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ROADS: ACCESS TO CIVILIZATION AND CONTACT IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

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Abstract: This article analyzes the impact of road construction in the Ecuadorian Amazon as axes of social, cultural, and environmental transformation. Through a historical-ethnographic approach, it examines how the development of the so-called Auca and Maxus roads, built by oil companies, affected spatial appropriation and facilitated colonization, natural resource exploitation, and subsequent urbanization, while generating territorial and cultural conflicts with indigenous communities. Testimonies from local actors are integrated to illustrate the dynamics of change and resistance in the region. The study concludes that roads are not merely infrastructure for development but also symbols of a civilizing project that redefines the relationship between the forest, the state, and local communities.
Keywords: Ecuadorian Amazon, roads, colonization, indigenous peoples, territorial conflict, historical ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

The Ecuadorian Amazon has historically been a contested space between national development projects and the ways of life of indigenous communities. The construction of roads, promoted by the state and oil companies, has been central to this process (Cabodevilla, 1996, 2013). This article explores how access routes, such as the Auca and Maxus roads, have transformed the region, facilitating colonization, resource exploitation, and urbanization, while generating territorial and cultural conflicts with indigenous peoples. Through a historical-ethnographic approach, the dynamics of change and resistance are analyzed, integrating testimonies from local actors to enrich the understanding of these processes.

The opening of roads facilitated the transportation of timber, especially along routes leading to oil camps and wells. This pressure on the forest has led to violent encounters, including spearings of settlers by isolated indigenous groups, who are increasingly pressured by the aggressive expansion of the agricultural frontier and large-scale exploitation of natural resources (oil and minerals). These activities were the state's primary strategy for integrating the region into national society (Trujillo and Narváez, 2021).

The first settlements of colonist farmers were built around oil camps and infrastructure, such as Taracoa, Dayuma, Cononaco, and Tiwino. Legal norms related to land access and use include the Law of Unoccupied Lands and Colonization (published in Official Registry No. 342 of October 28, 1964), the Regulations for the Adjudication of Unoccupied Lands (published in Official Registry No. 253 of June 25, 1971), the Law of Colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazon Region (published in Official Registry No. 504 of January 12, 1978), and the Forestry and Conservation of Natural Areas and Wildlife Law. The institutions responsible for enforcing these norms are the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, the Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization, the National Institute of Colonization of the Amazon Region, and finally the National Institute of Agrarian Development (INDA).

The application of these laws and the rapid colonization process led to the deforestation of large areas of primary forest within a few years. This way of constructing the Amazon and its inhabitants legitimized, from the state's perspective, intervention practices that outlined new definitions of planning, space, and the aesthetics of the population. Christian missions (Catholic and Evangelical) and oil companies became the axes of spatial and social integration of populations into "mainstream society," promoting a vision of development based on forms of natural resource management and territorial occupation with a Western civilizational perspective (Trujillo, 2011).

The colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazon was largely a spontaneous process driven by peasants seeking land. These settlers formed pre-cooperatives and later legalized their holdings, leading to conflicts with reserve areas and indigenous territories. Although attempts were made to organize this process through directed colonization programs—such as the Shushufindi (1972), Payamino (1976), and San Miguel (1977) projects—they failed to sustain themselves due to a lack of resources and the complexity of local dynamics (Trujillo, 2001).

During the military dictatorship (1972-1979), the state promoted the exploitation of natural resources as a central axis of its nationalist project. The Amazon was imagined as an inexhaustible source of wealth, justifying the opening of roads and the expansion of the agricultural frontier. However, this process came at a high cost: pressure on forests and indigenous communities led to violent encounters, especially with isolated groups resisting the invasion of their territories.

THE AUCA ROAD: A SYMBOL OF COLONIZATION AND CONFLICT

The population around the Auca Road consists of two culturally and ethnically distinct groups:

1. Colonists—peasants, mostly from the provinces of Loja, Bolívar, El Oro, and Manabí (in order of magnitude). They arrived in the area approximately 40 years ago, simultaneously with the road's construction. Their agricultural production focuses on three basic lines: a) cash crops, primarily coffee and to a lesser extent cocoa, which represent the main source of income from agricultural production on their farms; b) cattle ranching; and c) subsistence crops (plantains, cassava, rice, fruit trees, among others) and poultry, which complement the settlers' diet.
2. Kinship groups (extended families) of the Waorani cultural group: Niwairis (Davo, Pego), Bahuairis (Cawuya), Babeiris, or the Babe group, located within the Huaorani Ethnic Reserve. Settled south of the Tiguino River, they maintain itinerant horticultural practices, as well as hunting, fishing, and gathering.

