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## “Our Land Is Not for Sale!” Contesting Oil and Translating Environmental Politics in Amazonian Ecuador

By

Casey High

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### RESUMEN

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En abril de 2019 el pueblo Waorani en la Amazonía ecuatoriana ganó una batalla legal contra planes de vender concesiones petroleras en su territorio indígena. En este artículo analizo sus relaciones con petróleo como parte de un emergente “middle ground” político que se caracteriza por hombres Waorani trabajando en las empresas petroleras y nuevas alianzas contra la extracción de petróleo. Muchos Waorani describen su tierra (wao öme) o territorio (ögípo) como un nexo de relaciones interdependientes entre seres humanos y no humanos amenazados por la presencia de petróleo. No lamentan la violación de una naturaleza pristina independiente de ellos mismos, sino las amenazas para las cualidades de wao öme que permitan que los humanos y otros seres “viven bien.” En el contexto de cambios generacionales y una agenda de desarrollo nacional que promueve “los derechos de la naturaleza,” activistas Waorani dependen de la habilidad de traducir wao öme como “naturaleza” y “cultura.” Aunque estas traducciones indican la fragilidad de las alianzas del “middle ground,” algunos adultos jóvenes Waorani hoy en día operan eficazmente a través de tal diferencias para desafiar el petróleo. Este middle ground en construcción demuestra que conceptos indígenas como wao öme no son fijos en oposición a’ “occidente,” sino son una parte importante de la participación reflexiva y estratégica en las políticas ambientales. [Amazonía, “middle ground,” economías extractivas, petróleo, traducción, Waorani/Huaorani, Ecuador]

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## A B S T R A C T

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In April 2019, Waorani people in Amazonian Ecuador won a key legal battle against plans to sell oil concessions on their indigenous territory. I analyze their engagements with oil as part of an emerging eco-political “middle ground” characterized by Waorani men working for oil companies and new alliances against oil extraction. Waorani activists lament not the violation of a pristine natural environment separate from themselves and in need of conservation, but instead threats to the qualities of Waorani land (*wao öme*) that allow people and other beings to “live well.” In the context of generational changes, their engagement in environmental politics involves translating and moving between different conceptions of indigenous land. While becoming environmental citizens evokes discourses of nature, culture, and stereotypes of Amazonian people as natural conservationists, current eco-political alliances are based as much on close working relationships with outsiders as symbolic politics. In this context, some Waorani engage productively across different understandings of their territory and its conservation to challenge oil. This middle ground under construction shows that indigenous concepts like *wao öme* (Waorani land) are not fixed in opposition to “the West” but are integral to thoughtful and strategic engagement in contemporary environmental politics. [Amazonia, middle ground, extractive economies, oil, translation, Waorani, Ecuador]

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### Introduction

On February 27, 2019, I traveled to the city of Puyo to join indigenous Waorani people in protest of the government’s decision to sell oil concessions on their lands in Amazonian Ecuador. Upon arriving I was surrounded by acquaintances from distant villages where I have conducted ethnographic research since the late 1990s, many wearing colorful feathered crowns and palm fiber strings tied around their chests. Some women had painted around their eyes with red dye and wore stretched tree bark skirts, while several men carried long spears over their shoulders. The protest concerned Block 22, one of several areas designated for oil extraction on Waorani lands in recent decades, including the communities in Pastaza province where I lived during my longest period of fieldwork from 2002 to 2004.

The protest focused on delivering a lawsuit brought by the Coordinating Council of the Waorani Nationality of Ecuador-Pastaza (CONCONAWEP) against the Ecuadorian government. The case, which circulated on social media under the banner of “Waorani Resistance Pastaza,” highlighted the lack of community consultation required by Ecuadorian law prior to selling oil concessions. Arriving from distant villages, protestors blocked traffic in the busy city center, carrying giant



Figure 1 “Our land is not for sale!” On February 27, 2019, Waorani and other indigenous people marched in the city of Puyo, in Amazonian Ecuador, protesting the government’s decision to sell concessions for oil extraction on Waorani lands in the province of Pastaza without free, prior, and informed consent. Photo by Casey High. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

signs denouncing oil and insisting on their right to decide the fate of their lands. One in Spanish read “*la selva es nuestra vida, no mas petroleo*” (“The jungle is our life, no more oil”). Another, written in the Waorani language, read “*monito ome goronte enamai,*” with a Spanish translation: “*nuestra selva no se vende*” (“Our jungle is not for sale”). Adding to the spectacle were at least a dozen international activists who darted skillfully between lines of Waorani protestors, photographing beautifully adorned elders and recording antioil slogans (Fig. 1).

Block 22 is part of the government’s Ronda Suroriental auction of new oil concessions that has met considerable resistance in Amazonian Ecuador. Protestors from several other indigenous Amazonian nationalities whose lands are located within these areas marched alongside Waorani people in Puyo. Some mestizo Ecuadorians also joined, including an elderly woman who drew attention with her loud screams of “*Carajo! Petroleo afuera!*” (“Damn it! Out with oil!”). Only a few meters away were Waorani elders, who brought a calm demeanor to the demonstration as they walked barefoot down the streets. Their presence as *pikenani* (elders), especially their body adornments and collective singing, drew attention from photographers and onlookers. As the march progressed, Waorani acquaintances from my previous fieldwork seemed to join the protest out of nowhere, many in

ordinary street clothes. I also met several activists from the United States involved with international NGOs spearheading the Waorani Resistance campaign, such as Amazon Frontlines and Digital Democracy.

