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Constitutive Diversity among the Waorani of Eastern Ecuador

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Abstract. The Waorani of eastern Ecuador were known for their isolation. A group of only about 500 people, speaking a language unrelated to any other, they were famous for having maintained a hostile relationship with all surrounding societies. In effect, until the 1958 pacification of the first of their four mutually belligerent territorial groups, all Waorani were at war with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, their culture contained elements that they themselves identified as having come from other peoples. Some of these elements were remnants of previous inhabitants of their territory between the Napo and Curaray rivers: Unable to make stone axes themselves, they made gardens with ax heads they found in the forest. Some were asserted to be transfers that came with captive girls abducted from nearby lowland Quichua settlements. One informant suggested that manioc mashers were introduced to the Waorani by this route. Others were adopted from surreptitious observations of neighboring non-Waorani. After contact, Dayuma, American missionary Rachel Saint's protégé, encouraged intermarriage with lowland Quichua among her converts, a practice still somewhat contested by those who want to maintain ethnic and political boundaries. Such incorporation of practices and peoples by the Waorani continues today as they redefine what being Waorani means in a globalized world.

Key words. Ethnogenesis, Waorani, Ecuador, indigenous, constitutive diversity Diversidad constitutiva entre los Waorani de Ecuador oriental.

Diversidad constitutiva entre los Waorani del Oriente Ecuatoriano

Resumen. Los Waorani del oriente ecuatoriano fueron reconocidos por su aislamiento. Un grupo de solo 500 personas, que hablaban idiomas diferentes. Era famoso por mantener relaciones hostiles con las sociedades circundantes. En efecto, en 1958 se produjo la pacificación del primero de los cuatro grupos territoriales, mutuamente beligerantes. Todos los Waorani estaban en guerra con el resto del mundo. A pesar de lo anterior, su cultura contiene elementos que ellos mismos identifican como provenientes de otros pueblos. Algunos de estos elementos son remanentes de los pobladores que les precedieron en el territorio entre los ríos Napo y Curaray. Incapaces de fabricar hachas de piedra por sí mismos, pero sí preparaban sus tierras de cultivo con las cabezas de hachas que encontraban en la selva. Algunos aseguraban que eran transferencias logradas a través de niñas cautivas secuestradas en las inmediaciones de las tierras bajas de los asentamientos quichua. Un informante sugirió que los pilones para machacar la yuca fueron introducidos a los Waorani por esta vía y que algunos se adoptaron a partir de observaciones subrepticias de vecinos no Waorani. Después del contacto, Dayuma, protegido de la misionera estadounidense Raquel Saint, alentó los matrimonios mixtos entre sus conversos de las tierras bajas quichua; práctica todavía criticada por aquellos que quieren mantener los límites étnicos y políticos en el grupo. Tal incorporación de prácticas y pueblos por los Waorani continúa hoy en día, ya que ello redefine lo que significa ser Waorani en un mundo globalizado.

