbal communication to check the overlap (or not) between the two.

From a practical standpoint, I intended to address the following questions during my research time:

- i. In what ways is the Alto Napo Kichwa identity being shaped and articulated?
- ii. What kind of actions do Kichwa communities take in order to preserve or re-create what they understand as their identity while guaranteeing themselves a sustainable future in a dynamic, global world?
- iii. In order to make effective political, social and economic demands, are Kichwas using a dual identity, i.e. an identity for community/family relationships and another one for external relationships (with other Kichwas, other indigenous groups, and national and international nonindigenous peoples)?

I approached the topic under analysis through the extended case method because, aware of the possible influences that my presence could have in the context, the engagement with the Alto Napo population allowed me to examine the sub-narratives and stereotypic practices *paradoxically* embedded in current integration discourses; distancing myself from such complex identity contexts would have indeed prevented me from understanding subjectivities. Participant observation thus became the most reliable instrument through which at-first-glance “discrepancies” could be examined and it

constituted an opportunity to reassess the literature that has been written about indigenous peoples in general and about identity formations in particular.

In sum, I adopted what Burawoy (1998) contended when referring to the Manchester School of social anthropology, though trying not to fall into the “objectification danger”:

Instead of collecting data from informants about what ‘natives’ ‘ought to do’, they began to fill their diaries with accounts of what ‘natives’ actually were doing, with accounts of real events, struggles, and dramas that took place over space and time. They brought out discrepancies between normative prescriptions and everyday practices – discrepancies they traced to internal contradictions but also to the intrusion of colonialism. (Burawoy, 1998:5)

Therefore, the connection between theory and practice that the extended case method proposes allowed me reevaluate existing theories on indigenous identities vis-à-vis power structures explored in Chapter Two by relying on an in-depth analysis of the specific context under study, where the engagement with communities and individuals becomes crucial to the construction of knowledge.

The qualitative measurement instruments included participant observation, twelve tape-recorded interviews, daily field notes of the experiences and discourse paradoxes vis-à-vis behaviors, and some content analysis. These instruments were designed to primarily allow for quotations and a thick description of the settings, attitudes and perceptions to be represented. The data was thus collected being as culturally respectful as possible and it was analyzed reflecting the qualitative essence of this study to represent the Alto Napo Kichwa identity the best way possible.

## 1. The Setting

During the first month of my trip, I volunteered at Fundación Jatunyacu, whose motto stands as “Our ideal is to preserve our Kichwa culture”. It is a small community-based organization mostly dedicated at preserving traditional Kichwa cultural expressions, which they perceive to be disappearing due to globalization dynamics, in the rural community of Jatunyacu (Tena county) and improving the life quality of its members through ecotourism and education projects. Though my tasks in the organization ended not being what I had previously agreed with its President, Ramiro Aguinda, I taught English classes and computer skills three times a week<sup>33</sup> in the elementary school of Jatunyacu community. Given the change of plans and the urban Kichwa *paradoxes* I started to acknowledge, I decided to live with Ramiro’s family, sleeping in a tent placed on the roof, becoming one more in the house,<sup>34</sup> and commute to Jatunyacu every week. Despite this circumstance being one of the reasons for our disagreements, he and his extended family welcomed me in their house/shack and became one of my main urban informants. In Jatunyacu, I interacted with some of the Kichwa families living there as well as school teachers, all of whom were aware of my research and kindly offered to answer any questions I had.

In the second month, I completed an internship with Fundación Runa, which is an organization dedicated at exporting guayusa (revitalizing and energizing tea leaf) to the United States following fair trade standards and providing Kichwa guayusa farmers of the region with the framework needed for their vision of local and sustainable economic development. I slept in the organization’s intern house in the outskirts neighborhood of

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, I was only able to teach practical computer skills on the last day because the three old computers that had been donated to the school could not be switched on due to daily electricity cuts.

<sup>34</sup> I counted a total of thirty people living in approximately 250 square meters of living space.

*Las Hierbitas* (mostly Kichwa populated) in the city of Tena, but almost every day I would commute to Archidona where I joined Runa's field technicians, travelled to the communities Runa works with in order to buy the guayusa there, and implemented the needs assessment surveys. These surveys had been created a year ago to gather data about the needs of the Kichwa communities that Runa works with. This data is supposed to help the PEB (Producer Executive Body, a committee comprised of nine Kichwa farmers that represent Runa's guayusa farmers in the region) better assess how to invest their Fair Trade Social Premium Fund. Kichwa community needs information is essential to the Foundation for future developmental projects since fifteen percent of the profits that Runa company generates are given to this fund under a fair trade ideology of reinvestment in the region. Through this internship, both Fundación Runa and I gained: they had an intern helping them obtain the information they needed (among helping them with other administrative tasks) and I gained access and direct interaction with both urban and rural Kichwa communities in the Alto Napo region. I also gained permission from this organization to use their survey results for my thesis, they put me in contact with possible interviewees, and they invited me to some cultural events that could help me with my research, all of which I am thankful for.

Finally, on certain weekends and before leaving the country, I travelled to several cities in the Andean region (such as Quito, Riobamba, Otavalo, and Cotacachi) in order to gain a different perspective that could help me better understand the Alto Napo social dynamics. Thus, I saw first-hand some of the social dynamics between mestizos and Andean Kichwas, I interacted with everybody I could like I was already doing in Alto Napo (from grocers, to taxi drivers, to bus passengers, to highly trained police/military



men), and I came back to the Alto Napo region with a refreshed mind, better able to look for some key variables. All research costs were incurred at my own expense and never on the participants'.

## **2. Sample / Participants**

Following a convenience and purposive sampling procedure where the individuals are accessible as well as representative for the case study, I chose my interviewees according to certain characteristics that could give me more accurate answers to my research questions and that could serve me to critically analyze my field notes with the intention of diminishing the intensity of possible researcher biases; even though I consider I was open-minded and flexible, I was still aware that all researchers have both conscious and unconscious biases. Some of those characteristics I was looking for in the interviewee were ethnicity (Kichwa, mestizo, white, foreigner), occupation (seven are government employees and two are Kichwa musicians/artists), activism (five are Kichwa activists), sexual orientation (one is a Kichwa homosexual), academic degrees, degree of interaction with national and international communities, and degree of interaction with other Kichwas in different regions, among others.

Regarding Kichwa participants, I interviewed community leaders, Kichwa intellectuals, musicians and other adult (more than 18 years of age) female and male members of Kichwa communities. All of them are literate and speak Spanish, so they read and signed the informed consent form and were interviewed in Spanish. In the Alto Napo communities that I visited, there were only few elders that did not speak Spanish. I decided not to interview individuals who could only speak Kichwa so that it would be

easier for me to guarantee their anonymity in case they chose to stay anonymous (I do not speak Kichwa and I would have thus needed a translator).

Eleven of my interviewees were residents of Alto Napo urban areas because I noticed that recording an interview in the rural area could create the psychological barrier I was trying to avoid. Furthermore, in some rural communities Spanish is the second language of its adult/senior residents and sometimes it could take two or three times of rephrasing a question in order for the interviewee to understand my question. Nevertheless, I would always make my informants aware of my research (or task, in the case of Fundación Runa) and asked for permission to set a time aside to ask questions directly related to my job and take written notes.

I asked for the voluntary participation of my interviewees once I personally introduced myself and had built some rapport with them. However, the sample previously described reflects the participants that agreed to be interviewed as there were both some individuals (mestizo and Kichwa) that understandably refused to be interviewed and, as mentioned in the introduction section, interviews were only one of the methods that I used in my research. As it will be further explained in the following sections, the individuals that contributed to my research through participant observation comprised the Alto Napo population that I interacted with; their diverse ethnic backgrounds, class statuses and occupations provided an ample framework from which to critically think about the information they gave me and the public messages they expressed. Therefore, I acquired a random sample with participant observation because I was looking to gather as clearly as possible the complete picture of the social dynamics in the region; grocers, neighbors, restaurant owners, national tourists, government employees, farmers, store

workers, bus passengers, community members, are just a glimpse of the many individuals that helped me understand the Alto Napo socio-economic and political dynamics.

### **3. Measurement Instruments**

Given that I tried to be as little intrusive as possible with the individuals and communities I interacted with, I did not use any intervention procedures or surveys. One week into my trip I decided not to implement the surveys I had created before departing the United States because: 1) I realized that quantitative methods such as surveys would not be able to entirely grasp the complexity of the situation; 2) I noticed there were some discrepancies between discourse and action, and that became precisely one of my main research focuses; 3) I was acquiring more accurate information through participant observation; and 4) given that I was in constant move interacting with people and visiting places, surveys would have been too time-consuming.

Furthermore, while Fundación Runa gave me permission to use their survey final results, which I received by the end of August 2012, I decided not to formally include them in my thesis. I acknowledged some methodological issues such as question phrasing or implementation settings that brought me to believe the results may not be valid or reliable, from a rigorous academic standpoint. However, the opportunity that the organization gave me to access and interact with several Kichwa individuals and communities indeed allowed inquiring about and understanding the challenges that the population is currently facing.

The main instruments thus used to collect the data were observations, interviews and content analysis. Even though I gained most of the information through both

participant and passive observation, the twelve interviews and content analysis allowed me to double-check and complement my observations more accurately.

In my observations, I primarily looked for four main themes: the narrative used to express cultural capital by both Kichwas and nonindigenous peoples, their perception of discrimination and stereotyping, the meaning of symbols attached to the representation of *indigenoussness* in public and private spheres, and the mixture between tradition and cosmopolitanism. Since this is a qualitative study, I had to use a thick description in my field notes such as including the setting, participants, activities, and behaviors, among others, in order to reproduce as accurately as possible the picture of what I had observed.

In regards to the twelve interviews that I conducted, each of them was tailored to the individual that I was interviewing. The type and number of questions that I asked the (mestizo) Governor were, for example, clearly distinct from the questions I asked a Kichwa intellectual and activist. In each circumstance thus I was looking to measure the perceptions of the individual in relation to four main themes: stereotyping practices, strengthening vs. devaluing of the Kichwa culture, opportunities for self-empowerment, and future directions for Alto Napo Kichwas. The time of the interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to more than two hours, making an average of approximately one hour and ten minutes. In regards to the administering of interviews, they were conducted according to the place and time that was most convenient to the interviewee, with places ranging from office settings to house rooms with background music noise, and with times being during the day for office settings and evenings/nights for house rooms. All interviews were recorded and all informed consent forms were obtained.

Finally, the content analysis of websites that promote the Kichwa culture for tourists such as the Ministry of Tourism's "Ecuador Love Life" project or Fundacion Jatunyacu's, as well as Facebook contents of Kichwas that I interacted with, new literature acquired in Ecuador such as Carlos Alvarado's "History of a culture... that one wants to kill",<sup>35</sup> and some media analysis of Ecuadorian newspapers such as *El Comercio* or *El Universo*, allowed me to dig deeper into the narratives that describe indigenous peoples such as the Alto Napo Kichwas be it for political, economic or cultural purposes. Even though in the following chapters I do not have specific sections dedicated to the interpretation I make of such contents, I do indeed either make references to them or they contribute to my critical discussions of the topics herein studied.

In order to comply with research validity and reliability factors and given the qualitative essence of my study, I asked Kichwa intellectuals, foreigners that had lived in the area for a longer time than me, and Professor Uzendoski (who I also interviewed) for their insight about possible explanations of what I, a foreign Western researcher, may have considered as paradoxes or contradictions in representations of a Kichwa identity vis-à-vis daily behaviors. Furthermore, many participants in fact invited me to their celebrations and/or informed about any festivities that were taking place; they were aware of my research and indeed helped me with it putting me in contact with possible interviewees, informing me of cultural events, inviting me to participate or help in their social or economic events, etc.

#### **4. Data Collection and Procedures**

All interviews and participant observations were handled with as much care and respect as I was consciously able to provide. I emphasized to my research subjects that

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<sup>35</sup> "Historia de una Cultura... a la que se quiere Matar", in Spanish; title translation mine.

their participation was highly valued and their visions highly respected. They were free to participate and I kindly rejected twice, for example, the possibility of interviewing some Kichwas because I noticed it was likely they could somehow be coerced into participating in my research by one of my informants. Furthermore, confidentiality was my main concern and I too rejected, as politely as I could, some adults from being present during the interview process, except for Professor Uzendoski when he allowed two of his students to be present.

Before the interviews started, I provided them with the informed consent form and I informed the participants that they also had the right to stop the interview at any time and not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with; however, this circumstance never occurred and all my interviewees answered all the questions posed and even added many comments that had not been addressed. Following a conversational style rather than a strict question-answer format and giving them the freedom to express whatever they felt important was thus one of my priorities too. After explaining the options to remain confidential or anonymous, only two interviewees decided to keep their anonymity. All interviews were recorded with my laptop's sound recorder software, and I kept my username and password protected laptop (together with the signed informed consent forms) securely stored in my suitcase with a lock, whose key I kept with me at all times. All interviews were carried out in Spanish, except Professor Uzendoski's and Tyler Gage's which were conducted in English. There were no follow-up interviews.

In regards to the collection of my observations, I wrote daily field notes. I carried a notebook with me at all times where I would write nonparticipant observations as often as I could during the day and especially when witnessing cultural events and other public

festivities, political discourses, private parties, etc. When conducting participant observations, sometimes I had to make mental notes which I would write down in the evening or I would simultaneously write as I was participating, depending on what was more convenient in terms of ability to sit down and write, and also in terms of being respectful to the setting. Finally, for content analysis, I mostly hand-wrote notes in my notebook and in the margins of the literature acquired to annotate my interpretation of the information I was acquiring.

## **5. Data Analysis**

All data collected was categorized according to my main three research questions and summarized in a field report, which allowed me to better cross-study the information. In addition and given the length of some interviews, I transcribed only literally the sections that were directly related to my research interests. Through the combination of all data collected, I hoped to be able to interpret the discourses that arise regarding the Alto Napo Kichwa indigenous identity and perceived threats to their culture and future.

Travelling everyday between urban and rural areas of the Alto Napo region, interacting with Kichwas, mestizos, whites and foreigners, and participating in many of both daily and extraordinary Kichwas' and mestizos' activities, allowed me to answer my thesis questions from a practical point of view. The interviews conducted were mostly used to either confirm my daily observations or to find an answer to some contradictions between narratives and behaviors that I had acknowledged. As it is presented in the following chapters, in order to analyze and interpret the data as accurately as possible, very detailed descriptions of my observations are provided as well as quotations selected

from interviews and media contents to shed light into the topics that are discussed and deeply examined.