Finally, at the gate of the judiciary office, the *demanda*—the lawsuit against the government—was delivered in a wheelbarrow of folders. Filed against the Ministry of Energy and Non-Renewable Natural Resources, the Ministry of Environment, and the Secretary of Hydrocarbons, it sued the government for selling oil concessions without the free, prior, and informed consent of Waorani communities. It claimed that the block 22 concession was illegal because consultations carried out in 2012 failed to comply with requirements protected in the Ecuadorian constitution and international law. Two leading Waorani activists gave interviews to reporters as a helicopter hovered in the sky overhead. One of them, Nemonte Nenquimo, a woman in her mid-thirties and president of CONCONAWEP, stated: “Our land is full of life. Inside the jungle there are sacred animals, our rivers, our community, and that is what we want to protect. Our land is our life, without our land we cannot live. We are here, all of us community members together, to speak, many other communities came to support us. They are going to demand our rights, and we hope they [the government] will listen to us and respect us, respect our lives. Our land is not for sale” (Fig. 2).

After weeks of uncertainty about the lawsuit, on April 26, 2019, the provincial court decided in favor of the Waorani, ruling the 2012 consultation invalid and suspending indefinitely the selling of oil concessions on their lands in Pastaza. Nenquimo was quoted in an article in the *New Yorker*:

Our territory is our decision, and now, since we are owners, we are not going to let oil enter and destroy our natural surroundings and kill our culture. . . .

We have shown the government to respect us, and other indigenous people of the world, that we are guardians of the jungle, and we’re never going to sell our territory.  
(Riederer 2019)

This event marks a major achievement for Amazonian peoples—especially given the current scale of deforestation and threats to indigenous rights in Brazil. It also points to eco-political alliances that highlight divergent understandings of what Waorani people call *wao öme* (Waorani land) as “nature” or “environment” and their role in its conservation. My informants often describe *wao öme* or *monito öme* (our land) as a place of abundance (Lu 2001; Rival 2000), where the productive interdependence of Waorani people and nonhuman features of the land is integrally linked to the notion of *waponi kiwimoni* (living well). After decades of oil drilling on their lands and many Waorani men working for oil companies, some Waorani today understand oil as a threat to *wao öme* and their ability to “live well.” These concerns have led to alliances with international



Figure 2 Waorani environmental leader and president of the Coordinating Council of the Waorani Nationality of Ecuador-Pastaza (CONCONAWEP), Nemonte Nenquimo, speaks to reporters in front of the judiciary office after delivering a lawsuit against the Ecuadorian government. Photo by Casey High. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

environmentalists that contributed to the 2019 legal victory, which involves young adult Waorani leaders translating and working across differences between *wao öme* and key aspects of conservation.

While these encounters evoke differences between *wao öme* and ideas of nature, culture, and conservation that often inform debates about oil extraction, some young Waorani adults are engaging productively with the “rights of nature” promoted in national politics as part a broader regime of environmentality in Amazonian Ecuador (Erazo 2013). While differences between *wao öme* and shifting concepts of conservation indicate the fragility of an emerging “middle ground” between Amazonian people and environmentalists (Conklin and Graham 1995), Waorani activists are navigating across such differences in new ways to defend their lands. For some, defending *wao öme* involves close working relationships

with an increasingly translocal network of environmental and indigenous rights organizations.

While becoming highly visible “environmental citizens” (Agrawal 2005), their defense of *wao öme* also undermines the premise of “nature” as an abstract domain independent from human action or “natural resources” to be extracted, managed, or conserved. Even as conservation can render indigenous people less visible as active agents in socioecological relations—or exclude them from lands—some conservation projects envision Amazonian people in harmonious relationships with their environments (Erazo 2016, 9). While adopting discourses of “nature” and “culture” in environmental politics, many young Waorani adults conceive of conservation in terms of the rights and needs of specific nonhuman beings and their relationships to Waorani people that constitute *wao öme*. Rather than suggesting peaceful, harmonious relationships in *wao öme*, they also highlight dangerous and antagonistic relationships between Waorani people and certain animals. In this context, “living well” increasingly depends on an ability to translate and move between different conceptions of indigenous lands.

Their recent success in defending *wao öme* against oil is in part the result of decades of dealing with oil companies, missionaries, state institutions, and international environmentalists. While environmentalists often present Amazonian people as natural conservationists (Conklin and Graham 1995), eco-political alliances are increasingly about more than the symbolic politics that characterized late twentieth-century Amazonia. The Waorani Resistance Pastaza movement indicates greater Waorani familiarity and close working relationships with international allies and other indigenous groups struggling against oil. Alongside growing concerns about scarcity, pollution, and territorial boundaries (Lu and Wirth 2013), face-to-face relationships with environmentalists, whether involving technical training, paid work in environmental mapping, long-term friendships, or shared family life, have allowed some Waorani to engage productively across different understandings of their territory and its conservation. In this context, they are challenging oil through development agendas that claim post-neoliberal models of well-being and conservation.