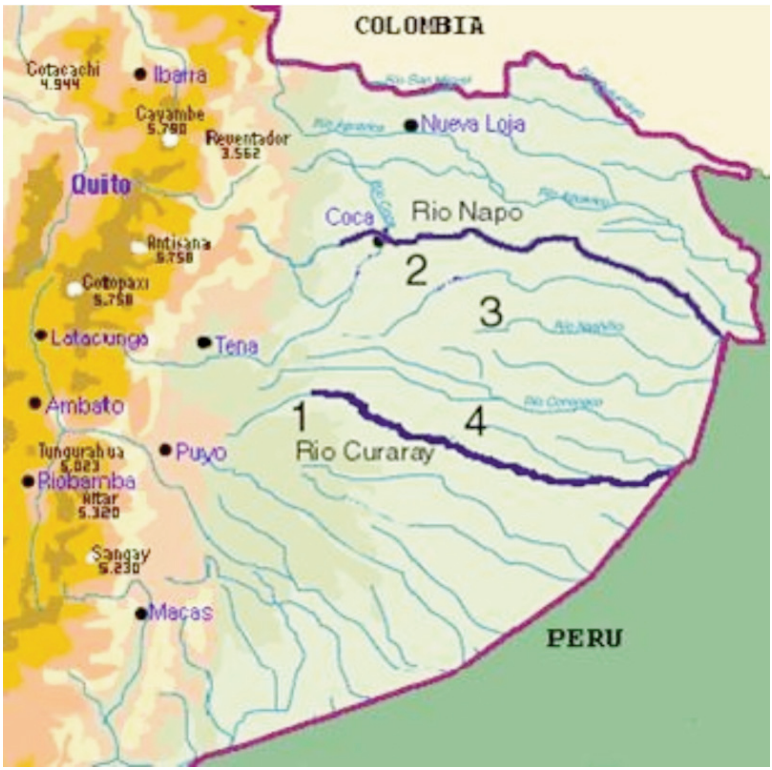
Palabras clave. Etnogénesis, Waorani, Ecuador, indígenas, diversidad constitutiva.

The Waorani of eastern Ecuador are a famously warlike group of interfluvial forager/horticulturalists inhabiting lowland tropical forests between the rivers Napo and Curaray in eastern Ecuador in an altitude range of 200 to 500 meters. Their language, *Wao tededo*, is classified as a linguistic isolate, unrelated to any other in the world. It had no written form until members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics began translating the New Testament into *Wao tededo* in the 1960s and 1970s.

When the first Waorani groups were peacefully contacted in 1958, the total population did not exceed 500. The Waorani were the only human inhabitants of an area roughly 20,000 square kilometers, living at a population density of about 0.025 persons per square kilometer. Subsistence was based primarily on manioc slash-and-rot (fields were not usually burned) horticulture, with corn, plantain, peach palm, and peanut as important secondary crops. Meat in the diet came mainly from blowgun and spear hunting. The pre-contact Waorani lived in four geographically separated and mutually hostile groups. Marriage was prescriptively with a bilateral cross cousin (although other kinds of marriages did take place when a suitable person was not available) and was usually arranged by the parents or classificatory parents of the young couple. Both polygyny (usually sororal) and polyandry (always fraternal) occurred (Beckerman, *et al.* 2009).

Before pacification the Waorani were at war not only with each other, but with all other non-Waorani people bordering their territory, whom they called *kowodi*. *Kowodi* included the lowland Quichua, Zaparoans, *mestizo* colonists, rubber tappers, ranchers, missionaries, oil company employees, the Ecuadorian military, and anyone else who came close to their territory. For the known generations before contact, the Waorani death rate from warfare was staggering. In a sample of pre-contact causes of mortality among 551 individuals taken from genealogies going back as far as five generations, Larrick, *et al.* (1979) reported that 230 (42%) died as a result of being speared by other Waorani and that 66% of all deaths and emigration were a direct result of warfare.

At the time of our fieldwork on the fertility effects of warfare in 2000-2003, the estimated 1,800 Waorani lived in about 23 small villages, the great majority of them in a protectorate of 1,700 square kilometers (about 0.6 persons per square kilometer) or in Yasuni National Park, both of which are situated in Orellana and Pastaza Provinces in Ecuador (see Map 1). Although pacification has fostered a more sedentary lifestyle, and some settlements have developed greater permanency and size than in the past, the Waorani custom of mobility and relocation continues into the present. New settlements spring up and abandoned ones are repopulated, and younger Waorani often leave the Amazon interior for jungle frontier towns and highland cities in search of jobs and education.



Map 1
Location of precontact Waorani groups and date of contact:
1 Geketaidi 1958, 2 Piyemoidi 1968, 3 Wepeidi 1971, 4 Baiwaidi 1969.