In addition, I was aware that *simply* my presence as a white European woman with a higher education may have well influenced the results that were collected in the ethnically and economically diverse contexts that will be further described and analyzed. However, while I could not avoid having such an influence *per se*, I tried to diminish the negative impacts, like silencing and objectification in Burawoy's terms, of such presence by being culturally respectful and adapting to some social habits such as eating worms, drinking beer, or sharing my clothes, among others, though I was not courageous enough to help eight-year-old children kill the chickens for dinner. Indeed, Jackson and Warren (2005) observed that "ethnographic practice that bridges inquiry, activism, and participatory approaches to the production of cultural knowledge raises complex questions, epistemological and ethical, answers to which are not exactly around the corner." (2005: 556-557)

Therefore, rather than following a positive approach where the researcher distances him/herself from the research subject and context, I followed a reflexive approach "that embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge" (Burawoy, 1998:5). More specifically, the extended-case method allowed me to approach my study topic of the Alto Napo Kichwa indigenous identity formation through the consideration of postcolonial power structures in Ecuador that still impede Amazonian Kichwas from participating as equal citizens in the larger nation-state context, though not openly claimed so. According to Burawoy's definition, "the extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique,



to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’, and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory.” (1998:5).

The further connection of this case-study with the body of existing literature thus contributes to expand the existing research on indigenous peoples in Latin America and, more specifically, in Ecuador in order to unmask the power structures embedded in identity formations as well as to link indigenous identities to the demands of rights.

#### **Chapter Four: Holding onto a Kichwa Ideal. The *Imaginaries* within Reality.**

*It is as if I had lost the memory, like in the Jackie Chan movie, and I don't know who I am anymore.[...] If I could go back 460 years, we would know who we are.*  
Ramiro Aguinda, urban Kichwa musician and intellectual (Interview, 6-12-12)

#### **Introduction**

Understanding the Kichwa identity as an indigenous social formation in the context of Alto Napo becomes crucial if we are to: make a sound judgment of stereotyping practices still in place, understand the Kichwa political, economic and cultural discourse vis-à-vis the demands for power and rights, and make an academically rigorous recommendation for future studies or policy implementations. As I showed in the literature review chapter, there are many studies that focus on the indigenous identity in Latin America. Given the increasing connectedness and influences of global dynamics vis-à-vis contextual power relationships, a multidimensional approach is needed when investigating the articulation of indigenous identities in a context of rapidly changing notions of “tradition”.

In this regard, comparative analyses between urban and rural indigenous identity dynamics could indeed contribute to form a better understanding of the formation of a specific ethnic identity vis-à-vis the space inhabited, such as the Amazonian Kichwa. Much of the existing literature reviewed in this thesis draws from groups residing in rural areas, which can lead to an essentialized portrayal of indigenous peoples that nonindigenous populations might find attractive such as *exotic*, *frozen* past indigenous identities. Furthermore, the concept of urban spaces in the Amazon proves confusing for many European or U.S. based researchers that are used to larger populations forming a city; urban spaces such as Tena or Archidona tend to be seen as not quite rural but not cities either by Westerners and, as such, the sociological interest in representations of “authentic tradition” vis-à-vis power dynamics decreases. The grounded nature of this research lies on the incorporation of and engagement with primary sources.

The Napo province is geographically located between the Ecuadorian Andes and the more remote Ecuadorian Amazon, making of this province, I argue, a transitional area between the more influenced or so-called acculturated indigenous peoples of the Andes and the less easily accessed indigenous peoples of remote Amazon areas. Most scholars studying the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, as I demonstrated in Chapter Two of this thesis, substantially focus on either the Andean region or more remote areas of the Amazon, making of the Napo province a considerably less researched region in terms of indigenous identities. “Opening up” Amazon areas through infrastructures such as roads, electricity, Internet and cell phone reception, etc. be it for an integration of the region into the global market economy (which is extractive in the case of oil) or under state arguments of providing a “better living” for residents of such areas, clearly affects the

articulation of indigenous identities. In addition, the symbolic power attached to the recognition and articulation of “tradition” influences the formation of contemporary indigenous identities. Space and power relations indeed matter in the (re)construction of an identity and I will further elaborate on this argument throughout this chapter and next.

I present here the results found during my two-month research trip in Ecuador, with the intention to reproduce as clearly as possible not only the facts and discourses, but the images, the sounds, the feelings of all persons I interacted with (including my own, at some points) in order to get closer to something as intangible or abstract yet as deep, visceral and real as the Alto Napo Kichwa identity. I found that most Kichwas, regardless of the distinction between urban and rural areas of the region, have multiple and shifting identities that they articulate depending on the power relationships present in the context. While there are several identities performed inside the community or member unit, they also perform different and more *traditional* identities depending on the audience they interact with, thus shifting these identities to adapt to the specific time and space of the representation; there is no single Kichwa identity, but they try to construct one essentialist, homogeneous identity based on an imagined ideal of “tradition” for each of those representations to nonindigenous audiences in order to gain credibility. Therefore, a market-oriented indigenous identity might be performed to make a living, while a politically-oriented indigenous identity is performed to gain power and social and political rights. In between these two, we could place a third type of identity that is internal and consists of a mixture between idealized symbols of indigenous tradition and more contemporary forms of expression.

After a presentation and reflection of my research results on the Andean Kichwas of Ecuador when compared to the Amazonian Kichwas of Alto Napo, an analysis of the Alto Napo Kichwa identity formation is provided from the perspective of categorizations, the power structures embedded in symbolic capital, and the prejudices that influence the formation and shaping of such identity. Finally, a comparative analysis between social and economic dynamics among Kichwas in rural and urban areas of Alto Napo is presented. Looking at similarities and differences between Kichwas in rural and urban areas provides the framework needed to identify the ways in which an individual acquires and develops a Kichwa identity in Alto Napo in the year 2012. While my focus is on representing and interpreting Alto Napo Kichwas' ideas and practices, the mestizo perspective is also incorporated throughout this chapter as a comparative point of the topic herein analyzed. I conclude the chapter with a brief reflection on the most relevant findings before I move onto analyzing them in further detail in the next chapter.

### **1. Andean Kichwas vs. Amazonian Kichwas**

During my research trip in Alto Napo, I was also able to interact with mestizos, indigenous and white people from the Andean region, also known as the *Sierra* (or mountain range, in English). I somewhat briefly visited four different cities in the Andes (nine full days in total): Quito, Riobamba, Otavalo, and Cotacachi. Even though I was not in the *Sierra* region long enough to entirely examine the social dynamics there, I present in this section the brief comparative framework that allowed me to better understand the social dynamics in Alto Napo in terms of the use of indigenous traditional symbols, the power of recognition in those (i.e. symbolic capital) and prejudices against Ecuadorian indigenous peoples.

Apart from community interpersonal relationships characteristic of many indigenous populations where kinship and experiences define one's belonging to the group, these two ethnic groups fundamentally share a feeling of *otherness* from the white-mestizo dominant culture and a common language name, i.e. Kichwa, but the actual language semantics can be so different so as to not be able to fully communicate in their respective Kichwa dialects. Both language and shared prejudices can thus create the illusion of connectedness and union, which were powerful tools in the fight against oppression especially during the 1990s uprisings; however, the geographical and historical contexts mark clear divisionary lines between the daily life activities of Kichwas in the Andes and Kichwas in the Amazon.

The indigenous population in the Ecuadorian Andes region identifies as Kichwa, but more specifically, *Sierra* Kichwa. I was only able to differentiate the adult (and some youth) indigenous population through their Andean traditional indigenous clothing, ornaments and hairstyles, all of which made me realize that the Andean indigenous were using traditional appearances and tangible cultural capital in their daily lives and not just for cultural representations, as was the case for most Alto Napo Kichwas. Through my interactions with them, I acknowledged a sense of pride in *being* and representing their identity as Kichwas and not necessarily feeling shy in so stating.

In regards to language, I noticed an accent when some of the adults spoke in Spanish, thus hinting that Spanish was their second language. In fact, they spoke Kichwa openly among themselves or when they wanted to keep a conversation private from me. In a bus from Pifo to Otavalo, for example, I sat next to two young ladies, in their late teens; one of them was not dressed in traditional clothes and the other one was. The

nineteen-year old lady dressed in Andean traditional clothes, who I will call Carmen as a pseudonym, told me she sometimes dresses “normal”, like her sister next to her. Given the constant outside influences and acculturation processes in the Andean region since colonial times, “normal” needs to be understood here as “characteristic of the dominant white-mestizo culture”.

While they spoke Kichwa among themselves for a long time, at some point I mentioned something personal and Carmen started explaining me some of the social dynamics in her community, like people being *bought* for pro President Correa demonstrations (she literally used the verb *buy*). While people in her community are not interested in politics since they have lost all trust in politicians, she claimed, they still participate in pro-government demonstrations and in some situations she claims the police have shot opponents in demonstrations. Getting three meals and a free ride to Quito, the capital, to visit their migrant worker family in exchange of *just* marching in a demonstration, holding a banner and “making noise”, she stated, is a good deal for many members of her community. All mestizo and white people I interacted with in both the Andean region and in Alto Napo claimed the indigenous population has now plenty of chances to live well because President Correa and his government are providing them with many opportunities to “develop”; in fact, I was told that, as long as the indigenous person works hard and gets educated, he/she has a competitive advantage *just* for having an indigenous identity. The “purchase” of indigenous peoples in Ecuador thus takes a new, contemporary form; rather than it being for cheap labor (though it still prevails) and slavery purposes as it was until the mid-twentieth century, the indigenous peoples are now *slaves* of representation, opportunity and integration discourses.

While Carmen feels proud of her indigenous background and culture, she also claimed that her parents are “stuck in the past” when they would not allow her to divorce her husband, who she married at age fifteen, after the constant beatings she was suffering; escaping would mean the total loss of her community relationships, her parents’ stigmatization, and her denigration as a woman. Furthermore, she stated, when many girls in her community got raped, those that got pregnant were stigmatized for having sex outside marriage instead of being treated as victims. It is then young indigenous people like Carmen that are trying to rearticulate the indigenous identity to fit it in a contemporary world.

Moving onto white and mestizo negative biases towards the indigenous population, I found that it was somewhat more openly expressed on a daily basis in the *Sierra* region than in the Alto Napo. For example, Faustina<sup>36</sup> is a white high school teacher living in Riobamba that speaks Andean Kichwa and every year she asks the school director not to accept *too many* indigenous children because they *worsen the quality of education*.<sup>37</sup> One day, we were driving to another Andean town and Faustina, conscious of my often inability to identify indigenous peoples unless they were dressed in traditional clothes and thus eager to show me how the indigenous population *look like*, said: “Oh!, look at that Runa with her pig hair! [silence] I’m sorry, I meant miss indigenous”.<sup>38</sup> The silence that was made was in fact due to me trying to mentally process

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<sup>36</sup> I use pseudonyms here to protect the identities of my informants. Regardless of my reflections here, I am grateful to Faustina and her family for their extremely kind hospitality and help in my research.

<sup>37</sup> Faustina not only self-identifies as white but would like her children to claim they are white too, despite her daughter Marta (who in contrast identifies as mestiza) told her in a sarcastic tone that Faustina is probably a direct descendant of the Spanish Crown.

<sup>38</sup> In Spanish: “Oh!, mira esa runa con pelo cerdoso... Perdón, quise decir señorita indígena”. Translation mine. The word *runa*, as I will explain later in the chapter, is a highly pejorative word used by nonindigenous to refer to indigenous peoples. However, *runa* in Kichwa simply means “human being”.

what I had just heard, and the words *runa* or indigenous were not precisely what was causing my state of shock. Reiterating my Spanish citizenship as a way to signal that our communication in Spanish language may have different semantics, I inquired about her understanding of “pig hair”. Faustina indeed claimed that it was used to describe the type of hair that is “straight, thick and dirty, like pigs”, claiming she did not say the indigenous lady *was* “a pig”, but she was just making a reference to something *pigs have*. While Faustina was aware that the word *cerdoso* is a Spanish derivative of *cerdo* (“pig”, in English), her ability to cognitively associate that word with an act of racism was in fact far from happening. In sum, examining the narratives within the narratives becomes crucial to disguise current prejudicial practices in Ecuador that are masked by discourses about respect and integration.

Finally, the acculturation processes that have been forced upon the Andean indigenous population since the first Spanish colonizers arrived have had its fruits though some still resist, as some mestizo people somewhat openly told me. In Otavalo, during the Inti Raymi festivities,<sup>39</sup> a mestizo hostel owner explained that finally the indigenous population had been civilized in that city and were now celebrating an indigenous tradition in a peaceful manner; however, in Cotacachi, which is a town located approximately a thirty-minute bus ride away, the indigenous people “are not civilized yet because they like to fight and kill each other”. Indeed that same argument was used by the GOE officials<sup>40</sup> that I talked to in Cotacachi; there were a total of forty-seven

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Also, in Spanish, the word *cerdoso* is difficult to translate into an accurate English word, given the negative connotations it has in Spanish.

<sup>39</sup> Indigenous six-day festival to venerate the sun. Men of each community dance in circles while marching towards a central plaza, where they meet other communities of the area.

<sup>40</sup> *Grupo de Operaciones Especiales*; “Special Operations Unit”, in English



communities that would arrive,<sup>41</sup> they claimed, and that would dance, drink and then fight to solve their year-long enmities. The central square was full of national and international tourists enjoying the representations of *indigenosness* and waiting for the *real* action to happen. In the meantime, countless GOE military/police men, some of whom had been trained in Spain, were “watching out to protect everybody as the uncivilized Indians, in their fights, could harm *others*”. Even though the GOE claimed to have been using “dialogue” and this year they would not allow any deaths to happen, a total of four indigenous people died and thirty were injured in the 2012 Inti Raymi festival of Cotacachi.<sup>42</sup> The folklorization of the Andean indigenous identity becomes thus a tourist attraction, an excuse for military forces to be present in just one more context of Ecuador’s reality, one more reason for the white/mestizo population to *other* the indigenous peoples, and one more way for the indigenous people to recreate their ideal type of traditional indigenosness in their search for value, recognition and power.