My analysis is based on ethnographic research since the late 1990s, including two years of fieldwork from 2002 to 2004 and shorter trips of one to two months approximately every other year since, most recently in February and March of 2019. Much of my fieldwork has been in Toñampari and other villages along the Curaray River in the western part of their territory, within the initial Waorani “Protectorate” established in the 1960s following contact with Evangelical missionaries. I have also visited approximately half of around forty Waorani villages, some in the northern and eastern areas of the current Waorani reserve where oil drilling is most intensive. Until recently, few of my interlocutors discussed “environment” or “conservation”—even when I asked them directly about the impacts of oil. In this



article I draw particularly on discussions in the early 2000s with men living in the former Protectorate who recalled their experiences of oil work, ongoing research on social transformation across Waorani generations, and more recent fieldwork specifically with young men and women from across their territory involved in antioil activism.

### **A Middle Ground in the Making**

Emphasizing how, as hunter-gatherers, Waorani see the forest as an abundant “giving environment” resulting in part from past human activity, Rival describes how their understandings of social relationships correspond with perceptions of growth and maturation in plants (1993, 636; 2016). Whereas Rival observed the absence of concepts of individual or collective ownership—or of land as property—Flora Lu (2001) describes a Waorani “common property regime” where specific groups of resource users recognize spatial boundaries and private property. She contrasts this to open access regimes where, as a result of the breakdown of authority, property rights are absent (428). Lu argues that although their “resource management system” focused on maintaining harmonious relationships rather than resource conservation (2001, 426), oil, population growth, and external markets have placed this “system of resource governance” under pressure (Lu and Wirth 2013, 236). Lu and Wirth present updated survey data indicating that some Waorani are concerned with resource scarcity, biodiversity conservation, and territorial boundaries, analyzing how these processes have led to internal conflicts.

While Lu and Wirth highlight key changes in resource management, Waorani understandings of *öme* also undermine ideas of land as nature or as resources to be extracted or transacted as property. Rival (who translates *öme* as “land,” “territory,” or “forest”) describes how they attribute forest cultigens to both human and animal activities, and how food collecting across vast territories makes distinguishing between “extraction” and “management” all but impossible (2002, 81). In observing the growth of international conservation agendas in Amazonian Ecuador, Erazo notes that even the term *resources* itself “indicates a Western-inflected approach to nonhuman living things” (2013, 144). Building on this previous work, I focus not on resource use but on how Waorani concepts of *wao öme* figure in the changing context of oil and environmental politics.

Concepts like *wao öme* are often the basis of arguments for indigenous philosophies that subvert Western categories of thought. The idea of “nature” as a domain distinct from humanity is at odds with many Amazonian contexts where distinctions between humans and animal and plant species are less clearly drawn (De-scola 2013, 8–9) and all beings are understood to share a similar set of concepts (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Many scholars criticize these approaches, whether for



projecting an inverted nature/culture dichotomy onto Amazonian peoples (Turner 2009), presenting an exotic image of them in contrast to modernity (Bessire and Bond 2014; Ramos 2012), or ignoring informants' shifting understandings and uncertainties in everyday life (Cepek 2016). In Waorani contexts, they fail to recognize contrasting "gendered models of nature" (Rival 2007, 519) and the distinct moral connotations of human and animal perspectives (High 2012).

Even if *wao öme* is distinct from "nature," Amazonian livelihoods are increasingly embedded in national, intercultural, and global processes in which people have little choice but to think, translate, and act across differences. Both in conflicts and alliances, this involves acts of accommodation, exchange, and contestation where differences—whether construed as ontological or cultural—are subject to transformation, even as they become expressions of indigenous autonomy.

International environmentalism is part of this process, especially for the small but growing number of young Waorani adults involved in antioil activism and conservation projects. In Amazonian Ecuador, a shift toward Western discourses of "environment," "nature," and "conservation" has contributed to and rewarded indigenous people becoming "environmental citizens" whose sovereignty is closely connected to the conservation and the governance of indigenous territory (Erazo 2013). And yet, such regulatory regimes of environmentality do not simply remake the identities, values, and beliefs of Amazonian people who work across different understandings in conservation partnerships (Cepek 2011, 502; West 2006; Zanotti 2016). Furthermore, not all Waorani young adults or elders, including those closely involved with outsiders, are opposed to oil extraction in absolute terms.

However, in recent years a growing number of young Waorani adults have joined state-sponsored and international conservations projects. These include, for example, technical training and employment with NGOs in environmental mapping and monitoring, international support for the demarcation of territorial boundaries (Lu and Wirth 2013), participation in a government-sponsored Socio Bosque project promising cash payment to communities for conserving their lands (Erazo 2016, 9), and alliances like the Waorani Resistance Pastaza campaign. In at least two villages along the Curaray River, Waorani interlocutors have explained to me their efforts to attract tourists by not hunting monkeys and other animals nearby—the kind of suggestion I did not observe during fieldwork in the late 1990s.

If these examples evidence a degree of environmental citizenship, it is less entrenched than among groups more closely aligned with Ecuador's national indigenous movement and environmentalist agendas since the 1980s (Erazo 2013, 142). And yet, a transition from living in mobile longhouse groups to permanent villages since missionization, interethnic relations, and the establishment of a Waorani political organization have contributed to new understandings of

indigenous territory. While ideas of nature, environment, and conservation now resonate among Waorani environmental leaders, everyday discussions tend to exceed these discourses, emphasizing distinctions between life “inside” and “outside” of *wao öme*, interdependent and antagonistic socio-natural relations within it, and external threats to Waorani people “living well.” Furthermore, their primary organization, the Waorani Nationality of Amazonian Ecuador (NAWE), has been entangled with oil interests since its formation in the 1990s and is yet to achieve the cooperative obligations that characterize territorial governance elsewhere in Amazonian Ecuador.