Early contact with *kowodi*

Despite their early self-imposed isolation the Waorani have had intermittent contact with outsiders, mostly intruders into their territory. During the rubber-tapping era, for example, many Waorani were captured and pressed into service tapping rubber. Some of our older informants told us stories of relatives who had been abducted to work in rubber extraction and were never heard from again. Occasional Quichua hunting parties, Catholic missionaries, and later oil and hardwood exploiters, evangelical missionaries, and adventurers have come into contact with the Waorani, usually with deadly consequences.

Nevertheless, Waorani culture contained elements that they themselves identified as having come from other peoples. Some of these were remnants from previous inhabitants of their territory — for example, stone axes found in the forest were used to make gardens. Later they stole

axes and machetes from neighboring or trespassing Quichua. Some adoptions were said to be transfers that came when girls were abducted from nearby lowland Quichua settlements and married to Waorani men who needed wives. One informant suggested that manioc mashers were introduced to the Waorani by this route. At the time of our study, only a small number of our Waorani informants were married to Quichua (or other outsiders), but we concentrated on older Waorani, age 50 and over in 2000 who had experienced life pre-contact, whose children were among those in the first post-contact transition generation. In our genealogies, *kowodi* spouses were rarely named but denoted as "a Quichua", reinforcing the us/them-human/not human distinction that was so pervasive prior to contact.

Other elements were adopted from surreptitious observations of neighboring non-Waorani. One Wao man observed a lowland Quichua man building a homesteader-style house on stilts. He watched until he was sure he knew how to do it, then killed the house builder, took his tools, and built his own house on stilts. A similar story is told about canoes, which the Waorani sometimes stole from nearby settlements or from the Quichua they killed who had come into their territory to hunt, but they also surreptitiously watched the Quichua build them in order to learn how.

First peaceful contact

The first big change in interaction with *kowodi* came with events that led to the first peaceful contact with Waorani by American missionaries, Rachel Saint and Elisabeth Eliot, in 1958 following the death of Rachel's brother and Elisabeth's husband, both of whom had been killed in a massacre after they and three others attempted to contact the Waorani in 1956 by landing a small plane on a river beach in their territory. Rachel made it her life's goal to contact the Waorani peacefully and bring God's message of peace and forgiveness. Rachel and Elizabeth's success in this would probably not have been possible without the help of three Waorani women who had fled to the outside during a particularly intense period of warfare among the Geketairi, the group living closest to the western territorial boundary (Wallis 1973). Two women from this group explained how serious and scary this time had been:

> *Before I was six years old I grew up in the middle of raids and we had to move a lot in order to stay alive. I remember being in my mother's arms when she was speared in the leg running away. We had to hide in the forest for five months. Many people were killed – my grandparents, my uncle and his wife.* Morning Star (age 52)

> *I grew up with my grandmother because my mother wanted to bury me [method of infanticide] because I was a girl. There were lots of raids and often not enough food. We were afraid day and night. I was afraid they would kill me, but I survived after the kowodi came to live here.* Piping Guan (age 44).

Some Waorani, especially those who lived closer to kowodi areas fled from this extreme violence to the outside, a truly drastic course since one had to survive the trip through the jungle with nothing (no fire, food, etc.) and then survive the *kowodi*, all of whom were considered cannibals. During the worst of the slaughter among the Geketairi in the 1940s, Dayuma, a girl of about 15, witnessed the slaughter of her father and sister in a raid and fled with the rest of her family into the jungle. Dayuma and two other women fled outside Wao territory to a hacienda where they lived for more than 10 years during which Dayuma had two sons by two kowodi brothers. Rachel and Elisabeth, the missionaries, found Dayuma and the others at the hacienda and learned the Wao language from them after which they made their way into Wao territory to make the first peaceful contact with the Waorani in 1958.