## **2. Maintaining and (re)Constructing Indigenous Identities for Political, Economic, and Cultural Purposes**

In this section I present and analyze the construction of the Alto Napo Kichwa identity using Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital. I build from their understanding and perception of stereotypes and discrimination in the region and the country, and of the integration and anti-discrimination discourses that are so easily articulated in Napo on a daily basis.<sup>43</sup> While Kichwas may portray multiple and changing identities depending on

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<sup>41</sup> One of them was Carmen’s community with her husband participating.

<sup>42</sup> *El Comercio* news, 29 June 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.elcomercio.com>; last accessed October 6, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> It was beyond the scope of this research to examine the existence and/or degree of discrimination against Alto Napo Kichwas, since the main focus of the study was on understanding how and why the Kichwa identity is articulated in the region. However, understanding the ways in which Kichwas perceive prejudice

the context they are in, still-present racism needs to be seen as a crucial variable in the constant re-shaping and re-articulation of their identity.

### *2.1 The complexities of categorization terminologies: A first step towards the portrayal of a single identity?*

All Kichwas I interacted with in Alto Napo refuse to use the word *Indian* to identify themselves. In the context of Ecuador, *Indian* was (and still is) used with a highly pejorative connotation to describe a “savage-like native”. Therefore, they prefer to identify as *indigenous*<sup>44</sup> (if they are to make a political, economic or cultural claim in a context with nonindigenous) or simply Kichwa, when needed or asked directly (otherwise, they do not talk about it). As Dr. Uzendoski<sup>45</sup> rightly assessed,

The Napo Kichwas are not really into this ideal of defining themselves as a group, in a way that people do in the Western world. [...] The most important concept in the Napo Kichwa is the *ayllu* [...] which means family, extended family. It also means residence group. That’s what Kichwa people are all about. [...] You don’t necessarily have to be born in the *ayllu* to become part of the *ayllu* [like him]. [...] It’s not about this biogenetic essence that you are given at birth.[...] It’s about everyday living and becoming related to someone by sharing. [...] It’s not about biological relatedness, it’s about social relatedness. [...] Social relationships determine kinship. [...] The question [“Are you a Kichwa?”] from the beginning

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and discrimination to be impacting their lives comprised one approach from which to look at the identity formation.

<sup>44</sup> The word *indigenous* though, as explained in Chapter One, is a 16<sup>th</sup>-century derivative of *native* that started to be used by Spaniards to refer to the native populations they were conquering.

<sup>45</sup> Dr. Michael Uzendoski is a symbolic anthropologist and Professor at the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Florida State University. He is married to Napo Kichwa Edith Calapucha and has intensively studied the Amazonian Kichwa languages and cultures. The interview was conducted in Sapo Rumi, a rural community in Tena county. I am eternally grateful to him, his wife and brother-in-law Federico for their insights and hospitality.

has these assumptions of Western identity. [...] They don't sit around and agonize whether they are Kichwa or not; they're more worried about "what am I doing today?" in terms of social roles, family, etc. (Interview, 6-30-12).

Milton Carrera, Governor of the Napo province and mestizo, had a substantially different opinion though; he claimed indigenous peoples in the Napo province do not want to identify as such because it implies "discrimination, insult to their identity and culture" and they thus prefer to identify just as Kichwa (Interview, 6-6-12). Furthermore, while the word *runa* in Kichwa means simply "human being", it has also been used by nonindigenous peoples with the same negative connotation as the word *Indian* and it is thus also mostly rejected by Kichwas when speaking in Spanish. However, there is a generation of Kichwas in their thirties self-called *Kichwa intellectuals*<sup>46</sup> that few years ago started to use the word *runa* in a friendly manner to salute any person they were encountering in the Spanish-speaking context with the purpose of changing the traditionally negative connotation of such word, i.e. a counter-hegemonic strategy.

Analyzing the terminology for self-identification and *other*-identification is complex enough. Just to cite few of my interviewees affirmations, "I am a Napo Kichwa" (Blas Chimbo, Interview 7-12-12), "I am a cosmopolitan indigenous" (Leonardo Cerda, Interview 7-5-12), "I'm identified as a Kichwa, but I identify as an Amazonian indigenous" (Ramiro Aguinda, Interview 6-12-12). But what I extracted from these perceptions and interactions is: 1) the need for an effective strategy that can bring value to the existence and performance of difference; 2) the need to portray a unified image or identity vis-à-vis nonindigenous peoples in Alto Napo in order to demand power and rights more effectively; and 3) the identity to be performed can be *essentialized* and

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<sup>46</sup> A more detailed explanation of this group will be further developed in the following sections.

*traditionalized* in the public spheres with nonindigenous as long as that helps Kichwas both maintain and revive their culture while guaranteeing themselves a life with dignity.

## 2.2 *The Use of Symbolic Capital*

A comparative analysis between Kichwa socio-economic dynamics in urban and rural areas of the Alto Napo will be presented in the last section of this chapter. The use of traditional modes of expression, practice and philosophy are more pronounced though in rural areas. However, when looking at the representation, use and reference to *idealized* expressions of Amazonian Kichwa tradition, I found that regardless of the space being urban or rural, most patterns are similar except for few exceptions that will be further discussed, such as the consumption of certain drinks like *chicha* or *guayusa*, and the use of Kichwa language.

Kichwas of the Alto Napo, for example, do not use the *traditional* Amazonian Kichwa dress code in their daily lives, such as the seeds dress, the *cloth* dress,<sup>47</sup> the full dress *pacha* for women, the *paja toquilla* dress, or the *llanchama*. Instead, the use of pants, leggings, shirts, skirts, tank tops, flip flops, sandals, make up and nail polish for urban women, etc. is common and, especially in the urban areas, the dress code is typical of the modern/cosmopolitan 21<sup>st</sup> century style. They do enjoy though walking bare foot at home (both for urban and rural areas) or in some communal areas in the rural area.

However, when there is a cultural representation such as in hotels for tourists, in a festival, the Cacao Fair, the city or town festival, an end-of-school-year representation or festivity, a presentation of a book, etc. Kichwas (and interestingly enough, also mestizos and white people in the case of school representations) rent or take from the closet the

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<sup>47</sup> It is made out of cotton and it can consist of the *maquicotona* and *panpalina* for women, and the *curu balon* and *cushma* for men.

traditional dress and get changed, use eye liner or (seldom) a seed ink to make facial paintings, complement the dress with seed jewelry, traditional music instruments, leafs and/or a spear, and make the representation. As soon as the representation is over, they get rapidly changed (except for Kichwa intellectuals and activists) into their modern, party clothes. It is thus in those circumstances where the music, dresses and ornaments become part of the folkloric symbolic capital, and the representation of the Kichwa identity is performed both to outsiders for economic (tourists) or political (to the State as a form of multiculturalism discourse reaffirmation) purposes, and to nonindigenous and other Kichwas for cultural purposes, as a retro-encouraging mechanism to bring value and recognition to their identities as indigenous peoples.

Ramiro Aguinda, for example, is an urban Kichwa in his late thirties self-called intellectual, tourist guide, musician and composer that has a music and dance group with his family. Ramiro's mother speaks Kichwa as her native language and so did Ramiro's father; but their concern about their nine children's future was so considerable that they forbid them from speaking Kichwa as they grew up and never taught them to. In fact, they would talk to them in Spanish as best as they could, given that speaking Spanish was an activity they struggled with at some points. They considered that knowing and speaking Kichwa would be equaled to more discrimination, less opportunities and a future with no dignity. However, Ramiro's concerns about the disappearance of his culture brought him to learn Kichwa as an adult. Even though only Ramiro and his brother can now speak Kichwa, the entire group dances, sings and plays Kichwa music.

In one of Ramiro's show in a luxury hotel in Tena, for example, he performed a two-hour show for national tourists (mostly first-time tourists in Napo, coming from the

cities of Quito and Guayaquil). I thought the show was absolutely beautiful and well-prepared, so did the tourists; but what the tourists did not know was that the discourses seemed to be false. Ramiro told them that what they saw was the *reality*, that all Kichwas dressed like that (traditional clothing), used the shaman, spoke in Kichwa, etc. After the show and helping the children sell arts and crafts, I talked to some of the tourists and they manifested their pleasantness with the show. Moreover, one tourist lady from Guayaquil mentioned that she was very happy with the hotel for having been able to “find those Kichwas”, as she had not seen any dressed like that in Tena yet. Ramiro indeed claimed “I feel proud when I dress like this, I feel good” (Interview, 6-12-12); that is, the recognition and value granted through these representations become the source for re-affirming his ideal of indigenous identity.

At 11pm, once their job in the hotel had been completed, the *real* party had already started. We went to the baptism party of two of Ramiro’s nephews. With no food in their stomachs since 8am (only few snacks here and there), having killed the chickens and helped prepare food for the approximately eighty-people party, and after their two-hour show in the hotel, the children went straight to eating food once we reached the party saloon where adults were already drunk and dancing all kinds of Ecuadorian music except Kichwa. I was thus able to acknowledge in a matter of few hours the multiple and shifting identities of urban Kichwas in Alto Napo.

Considering that symbolic capital can be seen as the legitimization of identity expressions by the power granted to those that perform recognition, during my internship at Fundación Runa, *guayusa* farmers told me in many occasions that they were happy with the project; apart from bringing them an income, selling *guayusa* was helping them

promote their culture and identity in the national and international markets because “Kichwas drink guayusa”.<sup>48</sup> Nowadays, rural Kichwas drink more guayusa than urban Kichwas, but the traditional guayusa ceremonies significantly conflict with work and school schedules so as to allow only some rural elders to continue with the tradition. Furthermore, the reluctance of the central government to visit the Napo province and acknowledge that guayusa is farmed instead of being a wild species, shows that the power embedded in the recognition of an indigenous economic and cultural practice interferes with the continuation of such practice and, thus, the identity.

In regards to less intangible aspects of the identity like the amusement time a person has, one of the *paradoxical* discourses I heard came, once again, from Ramiro. He claimed in the interview that, in his free time, he enjoyed singing and dancing Kichwa, dancing bare foot with mud in the jungle, drinking *chicha*, being in the jungle, *at home*, since “being with my family is not real because they behave like mestizos; in the [rural] communities it still feels like your home” (Interview, 6-12-12). However, I asked him why he liked for example to go to the disco, party, and get drunk, as I had only seen this kind of amusement activity in the month that I lived with him. As soon as I heard his answer, I realized I had made a mistake; instead of asking why he *liked* to go to the disco, I should have asked why he *went* to the disco. Despite the amount of nature and rivers, though some polluted, that the city still has, he stated “everybody goes to the disco. It’s not that pleasant, but there is nothing else I can do because I live in the city. [...] I’m happy here too because there are still a lot of indigenous people.” (Interview, 6-12-12).

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<sup>48</sup> The guayusa tree grows in certain parts of the Amazon region, such as the Alto Napo, and is considered part of the Kichwa ancestral heritage. Guayusa leaves are used to prepare a revitalizing tea and, in fact, it was traditionally prepared in the morning when the sun had not risen yet during a ceremony where dreams were interpreted, disputes solved and the day was planned.

Nevertheless, what at first glance seemed *just* another paradox turned into an understanding that the connection to the landscape still is, even for an urban Kichwa like Ramiro, a crucial component of the Kichwa identity. While a surprisingly high number of Alto Napo Kichwas that I talked to migrated to other areas of the country or worked for oil companies to earn a living, the concept of the *ayllu* before described by Dr. Uzendoski proves useful to understand why they come back to it and why family members live in very close proximity, both in urban and rural areas. In fact, Dr. Uzendoski explained:

One of the things that define the community is their connectedness to the landscape, like an *ayllu* isn't just a social unit, it's a family. [...] The history of family relationships stands into the landscape. [...] The idea is that when people die, their soul becomes a breath, a *samay*, and that *samay* becomes part of the place they live in. (Interview, 6-30-12)

Following this idea of connection to the environment and the attempt to maintain a past Kichwa ideology, an urban Kichwa man of the Archidona county that I interviewed (and whose identity I was asked to protect) explained how him, his wife and parents left his newly born baby son alone in the jungle for twenty-four hours with no food or blanket, just some leaves on top. While this example only reveals a minority of the population, the cultural and identity concerns herein displayed prove to be significant. He claimed that it used to be what was done in the past and, as much as he loved his newly born son, he had to sacrifice his modern lifestyle to keep his cultural identity by passing the experiences, ideologies and spiritual beliefs to his future family members. When they came back, the baby fortunately had not been a wild animal's prey; he was indeed still alive (though he had severe hypothermia) because "he was meant to live. Maybe a jaguar



or another animal came by, because we saw some tracks there, but only to salute him, not to eat him. The spirits of the jungle protected him” (Interview, 7-2-2012).

### *2.3 How Representation and Integration Discourses Perpetuate Othering*

Moving onto common narratives that exist in regards to prejudicial practices that Alto Napo Kichwas suffer, I was able to dig deeper through my conversations with them and I realized that it is not only in the material aspects of the spaces they inhabit that they feel stereotyped or discriminated against, but also in the more spiritual, holistic world. They feel they not only have to deal with land losses (either they are simply seized by mestizos if they do not have a deed, or their need for cash makes them sell part of their property at a low price), less access to well-paying jobs, or less representation in government posts (and, according to all Kichwas I talked to in this regard, most Kichwa government representatives are bought and once in power they forget about *their* people). Most importantly they do not lack anymore the freedom to express (as long as it is though within the system limits), but the right to be understood, to be accepted as who they *really* are, and the right to efficiently receive what they *really* need, despite state discourses of integration, representation and transparency. As Ramiro Aguinda told me when he was referring to the cultural representations he makes to earn a living,

What I learnt the most about the presentations was that I can speak, people listen to me, I can be a great professor in this [...] People that do domestic tourism and foreigners listen to us, they understand us and *they become acculturated* about our way of being, our lifestyle. [...] The presentation I did few days ago for the Cacao Fair [city economic event], you were there, you remember right? I didn't get paid ... All [music] groups of indigenous people here are discriminated against. [...]

There is no real support, they only use us to get along in the Amazonia.  
(Interview, 6-12-2012. Emphasis mine.)