And yet, some young Waorani adults, like those who led the 2019 protest in Puyo, are engaging in an eco-political scene that draws on both *wao öme* and environmentalist discourse. In describing alliances between Amazonian peoples and Western environmentalists in the 1980s, Conklin and Graham (1995) drew on White’s (1991, ix) concept of the middle ground as “the construction of a mutually comprehensible world characterized by new systems of meaning and exchange.” In contrast to the shared geography or face-to-face interactions envisaged by White, they described this eco-Indian middle ground as “a political space, an arena of intercultural communication, exchange, and joint political action” (Conklin and Graham 1995, 696). Since the power indigenous people gain in these contexts often depends on their ability to conform to Western stereotypes, this middle ground is often built precariously from misunderstandings and conflicting expectations.

Numerous scholars engage the middle-ground concept to address how relationships between indigenous people and outsiders are inflected by misleading images of authenticity. Whether in the context of conservation (Cepek 2008; Li 2016), tourism projects (Hutchins 2007) or experiences with other agents of development (Ball 2012), they demonstrate how indigenous practices challenge external readings of novelty, change, and divergent views as evidence of cultural loss (High 2015). While stereotypes remain part of Amazonian “middle grounds,” I want to highlight how these interfaces are increasingly characterized by indigenous people engaging in working relationships, new knowledge, long-standing friendships, and shared lives with nonindigenous people. Whether in seeking income to support families or forging political alliances to protect lands, their livelihoods and desires are often embedded in increasingly familiar translocal relationships (High and Oakley, this issue). This suggests that emerging middle grounds are as much about Amazonian people working and translating across differences as they are about symbolic politics.

The Waorani Resistance Pastaza campaign is not the first or only example of Waorani engagement in such relationships. Some elders who converted to Christianity in the 1960s and lived for decades on a mission settlement have maintained close relationships with North American Evangelical missionaries (High 2016). Waorani employment in oil work since the 1980s and state schooling also

constitute middle-ground interfaces. In the early 1990s, Moi Enomenga, one of the first Waorani political leaders, was propelled into the global spotlight when journalist Joe Kane's book (1995) and a documentary film (Walker 1996) highlighted Enomenga's struggle against oil. What is new about current Waorani engagement with environmental politics is not the experience of dealing with outsiders, but how these interfaces reflect enduring working relationships, professional positions in environmental organizations, and a deeper understanding of global environmental politics.

After decades of oil, some Waorani are now communicating effectively across key differences—even when it requires more work than it does for outsiders. Young adult activists in particular engage in face-to-face relationships with foreign environmentalists, their discourses, and more nuanced understandings of how *wao öme* often contradicts external interests in their land. Antioil politics, in positioning Waorani as environmental subjects, involves strategic translations that are part of a middle ground under construction. In this context, the young adults I describe are subject to and engage productively with seemingly contradictory ideas about oil, *wao öme*, and its conservation. I highlight how these differences are part of an eco-political scene where Waorani land and culture are central to conservation efforts.

### **Living with Oil and *Wao Öme***

Waorani conflicts with oil precede their first peaceful encounters with missionaries in the late 1950s, when many Waorani were relocated from areas earmarked for oil extraction to what became a "Protectorate" led by missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Kimerling 1993). While most Waorani relocated to the Protectorate in subsequent years, some—including those who refused contact with outsiders—remained to the east, an area targeted by extensive oil drilling. Despite granting a larger Waorani Ethnic Reserve in 1992 covering around a third of their ancestral territory (Finer et al. 2009, 8), the state's selling of oil concessions on indigenous lands is indicative of a country that has embraced oil exports as a path to development since the 1970s. Despite increasing GDP, becoming a "petro-state" (Karl 1997) has brought increases in national debt, ecological damage resulting in a multi-billion-dollar lawsuit against Texaco/Chevron, and Amazonian communities affected by oil pollution receiving few benefits (Cepek 2018; Gerlach 2003; Lu, Valdivia, and Silva 2017; Sawyer 2004). Extractive economies have also contributed to violent conflicts between Waorani, outsiders, and the Taromenani—a group living in voluntary isolation within their territory (Gilbert 2016; High 2015) (Fig. 3).

In recent decades Ecuador's national indigenous movement has made indigenous self-determination and territorial sovereignty central to establishing a



Figure 3 Near a Waorani village in a remote area of wao öme in Pastaza province where hunting and fishing are relatively plentiful (garden in the foreground). Photo by Casey High. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

plurinational state (Whitten and Whitten 2011). The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and its regional body, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Amazonian Ecuador (CONFENAIE), have become increasingly aligned with international environmental concerns (Erazo 2013, 142; Hutchins and Wilson 2010). Environmental NGOs and indigenous territorial governments have replaced the state in providing public services in some areas, leading to a form of environmental citizenship shaped by Western understandings of conservation (Erazo 2013, 5). Although the Waorani organization (NAWE) has been relatively marginal in national indigenous politics (High 2007), collaborations with environmentalists have a growing presence for a new generation of Waorani leaders, some of whom work independently from NAWE.

As part of a broader shift in Latin American politics, the election of President Rafael Correa in 2007 promised Ecuadorians a radical alternative to the social, economic, and environmental crises of a neoliberal petro-state. Correa promoted his *revolución ciudadana* (citizen's revolution) as a post-neoliberal vision of state sovereignty and development premised on "well-being" (*bienestar*) and "living well" (*buen vivir*). In addition to investing in public services and benefits to address inequalities, Correa explicitly linked this revolutionary rhetoric to indigenous

concepts. His government's 2008 constitution made Ecuador the first country to formally recognize the rights of nature, including *pachamama* and *sumak kawsay* (Kichwa words translated as "nature" and "living well").