The Waorani were characterized by their transhumance or nomadism; however, they are currently undergoing a process of sedentarization and urbanization.

These two populations are directly and indirectly linked to the oil industry, depending on settlement models, types of social and political organization, economic forms of social reproduction, and ethnic self-identification.

The Auca Road, built by the oil company Texaco between 1970 and 1980, is an emblematic example of how roads transformed the northern Ecuadorian Amazon. Stretching over 120 kilometers, this road connected the city of Coca with colonist settlements and Waorani families located between the Shiripuno, Tiwino, and Bataboro rivers.

The city of Coca grew as an oil development hub, from which a road extends southeast, known as the Auca Road. This long road, over 120 kilometers, cuts through Waorani territory (Cabodevilla, 1996). Traveling along this road, one can observe the colonization process that began in the 1970s with state support, through colonization laws and unoccupied land policies, closely tied to oil companies. Texaco developed the Cononaco and Auca wells, which, upon entering production, enabled the industrial oil development of the area, the construction of access roads, and the emergence of settlements of both mestizo colonist groups seeking land for production (cattle, coffee) and other Amazonian indigenous groups (Kichwa and Shuar).

Graph No. 1. Auca and Maxus Roads

Source: Ecuador Terra Incognita, 2018

The forced displacement of Niwairi Waorani families triggered a series of territorial and cultural conflicts, as the road divided their traditional territory, causing families of this ethnic group, who used this region as their space of mobility and socio-cultural reproduction, to migrate southeast, leading to conflicts over territorial boundaries and competition for resources such as hunting with other indigenous groups like the Kichwa and Shuar, who entered as colonists.

> "Approximately 40 kilometers from Coca lies the town of Dayuma, whose disorderly and chaotic growth demonstrates how the original rural pre-cooperative or commune model shifted to nucleated settlements along the multiple roads in the area. As a result, many of the old pre-cooperatives and colonist cooperatives no longer exist, giving rise to small settlements that have led to a rapid urbanization process with the creation of various neighborhoods, districts, parishes, cantons, and cities. A few kilometers further along the road toward the Pindo wells lies Davo, a Waorani warrior and son of Niwa, who recounts how his family has experienced these changes: "This was my father's territory, Ñiwa, the greatest Waorani warrior. He defended his territory from the cuwuris, the outsiders. He had a large house where the Cononaco camp now stands. That's where I was born." (Trujillo, 2001)

The Auca Road also divided traditional Waorani territory, causing families of this ethnic group, who used this region as their space of mobility and socio-cultural reproduction, to migrate southeast, leading to conflicts over territorial boundaries and competition for resources such as hunting (Trujillo, 2011).

Davo and his wife Zoila live at the Pindo fork, where they charge tolls to those passing through their territory. "Payment can be in money, but also in food and, frequently, in Coca-Cola," explains Zoila, who speaks Spanish.

This testimony reflects how roads have not only altered the landscape but also the subsistence practices and social relations of the Waorani.

THE MAXUS ROAD: BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

In the 1990s, the construction of the Maxus Road marked a new chapter in the history of the Ecuadorian Amazon. This 131.5-kilometer road was designed to access oil fields located in the eastern areas of Yasuní National Park. Although promoted as an "ecological road," its construction sparked intense debates between the state, oil companies, and environmental organizations.

The road forms a complex industrial system, spanning 131.5 kilometers from the so-called Pompeya Port to the Iro wells. The first 42.5-kilometer stretch served to reach camps near the Capirón, Tivacuno, and Bogi fields, where road branches (13 km) were built for access.

> The border dividing the Kichwa and Waorani is the Tiputini River, Giuyero for the Waorani, where the first permanent Waorani settlement was formed by the family of Kawena Awa, an elderly Waorani described as a hunter, not a warrior, and thus peaceful. His sons Tigue and Mingui live nearby, as does Nambai, who maintains kinship ties but is the son of Iteka, an emblematic Waorani warrior. Near kilometer 42 lies the NPF (North Production Facilities) camp of the Maxus company, which later sold its shares to the Argentine-Spanish oil consortium Repsol-YPF. The oil facilities have caused a systematic migration of Waorani families who have settled around the camp, obtaining food and resources from the company. "The hunter waits by the camp gates for his daily sustenance" (Trujillo, 2011).