It is important here also to note the words “they become acculturated” as that can be understood as a counter-hegemonic strategy, quite characteristic in fact of Ramiro’s discourses. He is just an example of the so-called urban Kichwa intellectual, but I acknowledged many Kichwas like Ramiro that, while they might present the image of and indeed internalize acculturation processes to the dominant white-mestizo (Western-like) culture, they simultaneously preserve certain ideals of traditional Kichwa culture in some situations, and a long hairstyle, a jungle-animal-tooth necklace or a temporary seed-ink tattoo for example can indeed be understood as symbolic forms of daily resistance in the context of Alto Napo. Or as Dr. Uzendoski claims, “one of the strategies of resistance is to...superficially adopt the narrative of the dominant culture while hiding their symbols and their true narrative” (Interview, 6-30-12).

A similar story like Ramiro not getting paid in an official event happened to Edmundo Salazar. He has the well-known music group Wayra Churis with his family and lives in a rural area, very close to Archidona city. Considering that “in socialism [now], the government actively appropriates and uses indigenous symbols and language for their own political purposes” (Dr. Uzendoski, Interview, 6-30-12), Edmundo’s experience clearly illustrates the extent of such political purposes. His group was asked to perform in Quito for a South American Congress, where all costs were supposed to be covered for them. They met and briefly talked to President Correa and presidents Chavez of Venezuela, Morales of Bolivia, and Uribe of Colombia, among others, and even asked them for support to promote their group and the Amazonian Kichwa culture. While the

organization paid for Edmundo's group bus round trip to Quito, they failed to not only pay for their performance, but did not provide them with food or accommodation, which was indeed provided in nice hotels to other mestizo music groups. In fact, Edmundo complained that they needed a place to sleep and few hours later they were told they could enter a gym hall to sleep there since "you guys are used to sleeping in the open. This is enough for you". Given the cold Quito weather, the hard concrete floor of the gym felt even colder; fortunately, as a form of charity, some kind neighbors close to the gym hall lent them some blankets for the cold night. In Edmundo's words, "They treated us like animals. Well, in fact, dogs were treated better" (Interview, 7-3-12). These power dynamics to which Kichwas are subject even when participating in an event that is supposed to recognize and support indigenous peoples of multicultural states clearly unmask prejudices (and in this case, discrimination) behind equality discourses that are so openly expressed in Ecuador.

The type of support that Edmundo was asking for is similar to Carlos Alvarado's when he approached the Ministry of Culture. Carlos is a nationwide known elder Alto Napo Kichwa intellectual, writer, activist, musician and artist that has written some books about traditional Amazonian Kichwa stories and myths that have been orally passed along from one generation to another since ancestral times. He also helped write some of the cultural laws of the new 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution. After many applications, he managed to receive a confirmation from the state that his books would receive financial and marketing support to be printed and distributed as a way to contribute to the maintenance and revival of the Napo Kichwa culture. Unfortunately, last minute he was told that the budget no longer permitted investment in such projects; he claimed to find

out though that, after the rejection of his project, an also well-known white-mestizo anthropologist had received “under the table” the money necessary to publish his book about Amazonian stories he had collected (though Carlos claims some of those are not accurate). Therefore, Carlos assumed the money that was supposed to be assigned to his project went towards an anthropologist’s whose connection to the Kichwa culture and identity is far from personal. Carlos stopped begging; given his unremitting love for his culture, he now pays out-of-pocket for a small printing and sells his books on his own in the streets of Ecuador.

Mestizos, on the other hand, use another common discourse and tend to describe the Kichwa population in an essentialist manner; they negate any discriminatory practices or prejudices and openly claim there is nowadays a real space opened for expression, representation and opportunity if the individual is *willing* to take it. As Governor Milton Carrera claimed in a Correa-presidential-style speech when I interviewed him,

We have to be realistic here. *75% of the population* here [in Napo] is Kichwa and if we [mestizos] live with them, what does that mean? That there are no differences. We all have the same needs, aspirations, perspectives, marked sometimes by scary developmental roots, but other than that, there is equality, I don’t see much difference. [...] Those that want to be discriminated against are discriminated because today with our Government, at least nowadays, gives us equality, *a space to defend what is ours. There might be only remnants of discrimination from authoritarianism, colonialism, paternalism, but in all those there is the will of the human being to overcome them*”. (Interview, 6-6-12. Emphasis mine.)

Leonardo Cerda, self-identified as cosmopolitan indigenous, claimed so too in the interview; digging deeper though, he admitted that these opportunities are not there yet for everybody. He claimed that

Discrimination means ignorance. [...] In Tena, there is a lot of discrimination between mestizos and indigenous peoples, not as much as in other cities of the country, but there exists a feeling of mestizo superiority against indigenous peoples. [...] The elites control the masses according to their convenience. They open doors up to where they want or look for indigenous people that follow their ideologies. [...] The indigenous sector should not only take advantage of those opened doors, but also to look for an autonomous representation from the bases. (Interview, 7-5-12)

Mestizos, on the other hand, state that they are the ones stereotyped against by Kichwas. Considering there are also socio-economic classes among mestizos, low and middle-class mestizos feel they are constantly blamed by Kichwas. Mestizos might indeed claim, after a long time of rapport building (to contrast the more openly expressed racism in the Andean region), that “Indians smell bad, are lazy, never stick to their agreements and can’t be trusted”.<sup>49</sup> They thus also perceive and further recreate the stereotype that while mestizos have to work really hard to pay their debts and have better futures, Kichwas spend their income in alcohol and parties (Mestizo taxi driver in Tena). However, I have also found mestizos that would vote for an indigenous person to be president of the country if he/she is well educated, and mestizos maintaining sexual relationships with Kichwas or even marrying them despite the fact that there is an unspoken/unconscious rule that forbids marriage with Kichwas. The mestizo-indigenous

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<sup>49</sup> Combination of many personal conversations with mestizos in Alto Napo.

dichotomy is never unproblematic, but it nevertheless needs to be acknowledged to move beyond its dominant narrative and examine its multiple sub-narratives.

Moving now onto the Kichwa language, it is considered one of the most important assets and defining characteristic of the Kichwa identity in Alto Napo. Even though there are many Kichwas that do not speak the language anymore, the need to both maintain and revive the language is currently in direct conflict with the so-called Bilingual Intercultural Education system. I contend it is being used through representation discourses to please Kichwa activists, but it is virtually an elite strategy to make the language extinct and to generalize the use of Spanish in a way that seems caused directly by Kichwas.

In order to illustrate the problematic associated with the current situation of the Kichwa language thus, Pascual Cerda's insights will prove relevant. Pascual is now a recently retired Alto Napo Kichwa activist and teacher, who as an early teenager co-founded the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Napo<sup>50</sup> and has been actively involved in politics (trying to organize now an indigenous political party in Napo) and the formation of indigenous movements in Napo. He has encountered many challenges because "back then [1970s] we were considered an object, a servant, and nothing else. [...] Up until recently, it was forbidden for an Indian to study in a university. [...] The Ecuadorian conservative ideology [is that] the indigenous has to become educated, but only up to a certain point, like high school." (Interview, 7-11-12). He claims to be friends with President Correa and he has been leading the National Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Education,<sup>51</sup> reporting directly to the Minister of Education. Given the different Kichwa languages that exist in Ecuador and given that Kichwa was not

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<sup>50</sup> *Federación de Organizaciones Indígenas de Napo*, in Spanish.

<sup>51</sup> *Dirección Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe*, in Spanish. It was founded in 1988 after indigenous people's demands for a bilingual education.

originally a written language, one of the roles of the Directorate was to unify the writing. In the last few years, it has concluded the “unification” of the Kichwa languages with the supposed attempt to more easily implement it in schools. The problem does not necessarily rely in a made-up need to standardize it, but in the structural context that discourages parents and teachers to teach Kichwa; “they [bilingual teachers] don’t know the pedagogical strategies for teaching someone Quechua in a whole environment where the entire context is completely hostile. [...] There is no psychological contextual reinforcement from anything that would make Quechua seem positive in the city (Dr. Uzendoski, Interview, 6-30-12).

The unified Kichwa is mostly Andean Kichwa and most Kichwas of the Alto Napo that I talked in this regard affirm that they can usually understand approximately only thirty percent of the Andean Kichwa, and thus have to learn and remember the rest. In sum,

The heart and soul of the Quechua is the spoken practices of the language, because once you start to write it down, it loses the meaning of what it means to be Quechua. [...] I’m not totally against unificado, I just think it doesn’t make any sense to standardize Quechua if the kids are not fluent in their own Quechua that they grew up with. [...] *Unificado is a language that doesn’t exist except that someone made it, nobody speaks it.* (Dr. Uzendoski, Interview, 6-30-12. Emphasis mine.)

According to the current reforms in the education system,

In the provinces with greater concentration of indigenous populations [like in Napo], the District Director [who supervises several counties] of Intercultural

Education has to be a *Kichwa speaking* person. [...] [In contrast,] to be Circuit Director [who supervises a minimum of twenty-five schools] has to pass a “merit competition”... The District Director post is political; the Minister [of Education] in charge appoints him/her. (Pascual Cerda, Interview, 7-11-12. Emphasis mine).

Whitten (2004) expressed that “interculturality stresses a movement from one cultural system to another, with the explicit purpose of understanding other ways of thought and action” (2004: 440). But how can then Kichwas show their culture to mestizos through an invented language that they do not speak? Would the mestizo culture become further hegemonic starting as early as in kindergarten? Therefore, what might end up happening is to have mestizos teaching and being the “experts” on an invented Kichwa language, while the Alto Napo Kichwa language gradually disappears and, with such disappearance, the further degradation of the Alto Napo Kichwa identity. Furthermore, either a Kichwa person will hold a high post such as District Director in certain strategic areas to show that “the indigenous population is indeed represented”, or a Kichwa Circuit Director will have to work harder to acquire such post while a Kichwa-speaking mestizo only needs to be friends with the Minister of Education to hold the District Director position. Pascual could not resist anymore; desperate, in tears, he claimed “I will work for my people until I die. There are many issues that I have not solved [because he was not allowed to], and that makes me very sad”.

Finally, there is no uniform opinion about President Correa, despite the large indigenous support he received when he first came to power in 2007. Some Alto Napo Kichwas feel he is the best president of Ecuador because he is redistributing money for the poor, while others feel he is not doing enough yet to end the power structures that are



still in place. However, the overall impression they have of him, regardless of whether they would support him again or not, is that of some degree of disappointment. Having that said, if a Kichwa holds a government post, he/she will most likely never say anything against the President or the Government if he/she wants to keep the job. Likewise, all government employees that hold a position of director or higher are making monthly *voluntary* contributions to the President's party; otherwise, it could be *suddenly* claimed that their work performance has worsen and get fired or devalued.<sup>52</sup> According to the National Statistics Bureau of Ecuador, 19.5% of the Napo province population was working for a government institution in 2010.

In conclusion, while the state and some Kichwas claim there are more opportunities now for the indigenous peoples, those still need to be acculturated and work within that power and political structure in order to be represented. Claiming an indigenous identity can lead to hold a government post as long as that identity is framed within the system boundaries and follows an urban, mestizo lifestyle, restoring to an imagined *indigenosness* only when an image of multiculturalism and respect is needed.

### **3. Rural vs. Urban Areas: A Comparative Analysis**

Before analyzing the socio-economic dynamics of the Kichwa identity in the urban and rural areas of the Alto Napo region, it is crucial to define what I mean by urban and rural areas. In this regional research context, I identify the urban area by the combination of government institutions, financial institutions, health centers, stores, restaurants, buses, taxi services, communication facilities, schools, etc., that shape that space and make it more dynamic in terms of social interactions and relationships. Thus, I

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<sup>52</sup> The *voluntary* contribution system herein briefly described is extracted from private conversations with both mestizo and indigenous government employees of whom I cannot reveal their identities, for privacy reasons, but I highly appreciate their trust in me.

consider the cities of Tena and Archidona, and its most immediate surrounding areas<sup>53</sup> as urban areas of the Alto Napo. In contrast, I identify the rural areas as those where, while electricity cables still arrive in the communities I visited (to counteract the many Western stereotypes that assume all jungle areas do not have electricity cables), its inhabitants work mostly on agriculture, hunting, gathering, and arts and crafts, and there are no stores except for a small grocery space in a private home. Emphasizing “the positive and constructive importance people tend to attach to a shared history and a sense of affiliation based on this history.” (Sen, 2006: 19), the deep net of communal relationships further link Kichwas to their identities, which are the source of discovering their individual identities but, more importantly, are also created based on the community dynamics and the identification with other Kichwa groups as well as other indigenous groups.

The results presented here are mostly based on participant observations and interactions with Kichwas, rather than on interviews since the most accurate and representative behaviors occurred outside an “interview lab setting”. In a context where there is a strong belief in the spoken word of the individual that is part of or has a close relationship with the community, activities such as sharing personal experiences, washing the dishes or clothes with other women, or being simply Anna helped me gain their trust and, despite the fact that there would always be some kind of barrier and they sometimes made fun of me because I was still a white foreigner, they told me I was “a different outsider”.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the identity articulation with an outsider that was somehow (and

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<sup>53</sup> These cities are growing at a fairly considerable speed and sometimes there are areas that are not considered part of the city yet, but might be in the near future.

<sup>54</sup> I have many examples to support this argument, but just to cite a few: a Kichwa rural woman trusting me enough to give me two dollars (it is enough money to buy eight bread buns and ten eggs) and asked me, the same way one asks a close neighbor or friend, to recharge her cell phone minutes in the urban area after we talked about sex, contraceptive methods and domestic violence with her and the women in her community; a Kichwa rural woman wanting me to stay in the community, *jokingly* holding me, and marry her son

temporarily) incorporated into the *ayllu* allowed me to grasp the multiple and shifting identities constructed and performed in the daily, crude realities of Kichwas in Alto Napo.

### 3.1 Similarities

Taking the Amazonian Kichwa identity from a holistic approach, I found there are certain characteristics that combined make for the *traditional* narrative of *what* constitutes a Kichwa, but a closer examination is incorporated in order to provide a more grounded analysis.