As Lu, Valdivia, and Silva (2017) observe, despite the pretense of incorporating indigenous cosmovision into "what is essentially a development project of the liberal state, couched in progressive, 'twenty-first-century socialist' principles" (14), the citizen's revolution repackaged oil-based governance in ways that have exacerbated social and ecological conflicts (24). The Waorani Resistance Pastaza campaign should also be understood in the context of the 2017 election of President Lenin Moreno—Correa's former vice-president—which marked a return to a more explicitly neoliberal agenda resulting in widespread civil unrest in the country.

Like elsewhere in Amazonian Ecuador (Cepek 2018), the oil-based economy has become part of everyday life for many Waorani people. As oil production intensified on their lands from the late 1980s, some Waorani incorporated oil companies and their observable wealth into a strongly egalitarian economy. Around 90 percent of adult Waorani men worked for oil companies between 1985 and 1992, usually as unskilled laborers on short-term contracts (Rival 2000, 248). Rival describes how Waorani approached oil companies much as they did givers of feasts, as providers of "natural abundance" to be treated "as sources of endlessly renewable wealth" (257).

When I began fieldwork in the late 1990s, I asked men in Toñampari, including some from villages to the east, about their experiences working for oil companies. While some lamented noisy oil platforms, overflowing pools of chemical waste and leaky pipelines, few were wholly against the industry that appeared to be destroying their lands. In contrast to my concern that oil might be affecting their lives negatively, adult men and women often described how they hoped to benefit from *la compañía* (the company). Their main criticism was that oil companies failed to sufficiently share their immense stores of food and manufactured goods. Informants most often described oil in terms of relationships they hoped to benefit from materially, whether from using discarded items from abandoned oil camps, wage labor, or blocking roads to demand items. It appeared as if they were accepting low temporary wages, bags of rice, or the occasional off-board motor in compensation for the damage of an industry generating immense revenue from their lands.

During my subsequent fieldwork in the early 2000s, several older men living in the former Protectorate described to me their work for oil companies in previous decades, such as trips with seismic testing crews, with a sense of adventure. Their accounts emphasized how oil work allowed them to meet people from distant villages or visit parts of *wao òme* previously inhabited by their ancestors. In our discussions of *la compañía*, some of them, now elders (*pikenani*), reflected on long days spent toiling with friends or kin, the remarkable distances they walked,

features of the land they encountered, and the food they ate in camps after long periods of hunger. Alongside accounts of helicopters and large oil machinery they observed for the first time, several men described *kowori* (non-Waorani) people they met through oil work, whether neighboring Kichwas or company managers.

Waorani relationships with oil had changed considerably since my initial fieldwork. While older men described their previous work primarily clearing paths and oil roads, some younger men now had relatively professional positions as truck drivers or “community relations” personnel. As growing villages became dependent on cash for medicine, food, and school supplies, several parents described how money from oil work allowed them to buy items from urban areas. Though contracts were still temporary, some men earned wages exceeding a typical income in Ecuador. Oil work was also intertwined with the trend toward marriages with Kichwa people. In 2002, young men from eastern and western parts of the territory routinely explained to me their plans to marry a Kichwa woman by earning money to buy gifts for her family. In this way oil work became part of an emerging form of masculinity and interethnic relations (High 2010, 2015).

At that time there was little hope of a population of around twenty-five hundred Waorani halting a billion-dollar multinational oil industry. But even in the early 2000s, few of my informants appeared to understand the consequences of oil extraction to the extent some do today. Consistent with Rival’s (2000) and Lu’s (2001) observations, young people and elders alike proudly described *wao öme* as a vast and seemingly inexhaustible territory—perhaps not an unreasonable view for a small population living on a reserve of around seven thousand square kilometers (Finer et al. 2009, 8). Their discussions focused more on how to populate and defend *wao öme* against colonists than on how to conserve it for its own sake, emphasizing efforts to demarcate *ögïpo* (territory) as necessary to support a specifically Waorani quality of life.

More recently, these discussions have shifted among some young adults who now describe their territory as more limited and under threat from oil (Lu and Wirth 2013). The perceived need to defend *wao öme* comes in the context of dramatic changes across generations. While oil work and formal schooling have transformed Waorani social life since mission settlement (Rival 2002), many young adults today spend more time in urban areas, resulting in closer relationships with *kowori*, fluency in Spanish, and shifting gender relations (High 2010). Some are more directly involved with indigenous organizations and environmental NGOs—that is, while maintaining close ties to their home communities.

Despite these changes, young people and elders appear to share certain ideas about *wao öme* and their place in it. Throughout my fieldwork young people and elders alike described *waponi kiwimoni* (living well) in reference to the bounty they say forests, rivers, and human interactions ought to provide. As a place peopled by a range of social beings, my informants describe *wao öme* not as a domain separate

from themselves, or as a natural resource to be managed, but as interconnected relations between human and nonhuman beings. Rather than a conservationist logic, they describe human beings in dynamic and sometimes antagonistic relations with nonhumans, much as relations between Waorani can erupt into violent conflict. Jaguars and other predatory animals, for example, are part and parcel to assault sorcery (High 2012), and peccaries raid manioc gardens, much as human thieves do. Such conflicts and predatory relations, whether in hunting or intergroup violence, illustrate how life in *wao öme* contradicts certain conservationist images of indigenous people in peaceful and harmonious relations with their environments—and thus have little presence in eco-politics.