The road was dubbed the "ecological road," and during its nearly 10-year construction, it was one of the main points of conflict between the state, the oil company, and environmental organizations, which warned of its high impact on Yasuní National Park and the Waorani population. A field diary entry (2005) describes the impact of the Maxus Road on local communities:

> "The Napo River is the main waterway, leading to the Amazon River. From the city of Coca, it takes almost 4 hours by speedboat to reach Pompeya Port, the entry point to the Maxus oil block, known as Block 16. Traveling downstream along the Napo is a unique experience; the river winds and floods large forested areas, passing through several old rubber-era haciendas that still retain their names. Entering Pompeya Port is like entering a foreign embassy: checkpoints, document reviews, permits, and searches. Access to Block 16 becomes a security zone where the Ecuadorian state seemingly lost sovereignty, and the oil company's rules apply from the moment we pass the checkpoints and board the bus. Traveling along the famous ecological road is under strict speed controls, not exceeding 40 kilometers per hour. The landscape is forest and Kichwa settlers' farms, who, taking advantage of the colonization stage promoted by the state in the 1980s, positioned themselves along the riverbanks and later declared part of the ancestral Waorani territory as their own. Up to kilometer 32 is the territory of the Kichwa communes of Pompeya and Indillama." (Trujillo, 2001)

The Maxus Road also caused a systematic migration of Waorani families who settled around the oil camp, obtaining food and monetary resources from the company. This change in mobility patterns led to the overexploitation of forest soils and increased pressure on the mobility zones of isolated families (Trujillo, 2011).

DISCUSSION

Roads in the Ecuadorian Amazon are not mere transportation routes; they are axes of social, cultural, and environmental transformation. They have facilitated the region's integration into the national economy but at a high cost: deforestation, displacement of indigenous communities, and loss of biodiversity. Moreover, they have reconfigured the ways of life of local inhabitants, imposing a development logic that prioritizes resource exploitation over sustainability and territorial rights.

The testimony of Zoila, Davo's wife, encapsulates this complexity: "The road divided our territory, but it also forced us to adapt. Now we charge tolls, but before we were free" (Field diary, 2009). This account not only reflects the resistance of Waorani communities but also their capacity to adapt to a process that has redefined their relationship with their territory and the outside world.

The opening of roads allowed a rapid influx of colonist peasants, who settled near camps and roads. Colonist peasants from Loja, Bolívar, Manabí, Pichincha, and El Oro, as well as Kichwa and Shuar family groups, settled preferentially near the Napo River and the extensive road network built by oil companies. In this way, they entered the Auca Road area, declared by the national government as unoccupied land and thus available for agricultural use, quickly displacing its former inhabitants. The aggressive clearing of the forest originated fundamentally from the same laws governing colonization, which required more than 50% of the land to be worked for it to be adjudicated (Trujillo, 2001; Papalardo, 2013). The road became the main access route to areas of Yasuní National Park (PNY), Waorani ethnic territory, and the Intangible Zone Tagaeri-Taromenane (ZITT).

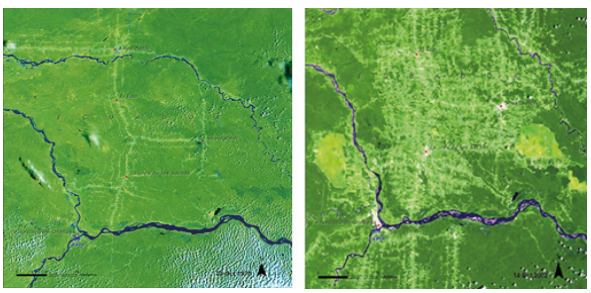

Figure N.2 Colonization in the Northern Region of the Ecuadorian Amazon (1977-2002)

Fuente: Ecorae-Senplades, 2015

Today, it is a true regional complex, combining aggressive agricultural frontier expansion, unplanned urbanization, and oil industry development around oil infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

Roads in the Ecuadorian Amazon are more than transportation infrastructure; they are symbols of a civilizing project that sought to integrate the forest into the nation and its ideal of development. However, this process has generated socio-environmental conflicts between local populations and oil companies. The construction of roads like the Auca and Maxus transformed not only the landscape of a highly biodiverse ecology but also the lives of those who inhabited the region, redefining their subsistence practices, social organization, and relationship with the territory—their ethos and worldview (Trujillo, 2001).

Rapid urbanization has turned former settlements into commercial hubs, with new populations forming neighborhoods using the extensive road communication infrastructure. These neighborhoods now demand basic services such as potable water and sewage systems, as well as education and healthcare. Between the 1990s and 2000s, one of the main characteristics of the oil subregion was the constant outbreaks of violence and conflicts between peasant-colonists, indigenous groups, and the military, many of which were mediated by the Catholic Church. Land conflicts were the primary scenarios of violence and tension in the oil subregion.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of considering local perspectives in development project planning. The testimonies of actors like Davo and Zoila reveal that, beyond environmental and economic impacts, roads have profound cultural and social effects. To move toward truly sustainable development, it is necessary to integrate the voices and rights of indigenous communities into decision-making, recognizing their role as local actors.

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