One of the at-first-glance “confusing” aspects of the identity that I found was their reluctance to clearly articulate *what* makes them a 21<sup>st</sup> century Napo Runa, or Kichwa of the Napo, especially in a context where the *status quo* demands a clear articulation and definition of an indigenous identity. As Dr. Uzendoski explained though (quoted in section 2.1), it is in fact part of the Napo Kichwa culture not to clearly use categorizing terms for self-definition purposes. While most Kichwas understand their identity to be a product of ancestral heritage and while they easily explain how their culture and *identity* (in the imagined traditional sense) is disappearing due to globalization and discriminatory practices, they refer to the parents’ identity, the language, a “jungle lifestyle”, or the gastronomy to explain *who* they are in the specific time and space they inhabit, with no clearly distinct identity trait and rather a combination of many characteristics. There is

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(probably for perceived economic reasons though); a rural Kichwa teenage girl explaining me how she gave birth alone in Tena’s hospital because her parents were angry at her for getting pregnant by a mestizo; an urban Kichwa lady asking me to give general advice about *life* to her teenage daughters; two urban Kichwa males sharing their business ideas with me, asking for my advice about a financial decision they needed to make, and trying to convince me to be their intermediary; or an urban Kichwa lady explaining me the *voluntary* contributions to the President’s party.

thus a distancing form self-essentializing concepts to describe their identity within the community.<sup>55</sup>

Many Kichwas explained that their identity has traditionally been (and still is) the reason for discrimination in the country and it causes them certain discomfort to admit generally speaking, and more specifically to a foreigner like me, who they *really* are. However, all Kichwa discourses that I heard are centered around some kind of past ideal or illusion, as if Kichwas were nowadays trying to gain value by identifying themselves as “traditional Kichwas” in the nonindigenous public sphere because “purity sells”, and not necessarily wondering whether they are creating a new form of Kichwa culture and identity in a global world.

Moving onto how Napo Kichwas perceive the mestizo population in the region, they tend to blame them for most of their problems and poor conditions. Considering the white population in the region is relatively small, the white person is not in their minds when they talk about nonindigenous groups they interact with, but only the mestizos. Kichwas thus see mestizos as those with power and money that will never accept them. In terms of physical traits, they can easily differentiate who is mestizo and who is indigenous just by looking at the hair, clothes, face or, surprisingly enough for a foreigner like me, the walking style. In fact, I was taught in several occasions, though unsuccessfully, to have the *skill* that allows them to differentiate mestizos without verbally interacting with them.

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<sup>55</sup> These observations were the product of a relatively long time spent with them talking about different social and cultural aspects of the Kichwa identity; they do not necessarily claim to be Kichwa unless they perceive there is a political, cultural or economic purpose in so doing, or unless they are asked directly (obviously in a polite and sensitive manner).

Continuing with the similarities I found, alcoholism (though not always perceived as a problem) is highly present in the daily lives of most Kichwas. The main similarities found consist on drinking beer in social occasions and especially in celebrations such as baptisms, communions, confirmations, weddings, community parties, etc. I was told that *trago*<sup>56</sup> is also consumed, but I never saw anyone drinking it, only beer. There are always few people that open a bottle of beer and start serving the guests in a plastic cup, one at a time<sup>57</sup>; once the guest has quickly finished drinking, he/she throws the remaining drops of beer (sometimes more than that, if they have been drinking for some time) to the floor, sometimes spits on the floor (almost hitting the other person's feet), gives the cup to the server and the server pours another cup to the following person, thus sharing the same cup with several people and drinking the beer quite fast. Both the rapidness and the considerable amounts of alcohol ingestion make the participants get drunk rather quickly, and aggressiveness and small fights start to progressively appear for both men and women. If it is a long party, such as a baptism party that I attended to in the city of Tena and that lasted for seventeen hours (then there was a six-hour break and the drinking resumed again without any food for seven more hours), it has to end in a men's fight to be considered a good party<sup>58</sup> and to mark the ending of the party. Confirming what some Kichwas told me, Dr. Uzendoski explained that:

The indigenous people are highly spiritual; I've never met a Kichwa person that denies the existence of God, or spirits or the idea that there is an unseen reality behind the reality [...] In that sense, they're deeply spiritual people with this idea

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<sup>56</sup> Hard alcohol made out of raw cane and consumed supposedly more frequently in rural areas.

<sup>57</sup> At the beginning, it is always the women that have to serve first the men and then other women.

<sup>58</sup> That specific party did not actually end in a fight though because a self-called Kichwa intellectual stopped it; the other men were saying it was acceptable to beat women up and they should go do it. Even though the other men wanted to fight him for defending women, he managed to stop them.

that there are alter mental states which allow you to have connectedness to the spiritual world. Historically, that's a big part of their culture, and it still is. [...]

There is a reason they refer to alcohol as spirits and I think alcohol is one of these substances that [like *ayahuasca* or other hallucinogenic plants] causes you cognitive change, that I think Kichwa people interpret in spiritual terms. [...]

Alcohol was a channel into this other world. [...] And then there is this other part of the Spanish and the *hacendados* [landowners] and *patrones* [masters] that exploited people giving them alcohol instead of food and created dependencies on alcohol. [He also referred to sixteenth century drinking after wars to celebrate their identities]. (Interview, 6-30-12)

During social drinking occasions and parties, children take care of each other and the older ones are in charge of bringing all children to sleep between one and two in the morning; despite the loud music (where traditional Kichwa music barely plays, but rather national Ecuadorian, Caribbean or disco music), the children told me they could sleep because they were used to it. Being used to sleeping with extremely loud music in a bed with five other children, for example, was not though what caught most of my attention in the several parties I experienced. Seeing three children lifting their drunken father or uncle from the floor or a bench and carrying him to a bed in the morning was far more interesting. But seeing the children's games and role play in the morning when the adults were sleeping was in fact the cause for, strangely enough, both my laugh and my disappointment (and my bias against alcohol intoxication, I realized there).

After the baptism party before mentioned, I saw the children playing, laughing, and having a great time with pieces of cloth wrapped around their bodies, sharing one of

the empty beer bottles from the party that they filled with water, dancing and pretending to be drunk. They were saying: “We’re drinking beer... we’re so drunk...ha, ha, ha... women are so drunk too... let’s go fight... let’s beat up women too... we’re drunken men”. Children thus learn and accept as normal the adult drinking and fighting behaviors they experience, and they know they are expected to behave the same way when they become adults.

While children still take care of other children in rural areas and help in house chores and the *chakras* (agricultural land in the jungle), I only saw for example five children fighting for a plate of white boiled rice in the rural area while the adults were starting to drink beer and dance in a community celebration. Considering that Kichwa children of the urban centers that I interacted with eat on average twice a day (plus the breakfast cookie and beverage at school that the government provides for), the experience of the children’s fight before mentioned is probably a sign that rural children lack more food than in the urban areas.<sup>59</sup>

In regards to systems of children punishment and obedience, I am usually inclined to pat children in their heads or faces when I interact with them, and I instinctively did the same with Kichwa children. In every single occasion where I tried to pat them for the first time, they instinctively lifted their arms so as to protect the head, shrank away, and frowned with a scared look in their eyes. These reactions brought me to thinking that adults hitting children was probably a common daily circumstance, and I confirmed so. However, even if the adult is using a lot of force to hit the children,<sup>60</sup> the Western reader

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<sup>59</sup> The lack of food in rural areas will be further discussed in the next sections.

<sup>60</sup> Like I saw, for example, a rural school teacher do to a seven-year old kid in his head on the only day that the classroom door was half open, or like I was told they did when the adults referred to *la correa*, “the belt” in English.

needs to disregard for a moment his/her own biases in order to understand the dynamics here, because in this context it is not considered child mistreatment, but *punishment*.

Another common and traditional punishment is to put *aji*, an extremely spicy type of chili, in the eyes and/or mouth of the child, especially the younger ones. In one of the *aji* moments, I saw an almost two-year-old child in the urban area being threatened with *aji* by his sixteen-year-old sister if he did not stay quiet. I believe it was his first *aji* experience because he disregarded the threat as if that was not something painful; once the *aji* touched his mouth, he started crying, screaming, spitting and we could not calm him down until almost one hour later. After that day, every time he heard the *aji* threat, he would run away.

In regards to male roles, they work mostly in the fields in the case of rural areas or in stores, restaurants, construction sites, etc. in the case of urban areas. Most of them give the income to their respective wives to be administered. But they do not take care of house chores or the children on a daily basis like women do. In fact, for example, I saw in the urban area one of the babies crying while her uncle next to her did not get up to assist her; the other female children were in the opposite side of the house and ran to take care of the baby as soon as they heard her. Men do the hard manual house repair work (though I have seen women working really hard on house repairs too and carrying very heavy loads) and participate in community leadership roles and organizing community events.

Women, in contrast, take care of the children, do all kinds of house chores, work in the fields (if they live in a rural area), run a small store in the city or have some kind of city job (in the case of urban women), some wash gold in the black market, and some even study to obtain the high school diploma. Finally, while there are more women in the



urban areas that really enjoy playing soccer in women's teams, soccer is considered by Kichwa women a way of releasing daily tensions and frustrations and, for urban women, also a way to lose weight especially when they wrap pieces of black trash bags around their bodies to sweat even more during the exercise. It is not my intention here to say that Kichwa men do not work, but I found that women were always fulfilling more tasks than men and they would stay up for more hours than men. Furthermore, men do not take care of the children in the most immediate, physical sense of the action; women and older children take care of the younger children, and men teach physical jobs to male children, according to their age.

Moving onto religious topics, most Kichwas in Alto Napo and especially women follow a mixture between Christianity and shamanic rituals. Historically, the influence of missionaries in the region has been substantial and one of the strategies used to convert the indigenous population was allowing the use of some indigenous spiritual practices and symbols as long as a Catholic ideology could still be followed (nowadays Evangelical and Pentecostal religions are quite popular too). Therefore, I found for example: men and women doing a *limpia*<sup>61</sup> to family members; women claiming there is only one true God, and despite beatings or cheating, the husband is always only one until death; or an urban Kichwa couple almost losing their baby waiting for the shaman rituals and prayers in Church to have an effect on their highly dehydrated and infected five-month-old son. Finally, Catholic rituals such as baptisms, communions, confirmations, marriages and burials are the common norm and, while there might be some Kichwas that do not agree in paying and sending their kids to years of catechism, it is still done both

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<sup>61</sup> *Cleaning* or *cleansing*, in English. It consists of a spiritual cleansing through the use of chants, leaf and cigarette smoke.

because it is the “tradition” and also to fulfill one of the mandatory requirements for Catholic marriage.

There are some significant differences between urban and rural Kichwas, as I will show in the next section 3.2, but the use (or not) of the Kichwa language acts as a trigger to other social dynamics. While Kichwa language is markedly more predominantly spoken in rural areas, most urban Kichwa teenagers and young adults do not speak or know how to speak Kichwa. In addition, the interaction of the youth with the urban areas is shifting not only the use of the language, but also other social aspects of the young Kichwa identity. Apart from language, the youth dynamics are the same: they try to hide their Kichwa ethnicity, they prefer to follow a modern, urban dress code and lifestyle, they really enjoy the use of Facebook and cell phones (in case of rural teenagers, they use the commute to the city high school to spend time in cyber stores), and prefer to dance and listen to *reggaeton* and disco music. For them there is thus nothing of value in being a Kichwa and in fact they feel more attracted to whites (in the strict sense or referring to lighter skinned mestizos) because “they’re just prettier, plus that way we won’t get laughed at” (many urban and rural teenage Kichwas told me exactly those words).

Finally, the presence of self-called intellectual Kichwas in their thirties in both urban and rural areas shows there is a growing attempt to end the daily stereotyping practices in the region as well as the need to promote the right of difference in a too easily, publicly and legally claimed “plurinational” country. This group usually consists of male artists, musicians, composers and writers that get together every once in a while to socialize and discuss possible strategies to revitalize their culture and identities in a way that dignity and an equal status to the rest of Ecuadorian citizens is brought to the

Amazonian Kichwa as an individual and as an ethnic group. The process of acculturation of indigenous populations in the region is probably irreversible given the Alto Napo historical context and the current global dynamics; however, it might still be possible to re-articulate an indigenous identity that is seen as valuable enough to maintain while adapting to this 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

Under these terms, I found that these Kichwa intellectuals draw from older activists still present, but take advantage of the existence of new technologies and social media such as Facebook in their pursuit of political, economic and cultural goals. While there is disagreement as to whether they should portray a more or less idealized traditional identity in the public spheres, they do nevertheless try to market several visions and understandings of the Amazonian Kichwa identity according to the different kinds of players that exist. Just like any marketing strategy, the “product” portrayed will highlight different characteristics depending on: the audience being national (the state or other citizens) or international, with a higher or lower social status; and the goal being political or economic, for participation or for integration, for social or economic rights.

### *3.2 Main Differences*

One of the most significant differences I found between Kichwas living in urban and rural areas was the use of Kichwa language to communicate with each other, as I have been explaining throughout this chapter. Therefore, while in urban areas Kichwa is barely spoken except among some elder Kichwas and few sentences on a public state event, this language is the mother tongue for many rural Kichwas.

Rural Kichwas are also economically poorer than Kichwas living in urban areas. Being a Kichwa is usually related to having less buying power than their fellow mestizo

citizens, but in rural areas this difference is especially marked. Furthermore, there are proportionally fewer mestizo inhabitants living in rural areas.

During the implementation of the needs assessment surveys in rural communities for Fundación Runa, the lack of food pattern became the *daily routine*. Eating once or twice a day, filling the stomachs with more white boiled rice than in the urban areas, yucca, plantains, or eggs, children with swollen bellies due to malnourishment, population with vision problems, vomits, diarrheas, flu, etc. were the *norm*. With soil infertility in some areas or lack of agricultural lands in others, rural communities of the Alto Napo are increasingly becoming more dependent on cash to pay for transportation to reach urban areas, high schools, health centers, etc. and to pay for food they cannot get in their communities (such as rice, oil, or sugar), medicines, school uniforms, electricity, or cell phone bills for some.

It generally took me one hour and fifteen minutes (sixty-cent bus ride plus walking distance) from Tena city to reach the Jatunyacu community I was visiting during the first month of my stay in the region. Its residents go to Tena quite often to buy groceries, study, visit the doctor, pay electricity bills, or collect the \$35 monthly government stipend for families with disabled children or single mothers. Therefore, the interaction with the urban area is frequent.