Even as these ideas resonate with descriptions of Amazonian socio-natural relations that contrast Western concepts, for some young Waorani adults *wao öme* is increasingly entangled with environmental politics, where diverse ideas of nature and conservation situate Amazonian people as environmental citizens in specific ways. In Amazonian Ecuador, international actors have at times romanticized the Amazon as a natural wilderness devoid of human presence and at others positioned indigenous people as integral to conservation (Erazo 2016). Despite ideas of nature becoming more central to indigenous identity, some indigenous leaders embrace discourses of conservation without entirely opposing extractive economies (2016, 7). In this context, even as *wao öme* and *waponi kiwimoni* are distinct from “nature,” “culture,” and “well-being,” Waorani engagements in antioil politics involve strategic translations, whether in the context of international solidarity or in reference to the “rights of nature” in Ecuador’s new constitution.

### **Yasuni Oil and Environmental Politics**

Ecuador’s 2008 constitution marked an important milestone for indigenous peoples and indicated a crisis in neoliberal regimes of development (Blaser 2013). Yet it remains to be seen how much indigenous people or *pachamama* stand to gain from their formal presence in state politics. Even as many indigenous Ecuadorians supported the government’s commitment to social and economic reform, their agendas were marginalized in the constituent assembly that drafted the constitution and National Development Plan (Becker 2011). If the inclusion of indigenous concepts in the constitution is, as Marisol de la Cadena suggests, an “insurgence of indigenous forces and practices” (2010, 336) into state institutions, it is also a translation that equates *pachamama* or *sumak kawsay* with nature and “alternative development.”

While the constitution embraces concepts from Kichwa, Ecuador’s primary indigenous language, Waorani people and lands also became an important reference point in this new politics of nature. The centerpiece of the government’s



development plan was the Yasuní National Park, which, combined with the Waorani Ethnic Reserve, comprises the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Finer et al. 2009). One of the world's richest areas of biodiversity, the park includes vast expanses of forest inhabited by Waorani and groups in voluntary isolation. It also contains Ecuador's largest oil reserves. In an initiative supported by The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the government proposed to protect the park from further oil drilling if compensated for half the estimated value of the oil (Yasuní ITT 2010). In proposing to invest the revenues in conservation, renewable energy, scientific research, and social development, the Yasuní Initiative called for "a new cooperative model between developed and developing countries" (2010, 3). Many envisioned it as a way to address climate change by preventing the emission of four hundred million metric tons of carbon dioxide that would result from the burning of fossil fuels.

As part of the "citizens' revolution," the Yasuní Initiative made Amazonia part of an eco-political agenda placing nature, indigenous people, and well-being at the center of national development. It had important implications for Waorani people who claim the Yasuní park as part of their ancestral lands. Framed as conserving nature and addressing historical inequalities, it presented indigenous rights as part of an alternative development. Promotional materials emphasizing "respect for the cultures" and "ancestral rights" in the park included photographs and videos of Waorani. In proposing to protect groups in voluntary isolation (Yasuní ITT 2010, 5), the rights of indigenous people, like the rights of nature, were presented as part of a sustainable future.

The government ultimately abandoned the Yasuní Initiative, citing the international community's failure to commit sufficient support. On August 15, 2013, I traveled with three Waorani friends to Quito, where we joined a predominantly mestizo crowd of protestors in front of the national palace to hear President Correa announce his decision. Despite previous campaigns warning of the Yasuní's fragility, Correa insisted that new oil drilling would affect less than one percent of the park and generate billions of dollars to develop the country. After decades of experience with oil, my Waorani companions were not convinced. One warned that new drilling would bring further destruction to *wao öme* and pressurize already strained relationships between Waorani and isolated groups. Having come to the protest wearing street clothes and feathered crowns, they appeared amused by the solidarity they had come to expect more from foreign nationals than from other Ecuadorians. They were soon busy explaining to news reporters their sadness and anger about the prospect of further drilling on their lands.

The failed Yasuní Initiative led to a wellspring of concern about conservation and cultural rights in Ecuador, including protests calling for a referendum on the Yasuní. Just as Waorani are often imagined in Ecuador as warriors and in the Yasuní campaign as being close to nature, their "uncontacted" neighbors—whom

Waorani refer to as Taramenani or Tagaeiri—became part of a broader narrative of conservation for their assumed natural state of isolation (High 2013). The long-standing association of Waorani people with violence in Ecuador shows that this symbolism is not strictly positive. After large-scale killings of Taramenani by Waorani men in 2003 and 2013, national media presented Waorani as murderous, stone-age savages—an image also evident in government responses to the violence as a purely “indigenous issue”—rather than a result of encroaching extractive economies (High 2015).

My companions at the 2013 protest—two of whom became leaders of the 2019 Waorani Resistance Pastaza campaign—are part of a Waorani generation gaining deeper understandings of oil, as well as ideas of indigeneity, conservation, and cultural rights that frame contemporary environmentalism. Some have close working relationships with international activists, including employment and technical training with NGOs and the coordination of a project to supply drinking water systems to Waorani villages affected by oil. The marriage of a leading Waorani environmental leader to the director of Amazon Frontlines—an international organization supporting indigenous struggles in Amazonia—is indicative of how these relationships are becoming more personal and enduring. In contrast to the oil-dependent, male-dominated Waorani political organization, Waorani environmental politics is characterized by international collaboration and women leaders, including growing international attention to Nemonte Nenquimo and the Association of Waorani Women of Amazonian Ecuador (AMWAE) in environmental activism.