One day Maria (57 years old, pseudonym used) went to Tena early in the morning with no food in her stomach. She needed to collect the stipend, which she spent entirely in powder milk for her two baby granddaughters and a pack of rice. She came back few hours later almost fainting. She explained she could barely walk in Tena and anybody reached to help her. Few days later, their electricity got cut off due to unpaid bills and

they did not complain or try to avoid the cut by promising to pay soon. That night, with the candle light I saw Maria “breastfeeding” her baby granddaughter while the baby’s mother was finishing high school homework. Maria had a total of sixteen children, two of whom had died and were buried in the house plot, and two of the daughters were studying in a Tena high school. Maria tried to hide from me, but it was too late, I had seen her. With a sad smile on her face, she told me “I’m calming the baby down while the mother finishes the homework”. I smiled back and nodded, signaling my understanding and empathy. Seeing that the baby was not calming down, the baby’s aunt (teenage mother of the other baby) started breastfeeding her niece, and that made me confirm again what I had been seeing even in the urban areas: everything is shared in the household. There was no more powder milk, no breast milk during the day and no more electricity; another trip to Tena will be needed and probably nobody will help Maria until she faints in the middle of the city.

In regards to other aspects of the rural gastronomy and considering the narrow variety of food consumed there, *traditional* Kichwa food like *maitos* (wrapped palm-like leaf with different ingredients inside and smoked) or *chontacuros* (a kind of worm) in special occasions is considered part of the cultural identity of Kichwas.<sup>62</sup> While alcohol consumption in rural areas is also present, there are two non-alcoholic drinks that are markedly more consumed there: *chicha* and *guayusa*. *Chicha* can be made out of *chonta* or yucca and can be fermented or not. *Chicha* is still associated with *being* an indigenous person. I was told in one occasion that a white grocer in Archidona refused to sell some products in the early morning to an urban Kichwa man (who wanted to pay with a ten-dollar note) stating that he did not need to buy any breakfast because he probably already

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<sup>62</sup> *Chontacuro maitos* with *garbatoyuyu* (an asparagus-like vegetable) and palm were my favorite.

had had his *chicha* in the morning. Given the daily habit of opening stores with no change, looking for it in the early morning can be troublesome for store workers; however, the argument given by the white grocer clearly shows not only the stereotypes they have of Kichwas because most urban Kichwas do not drink *chicha* anymore, but the racism embedded in a regular business transaction.

In most of the rural communities that I visited, *mingas* are frequent, but not in urban areas in the strict sense of word. *Minga* is the name given to the job of cleaning paths or communal areas as a collective work. Usually the dates and times of *mingas* are decided in community meetings and everybody in the community contributes to the task. There are other collective jobs done such as construction works, preparing a community celebration, or deciding on certain political or economic projects. In certain communities though it is becoming more difficult to get community members engaged in helping with *mingas*; they mentioned that years ago the residents would consider *mingas* a communal obligation, but also as a time to interact and socialize with other community members, so the hard work was perceived as lighter when done in a group. Nowadays, I was told people tend to give more excuses for not attending the *mingas*, and I noticed that this pattern was more frequent in communities that were relatively closer to urban centers.

In Jatunyacu, for example, one afternoon I was helping Ramiro Aguinda to cut tree trunks to make a division wall for the community school. There were at some point five young men that came and sat down, watching and laughing at me. I was uncertain as to whether they were laughing at me for not knowing how to properly cut the trunks, for being a woman doing that task, for being a foreigner that does not cut the trunks well, or for all of those reasons combined. Ramiro asked for their help, but they preferred to just

watch (Ramiro later on mentioned they had been drinking a bit); instead, the approximately eight children there wanted to help, and they certainly knew how to cut the trunks straight. In Jatunyacu thus “It’s sad because, back in the day, people would help each other out. Now, everybody lives in their houses, like in the city and if there is no money to earn, then nobody helps” (Kichwa man, private conversation 6-13-12).

Kichwas in more remote rural areas seemed to take more into consideration the nature or environment surrounding them for their daily live activities. While only very few rural communities still pollute throwing garbage in the open space, most others have environmentally sound garbage disposal processes. However, when I mention the connection to the environment, I refer to the idea of the Kichwa *cosmovision* adapted into the modern times that they inhabit.<sup>63</sup> Believing in deceased family members reincarnating in jungle animals or rocks that protect you, receiving messages from animals, feeling the revitalizing energy of mountains, rivers, trees or the sky, was (and still is for some) a lifestyle in a rural setting. In fact, a very kind shaman shared with me his representation of his place in the space; he did not give me permission to reproduce that drawing, so I can only say that there is an interconnection between the human being, wisdom, nature and God (in the holistic way, not as a specific religious God).

I can still perfectly remember and feel the day when I went to the community of Talag in Tena county to watch a soccer game between male Kichwas of the county.<sup>64</sup> It was an extremely hot day and my insect bites were giving me a hard time; apart from all kinds of other insect bites, I had tons of an insect similar to chiggers that kept on

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<sup>63</sup> Traditionally, the *cosmovision* has been referred to as the indigenous philosophy that understands its existence in the space in relation to the connection to mother Earth and all living species inhabiting it.

<sup>64</sup> I did not find the game especially interesting, but listening to and watching the Kichwa urban women getting anxious and yelling at their husbands for not playing well was certainly far more interesting.

reproducing under my skin and I was told by urban Kichwas there was simply not much I could do but to use mint, which I could acquire in a pharmacy. Before the game, I went with two friends (an urban Kichwa man and a mestizo lady) to the river close by. Suspicious about the presence of boas, I still felt an urge to go into the water with all my clothes on and, as soon as the water touched my skin, I felt protected, alleviated, and I intuitively felt that only my face should be on the surface, just to breathe. The following day, I realized that the itchiness and pain from the insect bites had considerably reduced, but I did not mention anything to anybody. Few days after that, I randomly explained the river experience to some women in a rural community and with a smile on their faces, they stated “You are becoming one of here; you are becoming one in connection with the nature”. Apparently, it looks like I *heard* the water telling me that the chigger-like insects could be suffocated by having my body become *one* with the river. I explained this experience a total of four times in rural areas, and every time I received the same answer; in fact, most of the time the story marked the starting point in our conversations about nature, environment and cosmovision.

Finally and moving onto the sensitive topic of domestic violence, more rural women told me about their situation than in urban areas. With this affirmation, I do not intend to claim that domestic violence is more frequent in rural areas than in urban ones, but that I was able to find more victims in rural areas that expressed their situation to me. It is not an openly discussed topic and it took me some time of rapport building to have women admit it (making sure men were not present at the time). Their perception of domestic violence might vary to that of a Westerner like me. Verbal insults are more commonly accepted and physical abuse is considered a *teaching* in certain occasions (“I



did something wrong and I needed to get punished, to learn”). Kichwa women know perfectly what domestic violence means and they highly reject it, but for most of them it is the *unreasonable punishment of drunken men*. Thus, domestic violence mostly happens when their husbands get drunk and beat them up for no “apparent” reason, just as an escape valve. However, I was able to talk to few women who explained these treatments happened even when the husbands were not drunk and the women had done nothing wrong; digging deeper and asking why they thought that was the case, they expressed it was because the men had nothing to do, they had no jobs and were releasing all tension through the physical abuse of women. For example, a lady in a rural community told me:

Some years ago, he used to hit me all the time and it wasn’t a punishment. [...]

One day, he even beat me up for finding out he was cheating on me, just because I found out. [...] But he’s changed now, he doesn’t do that anymore; the community men got together and told him that treatment was not acceptable, only the punishment. (Rural Kichwa woman in Archidona county, names protected)

Therefore, the importance a community opinion can have for a Kichwa individual in a rural area is significant. While urban Kichwas live also in urban-style community plots or neighborhoods, i.e. in close proximity to each other, they do not tend to either impose or promote a change of behavior in another community member. Furthermore, cheating and teenage pregnancy happens even among the mestizo population, but in the context of Kichwas I saw an urban young Kichwa male juggling with five different girlfriends at once, and two female early teenagers telling me I should throw away my marriage ring and sleep with whatever man I preferred during a party because my husband was not there with me.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented a small fraction of the multiple scenarios of Alto Napo Kichwas in regards to the universes of meaning found in their daily experiences that, combined, create a perspective from which to understand the symbolisms used in the Kichwa identity reality. Expressing in as honest, academically-sound and accurate way as possible what they told me while briefly analyzing such narratives required me to provide at some points a thick description of the contexts.

I have thus identified that being a Kichwa in Alto Napo nowadays is still not a desirable identity to claim by most. There are several identities and roles at play in the Kichwa social groups or *ayllu*, where a mixture between “traditional” practices and current 21<sup>st</sup> century dynamics can be found. Outside these internal identity articulations, other more market and politically oriented identities are under construction, which in turn tend to be portrayed in more essentialist and idealized terms. When performing imagined understandings of what constitutes a Kichwa “tradition”, they reinforce an indigenous identity that is acknowledged by nonindigenous peoples even when *indigenosness* is not performed; the biological features they (might) possess distinguishes them in the same way that the “blackness” of Fanon’s (1952) colonized subject marks his/her identity. Therefore, when the Kichwa individual attempts to cover his/her indigenosness in a scenario where this feature is perceived as an obstacle for climbing the social ladder, he/she will acculturate to the dominant white-mestizo culture, i.e. will wear the “white mask”; for Kichwas with a higher education, they can more easily acquire status symbols and the acculturation is even more profound. The current Alto Napo Kichwa indigenous ethnicity does not necessarily represent the past ideals of Kichwa identity anymore,

though certain cultural systems still prevail (especially in rural areas), and is both adapting to and being influenced by the dominant white-mestizo culture and the global economy.

On the other hand, in contexts where the performance of an idealized traditional identity to outsiders is perceived to bring value to the Kichwa identity, stereotypes can be further reproduced and create confusion in the mind of the nonindigenous person, who is in turn aware of the Kichwa shifting identities but still clearly identifies who is Kichwa and who is not. Thus, the Kichwa political and economic demands for representation and integration are sometimes perceived as flawless by both nonindigenous and some more “acculturated” indigenous peoples, but these perceptions are not necessarily openly expressed at all times. Instead, these indigenous and nonindigenous perceptions vis-à-vis the validity of the Kichwa demands make it easier for the nonindigenous to label Kichwas as inauthentic, to perpetuate the prejudices in a more subtle or politically-correct way, or to negate any prejudices under “we are all the same” claims.

From the Kichwa perspective, in contrast, the inauthenticity accusations make them able to better support their argument that they are in a lower power status, that they are *othered* on a daily basis, that their culture (as a product of an ancestral heritage) is disappearing, and that they need to hold onto the imagined ideal Kichwa tradition if their rights as Ecuadorians are to be enforced. So, it is a vicious circle.

In conclusion, the characteristics of those multiple and distinct identities vary so greatly that I am not able to fully list each identity feature in each single scenario, but I have tried to show in this chapter the most common patterns and present the reader with

another lens from which to look at the Kichwa identity formation in the Alto Napo region of Ecuadorian Amazon.

## **Chapter Five: Analytical Discussion and Final Conclusions**

*The power to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is, the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is political power par excellence.*  
Pierre Bourdieu (1989:23)

### **Introduction**

I embarked in this research project wondering what it meant to be a Kichwa person in the Alto Napo region of Ecuador nowadays, i.e. what the implications were of holding an indigenous identity and how and why it was articulated in an ethnically diverse former Spanish colony with an overwhelmingly large and Spanish reminiscent state apparatus. Under a constant pro-government propaganda that emphasizes the “citizen’s revolution” ideology that President Correa and his team claim to have launched and be promoting, the concept of a diverse population that is somehow pushed to create a unified Ecuadorian citizenry seemed to create a challenge on the preservation or strengthening of an indigenous identity like the Amazonian Kichwa. These “unification” State insinuations have been largely criticized in the literature I reviewed; multiculturalism is understood to need other strategies than the homogenization of citizenry.

In fact, the Ecuadorian state seems to be working to build a nation-state with a unique citizenship where diversity is allowed and indeed welcome, but under certain conditions, i.e. as long as the existence of multiculturalism not only does not interfere with the state’s agenda but it rather supports it. There is thus still an acculturation process in

place, where the indigenous person is not supposed to look like a mestizo anymore, but behave as such while keeping certain elements of indigeneity. Otherwise, those indigenous peoples that might simply choose to behave the way they prefer disregarding what might be considered acceptable are accused of being a group of secessionists impeding the well-being and progress of the entire country, a threat to the nation-state building, an obstacle towards the *modernization* of the country.

Everything then in this context becomes a possible source for politicization. Having to step down from a director post in Napo provincial tourist office not on the basis of a deteriorated professional performance but due to the inability to gain votes and have political skills like a mestizo person told me in a private conversation, and substituting her instead for a young, urban, male Kichwa provides for just another example of how much images, representation and reinforcement of Correa's ideology matter and are used.

Alto Napo Kichwa demands for integration and dignity do not reject though the nation-state building project. Analyzing thus the use of cultural capital vis-à-vis the power relations both in their daily lives and also in extra situational circumstances allowed me to understand the Kichwa identity formation from another lens and acknowledge the power structures that influence and shape this formation. In other words, I have attempted to unmask the still prevailing stereotypes and prejudices embedded in integration discourses through the application of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital in this context. Answering my research questions required not only recognizing which elements of the symbolic capital were represented (and recognized) in the public spheres versus other cultural elements not represented due to a perceived lack

of value (such as alcohol consumption, duration of parties, language use, etc.), but also the deeper demands and goals underneath such representation, that is, the narratives within the narratives.

Caught in the process between bottom-up, top-down and crossed identity formation dynamics, Alto Napo Kichwas struggle daily to have equal opportunities and their identity reflects a hybrid process of reflexive, multiple identity layers. Their shared feelings of *otherness* vis-à-vis the nonindigenous dominant culture prompt them to use certain forms of daily resistance while simultaneously seeking value for themselves, be it in the form of the portrayal of a traditional image that *sells* or in the form of adopting elements of the dominant mestizo culture.

In this final chapter of the M.A. thesis paper, I critically analyze the field findings in relation to the multiplicity of identities that are performed and the reasons behind such performances, the representation of symbols and cultural capital that help both shape and recreate certain notions of indigenusness, and the prejudices (more or less masked) present in the daily lives of Alto Napo Kichwas. A revision of the existing literature is provided throughout the text to show that the application of Bourdieu's symbolic capital framework in this research is the component that most significantly contributes to the existing body of literature on contemporary indigenous identities in Latin America. After that, I present the limitations found during my research and I conclude with a list of the most significant findings and recommendations for future research projects.

### **1. Multiple and Shifting Identities**

Following Sens's (2006) theory on multiple identities and the use of *imagined singularities*, the Alto Napo Kichwa, regardless of him/her inhabiting an urban or a rural

space, portrays and adopts a different identity feature depending on the audience to whom that identity is directed, like any individual interacting with other members of a society does. Indeed, “cultural identity emerges and is transformed through a process of interdependency and opposition among groups.” (Muratorio, 1991: 5). In an *ayllu*, the Kichwa person will adopt and play the role that is expected. The type of capital used within the community is not the same as the type of capital that they perform for nonindigenous populations and the State. In the community, the power relationships that exist are not geared towards gaining economic or political rights, as is the case for the “outside” performances; these are social relationships that are constructed to fulfill individual roles such as those of community leaders, women, men, godparents, workers, activists, etc. However, they also use the imagined tradition within the community to bind its members into the communal identity.

When interacting with nonindigenous peoples, in contrast, these roles might shift into either a more essentialist-ancestral image or a more modern, cosmopolitan one to fit the political, economic or cultural purpose behind such interaction. Indeed, as Fanon observed though referring to African descendants in the Antilles, “The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question...” (2008 [1952]:17). Applying the power component of Bourdieu’s symbolic capital, the power relationships that guide the recognition processes influence the way in which self and group representations are portrayed. The imagined traditions into which Kichwas were labeled by first colonizers and later by white-mestizo elites are their symbolic capital; they invoke an ideal type of

tradition for the market and the State by borrowing symbols of this imposed essentialized view, which in turn helps perpetuate such essentialist views of indigenous identities. There are thus changing notions of tradition and indigeneity depending on the power dynamics of the context.

The role of choice though with constraints, as Sen (2006) refers to, is present in the daily interactions of the Alto Napo Kichwa with other members of the Ecuadorian society. Acknowledging not only the several identity features an individual has, but also the choice spectrum (and the reasons behind that choice) from which to adopt that feature in a specific time and space becomes crucial to understand the identity articulation that I have been presenting throughout this paper. Or in Sen's words

Even when one is inescapably seen – by oneself as well as by others- as French, or Jewish, or Brazilian, or African-American, or (particularly in the context of present-day turmoil) as an Arab or as a Muslim, one still has to decide what exact importance to attach to that identity over the relevance of other categories to which one also belongs. (2006: 6).

As shown in Chapter Four, Alto Napo Kichwas might follow a combination between contemporary and “traditional” lifestyles in their daily private spheres. In rural areas, the ability to use this ideal symbolic capital such as language or gastronomy might be more plausible given the rural environment and the less interaction with the mestizo dominant culture on a daily basis. In urban areas, on the other hand, the more constant and dynamic interactions with mestizos have brought them not to use these “traditional” cultural elements on a daily basis. Instead, urban Kichwas tend to follow a modern lifestyle even in private spheres. Work and school schedules, better access to the Internet



and the media, stereotyping by mestizos, higher presence of state authorities, etc. comprise some of the social dynamics that shape the Kichwa identity into a more cosmopolitan one where the representation of an ideal traditional indigenusness is mostly performed as folklore in cultural, economic and political events. In fact, a mestizo lady in Tena explained in a private conversation that “the urban indigenous [person] dresses better because we, the mestizos, dress like this and the indigenous does not want stay behind. Obvious. He’s not fool”.

Altogether, Kichwas in rural and urban areas perceive a sense of *othering* by whites and mestizos, which prompts them not to openly claim their affiliation with an indigenous identity unless they perceive there is something of value to gain from such affirmation. At least in the context of Alto Napo, one is looked with skepticism if one asks “Are you a Kichwa?”, as if the person has to know beforehand what your intentions are before he/she can make an identity claim. This is clearly a result of exploitation, discrimination and degrading practices they have been suffering since the Spanish conquest and that consequently act as a self-protective mechanism, passed generation after generation. As Muratorio (1991) suggested,

Symbolic structures are the result of social processes and also have their own histories. [...] I have tried to understand Napo Runa consciousness and ethnic identity as a set of group memories and practices, both material and symbolic, that are reinterpreted under different historical situations. These memories and practices are part of an alternative discourse to that of the dominant ethnic group and dominating class, manifested in the various forms of resistance and affirmation of Napo Runa identity. (1991: 5)

In regards to the Kichwa perception that their culture is disappearing, I have also argued that they do not wonder though if they are creating a new ethnic identity that seeks power, representation and acknowledgement in a context dominated by white-mestizo ideologies, with their respective other individual identities like any other human being has. In fact, I have shown that a new native identity in the Alto Napo is emerging; it is an identity that simultaneously seeks to differentiate its group with a unique, valued cultural capital<sup>65</sup> (subject to the nonindigenous recognition power though) while it eagerly seeks to integrate and participate in the global economy like a modern, cosmopolitan individual. Digging even deeper and maybe making a far-fetched conclusion, I am inclined to argue that if they are found to be descendants of the Quijos (note the power of recognition at play here) *and* if prejudices are still in place or intensified, the world could see in the mid-term the *emergence* of a *Quijo indigenous movement*. The nowadays Amazonian Kichwas are more technologically savvy and connected to the global dynamics, and could construct an identity for the outside audience presenting itself as the last survivors of the Quijos, descendants of the greatest Quijo warrior Jumandi, a competitive advantage good enough to advance their demands for power and rights, and unfortunately another strategy for the elite to further segregate and divide the indigenous population of Ecuador.

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<sup>65</sup> There are currently anthropological studies being made to assess whether Kichwas of the Alto Napo region were in fact descendants or not of the Quijos ethnic group rather than of the Andean Kichwas. Some Kichwa intellectuals are currently waiting for the anthropological findings to change the name of their ethnicity. These intellectuals told me that these anthropological studies, carried out by Ecuadorian mestizos and white scholars, have received a lot of funding from the Ecuadorian government and private institutions. I have not been able to ascertain these hypotheses though.

## 2. Representation of “Indigenusness”

The reductionist portrayal of an ancestral-like Kichwa identity to nonindigenous peoples is considered to bring a higher value to the Kichwa as a person and as an ethnic group, apart from an income in the case of some cultural representations. Alto Napo Kichwas feel they do not have equal opportunities and thus need to differentiate themselves through a competitive advantage, even if it means adopting and recreating a Western notion of indigenusness that does not fit anymore with who they *really* are in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ecuador.

Referring to Sartre’s claim of “it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew”, Sen suggests that “charged attributions can incorporate two distinct but interrelated distortions: misdescription of people belonging to a targeted category, and an insistence that the misdescribed characteristics are the only relevant features of the targeted person’s identity.” (2006: 7). In the context of Alto Napo Kichwas thus the *folklorization* of an ethnicity becomes both a Kichwa strategy to gain value and paradoxically an instrument through which, in Marxist terms, elites can further benefit from the extraction of surplus labor. Will indigenous peoples be used in the future by elites as cheap labor commodities for market and tourist-oriented cultural representations? Maybe it is already so.

But we cannot continue patronizing the Ecuadorian indigenous population, and more specifically the Alto Napo Kichwas, through the lens of a top-down identity appointee. Kichwas, aware of some of the tactics used to exploit them, also adopt several resistance strategies. Working within the system boundaries, they react to these power structures by indeed recreating Western notions of the imagined *exotic* indigenous identity even if it requires following a past ideal, which they highly respect and provides

a source of ethnic pride. But they do it in a way so as to revive their culture and to acquire the deserved social value and power they have long been banned from. Therefore, what might start just as a cultural representation can turn into a political or economic claim, and vice versa. And the preservation and reproduction of certain elements of the Amazonian Kichwa cultural capital might be directly linked to the exhibition of participation and contribution to the economic and political fields of the state, even if it is only within the boundaries allowed. In the case of artists, for example, Whitten and Whitten (2011) suggested that “increasing recognition of the distinct ethnic identity of the artists strengthens their ability to communicate imagery to national and international audiences” (2011: 143). These contributions are thus perceived by Kichwas to be a form of legitimately claiming “we too are citizens that work for the nation-state”.

Finally, and moving onto the relationship between language and identity, in a comparative analysis between the indigenous movements of Peru and Ecuador, Glidden (2007) observed that

Many Peruvian people view education as a way to increase one’s class standing and consider the ability to speak Spanish as a key to future success and inclusion. Whereas in Ecuador, indigenous peoples saw joining an indigenous social movement as increasing their life chances [...] More recently, even latecomers to ethnic mobilization in Ecuador have demanded bilingual education as a means to save their culture. (2007: 28).

However, I have shown through the explanation of the bilingual intercultural education system that the recognition and implementation of an indigenous language might not lead to an increased feeling of belonging or ethnic identity among Alto Napo Kichwas. These

type of affirmations, like Glidden's (2007), might be the result of a lack of more grounded research where the perspectives of indigenous peoples that are not politically or culturally active on a daily basis need to be incorporated. While Kichwa language is one component of the Alto Napo Kichwa symbolic capital, not all Kichwas can or want to speak Kichwa. Speaking Kichwa is still considered, especially by the youth, a sign of indigenusness and, apart from their maybe different skin color, one more obstacle in the road for a successful future and an equal status and participation in the Ecuadorian society, because "to speak [...] means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon, 2008 [1952]:17-18).

Most Alto Napo Kichwa intellectuals that I talked to indeed acknowledge the need to preserve and strengthen their language as a way to maintain one aspect of their cultural heritage. However, they perceive the ways in which the state is attending the "language issue" not to be working or, more accurately, to be counterproductive. Furthermore, there are other aspects of their heritage these activists feel should be promoted and strengthened, such as guayusa ceremonies, songs, melodies, stories, the know-how of the jungle, the use of medicinal plants, shamanic rituals, learning and punishment practices (like the *aji*), etc. For example, Carlos Alvarado claimed in a small conference I attended in Sapo Rumi that "It doesn't do any good to talk about culture if we don't put it into practice" (7-5-2012). Complaining about textbooks in Ecuador explaining how the Spanish "brought culture" and acknowledging the disappearance of certain Kichwa "traditions", he claimed that "Our culture is right here, but trampled by us" (7-5-2012). One of Carlos' dreams is to build an "authentic indigenous community", i.e. pre-Hispanic, where people could live according to ancestral rules "so that tourists

aren't disappointed when they arrive and see there are no authentic indigenous peoples, and so that they can learn from us" (7-5-2012). The power dynamics embedded in the process of recognition by outsiders becomes thus the cause for the representation of an imagined ideal of tradition.

### **3. Challenges of Representing Idealized Indigenous Traditions**

After the large Ecuadorian indigenous movements that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s and after the election of socialist Rafael Correa as President of Ecuador in late 2007 through the support of many indigenous groups in the country, I have wondered throughout this thesis paper what is left of the indigenous identity articulation and politics that saw, for example, the birth of a new 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution that recognizes and grants many rights to the indigenous population of Ecuador. The first demand that the CONAIE made to the Ecuadorian Government in the 1990 indigenous uprising was, for example, the declaration of Ecuador as a *plurinational* state. However, what happens after such declaration is officially made, like in the 2008 Constitution, and the country is now proclaimed to be the *Plurinational State of Ecuador*? Selverston-Scher (2001) observed that

Indigenous people in Ecuador consider themselves excluded in many ways from the benefits of participation in the Ecuadoran political system. From their perspective, the Ecuadoran nation-state is modeled after a European model and represents the *mestizo*, or mixed, culture. To be a participant, or a citizen, it was understood for decades that one had to sacrifice indigenous identity and acculturate, that is, adopt the dominant mestizo culture. In effect, I contend, indigenous people were excluded from the rights of citizenship because they

maintained their identity. The modern indigenous movement developed and spread a new political ideology that insists on citizenship rights for indigenous people without sacrificing any elements of their ethnic identity. (2001: 3).

While Selverston-Scher wrote these observations in 2001, I have shown that in fact this same structure, despite the declaration of a plurinational state, still prevails (at least in Alto Napo) and that the indigenous movements, contrary to what the author suggested, have not changed the old postcolonial political, economic and social structures; while the state and some Kichwas claim there are more opportunities now for the indigenous peoples, they still need to be acculturated and work within that power and political structure in order to be represented and to participate as equal Ecuadorian citizens.

In a so-called socialist context where it is publicly claimed that all Ecuadorian citizens have the same rights and opportunities, discrimination and prejudice are either denied on the basis of “now with President Correa we are better off” or politicized by blaming right-wing factions for the perpetuation of power structures that prevent low-class citizens from reaching a sustainable economic development. The possibility to both express how an Alto Napo Kichwa deals with prejudice on a daily basis and to demand an effective change is therefore automatically shut down by narratives about inclusion and representation, and by the public appearance of self-called (and nonindigenous appointed) indigenous government officials using daily the “it is now possible to be an equal citizen, look at me!” discourse.

During this field research, most Kichwas and mestizos that I talked to claimed that one cannot openly criticize President Correa, even if it is a constructive criticism that could serve to improve strategies, because “Correa does not like public criticism and

usually reacts with insults and denigration of those who have criticized him” (Mijeski and Beck, 2011: 121). Therefore, if the Alto Napo Kichwa *dares* to claim that there is still a barrier that either prevents him/her from enjoying the same rights as any other Ecuadorian citizen or that it takes him/her at least double effort to reach whatever goal, not only will he or she be blamed for not doing *enough* to advance, to take advantage of the opportunities (wherever they might be and whatever it takes) and to get educated like Governor Carrera claimed in the interview (even if we wonder whose brain can function on an empty stomach), but his/her argument will be twisted in such a way so as to look like a crazy person worth not investing in and even someone to watch out for.

Olivera (2012), referring to Mexican indigenous peoples in Chiapas, assessed that “multiculturalism has been institutionalized, and the government is not interested in whether the indigenous exist as indigenous; now they are valued as useful commodities, providing cheap and docile labor for the transnational companies like any other poor and unemployed person in the country.” (2012: 102). I have shown that in the case of Ecuador the institutionalization of multiculturalism has indeed appeared, but contrary to what Olivera observed in Mexico, the Ecuadorian state is now interested in having indigenous peoples being represented in the political, economic and cultural systems. Be it because the *traditional* image of indigeneity attracts international tourists, or be it because they can be part of a political strategy that portrays an image of embracing ethnicities, the fact remains that the representation of this identity is subject to the boundaries set by a white-mestizo dominated state.