As Nenquimo’s statement in the *New Yorker* about refusing to let oil “kill our culture” illustrates, these new leaders increasingly engage in environmental politics through discourses of *cultura* (culture) associated with being *durani bai* (like the ancestors), including specific body imagery recognized by outsiders. For wider publics, such language can evoke enduring colonial imagery of the “wild” Amazonian warrior (High 2009) or the “ecologically noble savage” (Redford 1990). In contrast to earlier conservation initiatives premised on nature as wilderness (Erazo 2016), international organizations working in Amazonian Ecuador evidence a shift toward recognizing Amazonian people as “stewards of the forest” (Amazon Watch n.d.) and supporting the revival of ancestral cultural practices in “indigenous-led conservation” (Amazon Frontlines n.d.).

While cultural rights and conservation are central to environmental citizenship, we should not assume that Waorani people and their allies are always talking about the same things. Whether promoting indigenous rights or conservation, framing differences in terms of Western concepts can delimit the space afforded to conflicts that have persisted for centuries in South America (De la Cadena 2010). In this context, the more Amazonian people become fluent in European languages, concepts, and ethnic politics, the more easily they translate differences

as equivalences. For years, Waorani youth have participated alongside other indigenous groups in urban festivals where animals and plants are presented as “nature,” and Waorani spears, food, and shamanism as “culture” (High 2009). Such translations are becoming an important part of Waorani social and political life—even when unnoticed by *kowori* allies. They are part of an emerging environmental subjectivity that provides a path toward challenging oil and in an ever-changing middle ground.

### “Living Well” and Defending *Wao Öme*

Despite closer Waorani involvement in environmental politics, *wao öme* remains distinct from the categories through which many Waorani and outsiders talk to and about each other. While my informants often distinguish between different spaces within *wao öme*, such as the forest (*omaäre*), manioc gardens (*kenëkori*), and being in a house (*ökone*), their descriptions do not position Waorani people as separate or alienable from the “land” or “territory” (*öme/ögipo*) of which all of these domains are part. Nor, as their accounts of peccaries, jaguars, and other animals suggest, is having gardens or houses exclusive to human beings. *Wao öme*, rather than simply inverting Western categories, evokes something distinct from environmentalist concepts of “conservation” and “culture.”

Informants from several villages have expressed to me their concerns about oil from the point of view of animals that flee noisy oil installations, are poisoned from pollution, or are targeted by poachers along oil roads. On countless occasions during fieldwork, Amowa (my host father) returned home with game and fish from areas affected by logging, mining, and colonization. During my most recent visit, Amowa, his wife, and adult children shared their concerns about oil drilling threatening the forests and rivers on which their livelihoods depend. Amowa reflected on the prospect of oil roads extending into his hunting grounds, saying that “oil kills the animals, and [when] the road comes, they leave.”

One man in Toñampari described how, while hunting, he discovered dead animals and birds stuck in a thick sludge overflowing from a former oil-drilling site. He explained how each species came there seeking different forest fruits, and how, after heavy rain, the sludge seeps into a river known for its plentiful fish. He and his family lamented this not for the violation of a pristine environment in need of conservation but as something that threatens their own livelihood. While idealizing *wao öme* as a place of abundance, my informants also emphasize how different plants and animals interact and depend on each other within it. Just as the ideal of plentiful animals and forest fruits is mirrored by an emphasis on the growth of their human communities (Rival 1993), the depletion of human populations and

animal populations are closely interconnected in discussions of how oil and *kowori* people threaten abundance.

A young woman from the east told me a story that made clear how some Waorani experience oil as a threat both to themselves and to specific animals. She described her kinsmen encountering a strange scene of animals slaughtered near a river in oil block 16 in the Yasuni Park. What surprised them, she said, was not so much that poachers had killed so many monkeys, birds, and other animals with rifles but that they were left to rot around abandoned camps. They were horrified that these animals, which Waorani see as making “living well” in *wao öme* possible, were needlessly killed. This concern mirrors elders’ accounts of past spear-killings I have recorded, which emphasize close kin suffering as a result of excessive and needless killing (High 2015). The fate of the animals in the woman’s account evokes a broader social identity as victims often expressed in Waorani accounts of *kowori* outsiders (High 2009, 2015; Rival 2002).

These stories convey a key shift in understanding: oil and *kowori* people are not just about enabling relations between Waorani or acquiring goods; they also potentially undermine relations within *wao öme*. While some Waorani welcome oil drilling, others have become concerned about social and economic changes leading to a scarcity of animals (Lu and Wirth 2013). Oil work and the growing size of villages has made some Waorani—as hunters, gardeners, and forest trekkers—ever more aware of themselves as part of the socio-natural dynamics of *wao öme*. Alongside concerns about animals, gardens, and rivers affected by oil, adult men have also explained to me how they adjust their hunting practices according to the depletion of monkeys, deer, and other animals near overpopulated villages. These practices do not imply the conservation of animals for their own sake, nor do I suggest they are entirely new. Hunters describe how, even in areas with plentiful game, they decide when and where to hunt in part based on their knowledge of fluctuating animal populations.