Bowen’s (2011) concept of *multicultural market democracy* and *authentic multiculturalism* indeed helps in understanding the subjugation of indigenous peoples to a



system that proclaims to represent all ethnic groups of a society. Having the “freedom” to represent an identity while simultaneously holding it to the set boundaries clearly shows how the ability to articulate an identity is constrained. Under these circumstances then the freedom to maintain a nationality in a so-called plurinational country where diversity is supposedly welcome, and the possibility to strengthen an indigenous identity in whatever form the ethnic group considers it best represents them (be it more *traditional*, more cosmopolitan, or a mixture of both), all those ideals become subject to the recognition, approval and therefore the limits set by the dominant culture. It is thus what we might call the *conditionality of existence* that *enslaves* the Alto Napo Kichwas into some sort of hybrid identity, subject to the “symbolic surveillance” constantly inflicted by those in a higher power status.

#### **4. Limitations**

The first limitation, which I was aware of even before I started the trip, was the lack of time to properly understand the dynamics in place. Any sociological study that wishes to understand an identity formation encounters a massive complexity in the topic; indeed, “identity can be a complicated matter” (Sen, 2006: XI). Two months of field research were virtually not enough to arrange and conduct interviews, engage with the population through participant observation, and analyze the articulation of an indigenous identity while at the same time trying to adjust to the conditions of that space and time.

Furthermore, perhaps I could have tried to spend more overnight time in rural areas instead of just visiting on a daily basis, which provides for the second limitation. However, the intensity of the interactions in rural areas as well as the (at first glance) urban paradoxes that I found, which I am positive I would have missed had I been

elsewhere, and my own health concerns prompted me to sleep only few days in rural areas. Losing eight kilos in the first four weeks of my field research due to a lack of food and sleep may have affected the way I could perform my duties. Cognitively speaking, perhaps I missed to acknowledge certain dynamics or patterns, or to inquire more deeply about other aspects of the identity. Nevertheless, I would indeed recommend the researcher to live in rural areas more frequently than I did if a more comprehensive analysis of rural dynamics is to be presented.

Furthermore, except in the cases of government officials, I learned the most outside the interview setting. Participant observation became my main and most reliable source of information. Therefore, having to complete a certain number of interviews when the researcher considers that he/she would rather spend his/her time acquiring the data through another, more effective method can indeed be a time-consuming limitation.

Lastly, I was aware that examining the way in which members of a society interpret their individual and collective identities is problematic. Given the different contexts and scenarios of the social experience, identities are not only multiple, but dynamic and subject to constant change. In addition, my condition as a white, Spanish female researcher may have affected and shaped the way mestizos and Kichwas interacted with me. I was indeed perceived to be a rich enough person and I was asked many times how I could afford such research. Furthermore, the fact that my husband was not accompanying me made many Kichwas wonder about my role as a wife and even openly question whether I was being a “good” woman or not. I accepted all their opinions and did not take them personal; rather, they helped me understand how they perceive different individual roles.

## 5. Final Research Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Throughout this thesis paper I have tried to interpret the perceptions and opinions of Alto Napo Kichwas (and mestizos to some extent as well) vis-à-vis the indigenous identity in a way that best reflects the complexities of identity articulation and as an attempt to shed light into the highly problematic stereotyping that still prevails in the region. The conditionality or power relations to which Alto Napo Kichwas are subjected to when trying to create a better future clearly shows that changing the faces or bodies of state representatives does not lead to a change in the power structures still in place; it is just the “mask”, the image a so-called socialist and plurinational state wants to portray to a world where hegemony and inequalities are increasingly *politically incorrect*.

The application of Bourdieu’s symbolic capital has provided the framework that contributes to expand the existing literature on indigenous identities in Latin America as well as serve as a base from which Kichwas can reflect on for future strategies. The changing identities to gain power and rights are thus directly linked to power dynamics. By understanding the complexities embedded in the process of indigenous identity formation we can acknowledge how power relations are depleted and how identities are connected to rights, and not only land or language rights. As a way of conclusion, three main findings can now be drawn from this research.

First, Alto Napo Kichwas have multiple and shifting identities they perform depending on the audiences they interact with and the power relations of the context. There is a need to acknowledge and accept the multiplicity of features that form individual and collective identities. Rather than focusing solely on the way an ethnic group articulates its identity in internal and external spheres, the ways in which an

individual identity shapes and is shaped by the collective (be it the same ethnic group or a different one) needs further examination. In the case of Alto Napo Kichwas, I have shown there are similarities and differences between several individuals that, together, form the collective. The hybridity of such identities together with the social and political structures of the spaces they inhabit make the Alto Napo Kichwa identity a very dynamic one, where it is not possible anymore to distinguish ethnicities based on idealized cultural practices. However, Kichwas that are more reluctant to the disappearance or shifting of their imagined traditional symbolic capital, which they perceive to represent who they *really* are as an ethnic group, use certain resistance and “complaint” strategies such as “traditional” indigenous hairstyles, jewelry, or even jokes that make fun of what they perceive to be the weakness, arrogance or higher economic status of mestizos.

Looking towards a future direction, the new Kichwa generation might choose not to identify as Kichwa and to reject all indigenous symbolism if, on a cost-benefit analysis, the incentives for such identification are perceived to be disadvantageous. On the other hand, if they perceive the claiming of a Kichwa identity to be beneficial, the skills they are currently developing in the use of the Internet and social media could potentially help them advance and strengthen their identity in whichever way they feel best represents them. Examining the incentives the youth has (or not) to identify as Kichwa could thus be a possible investigation line for future research.

The second major finding of this research consists on the representation of essentialized expressions of symbolic indigenusness as (*paradoxically*) a form of resistance to acculturation and as a way of claiming for one’s own ethnic group the legitimacy of representations. In other words, the articulation of an ideal type of

indigenusness is perceived to be a competitive advantage against mestizos embarking in similar projects. Referring to the “indigenous past” of strong warriors like Jumandi or to the ancestral knowledge passed along, Kichwa activists perceive their people to be distinctively more valuable than the mestizo that “has lost its indigeneity”. This does not mean however that such advantage is effectively implemented in all scenarios, but Kichwa activists are *marketing* or framing themselves within the indigeneity of their identity to advance their economic and cultural projects. In addition, the ways in which they are trying to convince their fellows to adopt such a strategy provides for another possible research study. Linked to this, I would also recommend studying the current use of social media by Kichwas; given the constant shapes and influences in identity, examining whether social media is mostly used as a method for reviving the Kichwa identity ideal or as an acculturation process could contribute in identifying major trends as well as serve as a basis for future strategies.

Lastly, the third major finding of this study shows the prevalence of stereotyping and prejudice in Alto Napo. It is important to highlight here that stereotyping is bidirectional too in the sense that Kichwas also have preconceived notions of the *other*, i.e. mestizo or white Ecuadorians, that do not necessarily fit the reality, but I have limited myself to just the Kichwa perspective. Having already presented how this identity is formed, I conclude there is a common pattern on the reasons behind the articulation of an indigenous identity. Apart from the more pragmatic political, economic and cultural reasons that I have shown throughout this paper, there is a deeper sense of subordinating *otherness* that prompts many Kichwas in Alto Napo to either negate their indigenous affiliation altogether and not follow any practice that might be associated as *purely*

indigenous, or to articulate a more traditional image in certain public spheres where indigeneity is asked to be represented, like in cultural events. However, “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu, 1984:7).

Following Muratorio (1991), “if historical contextualization is crucial to understanding agency –indigenous forms of consciousness and practices– it also is important to understand the structures that set the limits and the constraints, the parameters within which these subjectivities were constituted.” (1991: 13). Since the 1990s, the different Ecuadorian indigenous identities have become more “visible” and the indigeneity of the identity has become the source for political, economic and cultural demands. Since Correa’s Administration came to power, the integration of indigenous peoples into social systems of power has indeed been proclaimed; however, while some indigenous peoples can now occupy significant government posts, the selection of indigenous people to hold certain public posts can be seen as a symbolic *Bentham’s panopticon* where representation acts as a form of surveillance against more perceived “radical” indigenous peoples.

Under a discourse that promotes the maintenance and expression of an ancestral, essentialist-like indigenous identity, the State and elite have adopted an integration and representation strategy for the public spheres in order to advance their backstage hegemonic practices against the Napo Kichwas in a way that fits the contemporary accepted ideologies of diversity. Indeed, if there is no imminent and clearly tangible threat of exclusion, the ability to dismantle or shape the indigenous culture or identity by nonindigenous peoples is greater. If President Correa’s ideology prevails even after he is

out of power, the articulation of a collective Amazonian Kichwa identity might depend on the state's multicultural and modernization agenda. If the agenda chooses to only publicly embrace the indigenous nationalities (again, within the system limits), the folklorization of cultures will increase and the cultural homogenization will paradoxically develop.

Using the Kichwa cosmovision presented in Chapter One as an analogy, the power structure embedded in the social fabric could be seen as the boa that, seducing Kichwas with her discursive charm and intrinsic connection to their symbolic capital, wants to keep them asleep, dormant, and after she has used and moved them like a puppet does in a performance, to *kill* them by becoming *one*: one homogeneous nation where difference is simply another character of the performance, subject to the boa's will. But as Sen (2006) suggested, "Important choices have to be made even when crucial discoveries occur. Life is not mere destiny." (2006: 39). Therefore, with humility and respect I conclude, Alto Napo Kichwas have a choice: to *wake up*.

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## Appendix: Geographical Context

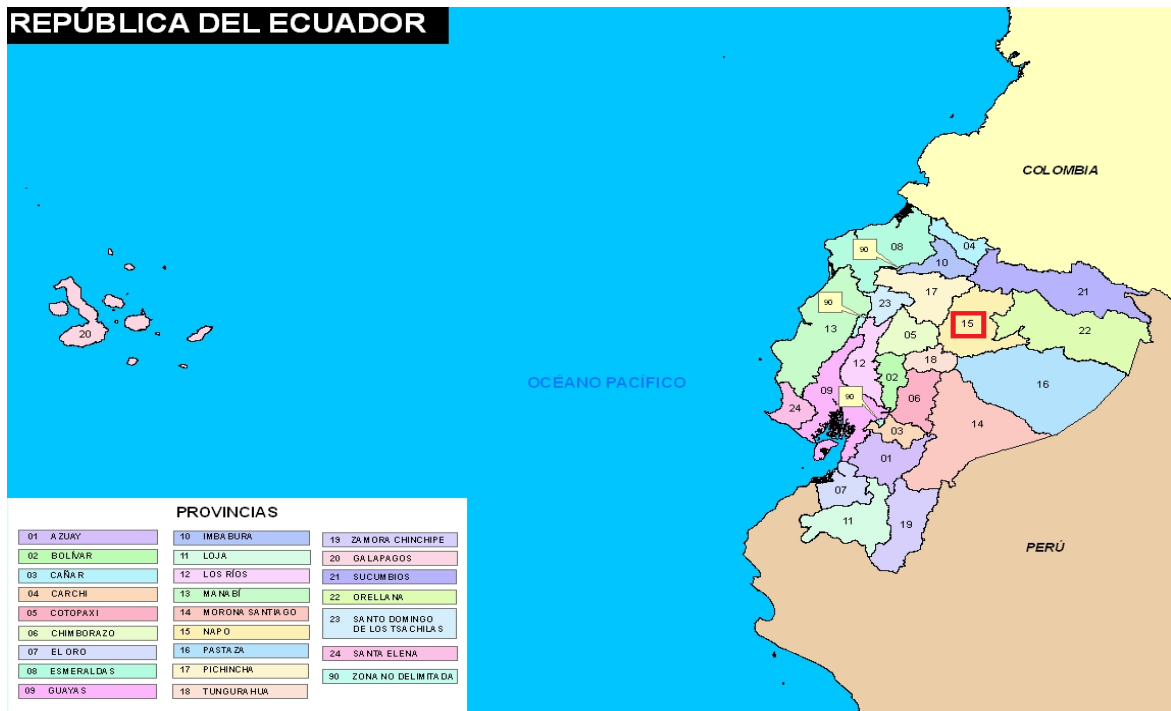


Figure 1: Political map of Ecuador with its 24 provinces. Number 15 corresponds to Napo province. (Source: Sistema Nacional de Información, [www.sni.gob.ec](http://www.sni.gob.ec))

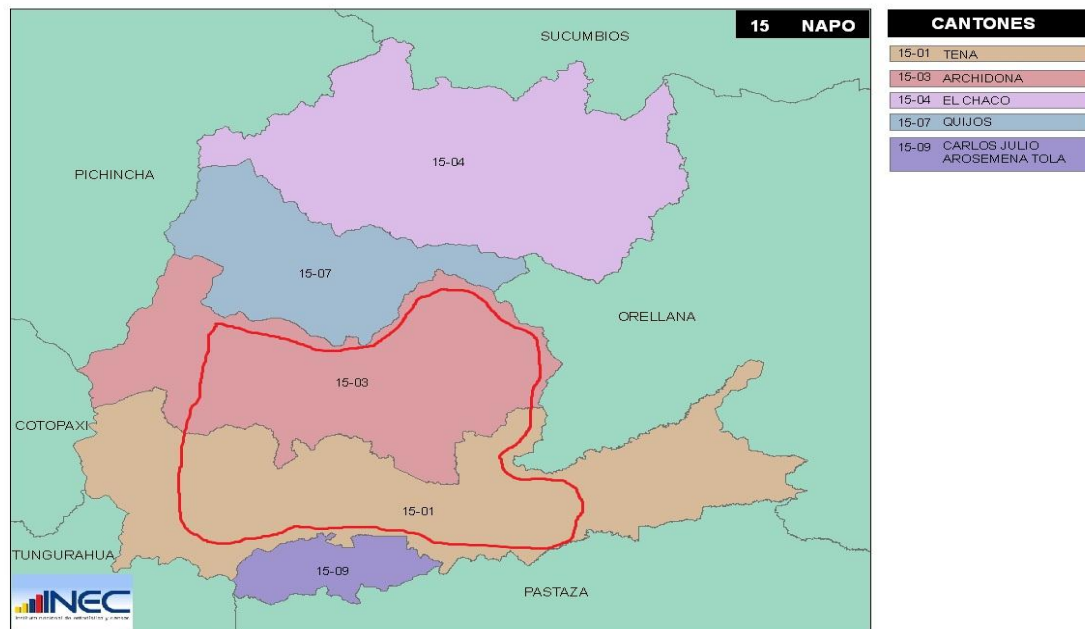


Figure 2: Counties of Napo province. Red highlight delineates approximately this research's field. (Source: Sistema Nacional de Información, [www.sni.gob.ec](http://www.sni.gob.ec))