Just as my informants do not describe *wao öme* as independent from human engagement, my initial interest in how oil was affecting Waorani “culture” was at odds with what many of them say is at stake with oil. Rather than worrying about losing their “culture”—as a distinct way of life to be distinguished from others against a backdrop of “nature” or “environment”—they described threats to the qualities of “living well” that are inseparable from *wao öme*. This is equally apparent in Nenquimo’s assertion at the 2019 protest that “our land is our life” as well as in her subsequent use of “nature” and “culture” in describing Waorani people as “guardians of the jungle.”

Even as Waorani activists sometimes highlight their struggles against oil through the language of nature, culture, and conservation, I rarely hear informants adopt discourses of *naturaleza* (nature) or *medio ambiente* (environment) in everyday life. However, an increasing emphasis on demarcating *wao öme*, defending

animals that suffer from the encroachment of oil companies, and disputes about oil suggest an understanding of their territory as scarce and bounded (Lu and Wirth 2013). What is new is not the recognition of interdependent socio-natural relations; it is how *wao öme*—and the quality of “living well” it enables—is becoming something that needs defending.

Defending *wao öme* increasingly involves Waorani adopting discourses of culture and conservation that confirm their environmental citizenship in protecting the rainforest. Their livelihoods may depend in part on young leaders successfully navigating between home communities and working relationships with outsiders with diverse understandings of nature, culture, indigenous people, and conservation. Even as they become adept at working with and translating differences, young adults in particular appear keenly aware that such a world exists outside of *wao öme*. The distinction my informants routinely draw in Spanish between life *adentro* (inside) and *afuera* (outside) of their territory is now as important as that between Waorani and *kowori* people. This distinction, rather than implying that life on the “outside” is inherently alien or unimportant to them, points to what is at stake in translating *wao öme* as “nature” or “environment.”

This became particularly clear when I interviewed two leaders of the Waorani Resistance Pastaza campaign after the block 22 protest in Puyo. I asked one of them, a man in his early thirties from a village along the Curaray River, about his work with an NGO making digital maps of Waorani territory. He first described (in Spanish) the benefits of working with international activists and other indigenous nationalities to defend Waorani lands against oil. He then reflected on how, for him, learning digital mapping—which involved locating different flora, fauna, and key sites in the land, was very different to how Waorani people know *wao öme*. Switching between Spanish and Wao-terero, he called mapping a “*kowori* technology” that outsiders could understand, but that Waorani people, in contrast, know *wao öme* through experiences not conveyed in maps. Although he struggled to communicate the precise distinction, it was clear that his reference to mapping as a “*kowori* technology” was not a critique but a recognition that Waorani and *kowori* people know *wao öme* in distinct ways, both of which he values.

Despite generational changes, Waorani and *kowori* people may still not be talking about the same things, even when speaking the same language and working toward shared political goals. While the stakes may appear small in these translations, settler colonial history in the Americas reminds us that formal treaties based on assumed equivalences have often ignored or manipulated fundamental differences in understanding. Whether thinking about *pachamama* as “nature” or an indigenous person who signs agreements with oil companies as having the authority of a “chief,” these equivocations can have major consequences. And yet, the Waorani Resistance Pastaza movement demonstrates that translating *wao öme* as

nature and culture can effectively challenge oil interests. Some Waorani are achieving a degree of success in an emerging middle ground that, though sometimes still steeped in essentialisms, is also constituted by enduring collaborations with outsiders.

## Conclusion

Whether adopting discourses of “culture” in urban festivals or defending *wao öme* through the language of environmentalism, Amazonian people today communicate beyond their communities in diverse ways. Through close working relationships and personal ties with outsiders, some Waorani engage successfully from within a *kowori* world they describe as radically “other.” Their actions, as Nemonte Nenquimo’s comments illustrate, are not simply based on automatic or innocent translations but on thoughtful reflections on how to survive, speak, and live well as environmental citizens with both *wao öme* and a dynamic middle ground constituted by diverse interests in indigenous people and territory.

Strategic translations occur on all sides of this middle ground, whether in the Ecuadorian government’s promotion of indigenous concepts and the “rights of nature” as tools for national development (Lu, Valdivia, and Silva 2017), international promotion of Amazonian people as environmental citizens (Erazo 2013), or Waorani leaders adopting environmentalist discourses in defense of *wao öme*. Waorani people are not just becoming more adept at translating different concepts; their lives increasingly involve working across such differences, whether in school, NGO offices, or the streets of frontier towns. Young adults often proudly explain that, “like the ancestors,” they learned to hunt, garden, and walk in *wao öme*, a place they have never known without the presence of oil companies. Some of them also engage with *kowori* in part by talking about nature, culture, and conservation.

What my informants describe as “living well” increasingly depends on working across distinct understandings of their territory. The Waorani Resistance Pastaza movement holds hope for new Amazonian middle grounds based not just on symbolic politics but also on working relationships with outsiders that present unexpected articulations of conceptual differences. This now includes collaborative projects, long-term personal commitments, and shared concerns with not only indigenous-led conservation but also indigenous livelihoods. In this context, some Waorani people move within and speak from the “outside” in new ways to challenge oil and defend their lands. Concepts like *wao öme*, beyond simply contrasting Western categories, can be integral to their engagement with this middle-ground-in-the-making, even when rooted in age-old stereotypes and convenient translations. After decades of accommodating and protesting oil, some

Waorani are finding significant potential for collaboration and solidarity across such differences.

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