Morning Star (age 52) talked about the hope of peace offered by Rachel's religion:

> *It was then [after the killings in her family] that we decided we had to go live with Nemo* [Rachel Saint] *and become civilized and Geketa* [the leader of the Geketairi] *took us to live there in Damointado. All the raiding wouldn't let us live in peace. You always had to be alert so you wouldn't be killed.*

It has been argued that adopting Christianity offered the Waorani a means to forge peace within and among the mutually hostile groups (Boster, Yost, and Peeke 2003). By 1973, the last major hostile group had come to make peace. The missionaries urged the cessation of warfare, violent raids, homicide, and infanticide, all of which have resulted in an increased individual lifespan and peaceful coexistence with other Waorani and kowodi. Along with peace, however, the missionaries and other outsiders who came later introduced them to a new culture and a globalized world. There were many new material culture items such as fish hooks, shot guns, tinned meat, cooking oil, rice, propane stoves, clothing, shoes, rubber boots, outboard motors and electric generators and the gas to run them, tools, aluminum cooking pots, mosquito nets, blankets, candles, books, radios, and later CD players, cell phones, TVs, computers, new modes of transportation (roads, motorized canoes, air service by small plane), jewelry and makeup, and new pastimes such as football and volleyball; but also much altered ways of living in the world

with new institutions such as schools with bilingual education, church, new diseases, medical care, identity cards, and exposure to the social stratification inherent in globalization that is so unlike their traditional more equitable social structure. The world changed irrevocably for the Waorani after that first peaceful contact. They became part of the global village.

Waorani integration into the global society

Although the missionaries fostered peaceful interactions with *kowodi*, Rachel herself was vehemently opposed to intermarriage with lowland Quichua and discouraged it among her converts. Rachel wanted to maintain their ethnic identity and heritage even as she changed it by being there. Dayuma, on the other hand, who became a leader in her community and spokesperson for the Waorani to the outside world (prior to the formation of the Organization of the Huaorani Nation of the Ecuadorian Amazon [ONHAE] in 1991), encouraged intermarriage with the lowland Quichua, often arranging these marriages herself. Although Rachel made sure Dayuma married a Waorani man, Dayuma's surviving mixed heritage son is married to an American and lives in the US. Dayuma's younger sisters, Ome and Guimare, and three of Dayuma's own children with her Wao husband are married to Quichuas. Intermarriage, was always traditionally looked down on as a "wild" marriage by the Waorani, and was still a contested practice during our work in 2000-2004 (Erickson 2004).

Today, sexual and romantic relationships between young Wao women and outsiders (e.g., oil company workers, foreigners and/or Ecuadorian nationals working for NGOs on conservation and development projects or living in Puyo, Tena, or Coca, the closest provincial towns to the Waorani territory) are not uncommon, and older women complained that their daughters and granddaughters do not follow traditional customs of premarital abstinence and elder-arranged marriages with appropriate Waorani men – their bilateral cross cousins. Instead they enter into relationships when and with whom they please. Most of these liaisons do not end in marriage, but the girls often get pregnant because they do not use birth control and then return home with a baby and no husband.

The reversal of generational authority and unwed childbearing appear to be new social phenomena among the Waorani, as explained by Purple Bird (age 48):

> *This is because of civilization* [the term the younger, Spanish-educated Waorani use to describe cultural changes after the missionaries came] *that brought with it education, learning other languages* [Spanish, Quichua], *learning how to cook other food* –

> *all this influences what young people do now but not their parents who have not learned these other languages and ways of living. Because of all these changes, the children just do what they want, go where they please, and don't obey their parents.*

A very few Waorani, mostly young men but also some young women, have moved out of Wao territory to go to college, to work for ONHAE in Puyo, or to work in other areas of Ecuador. There they might have girlfriends of other ethnicities, but it is still too early to tell what the long-term outcome of such relationships will be. Although still rare within the Protectorate, marriage with outsiders will likely become more common as the Waorani further integrate into Ecuadorian and global culture.

The Waorani are conscious of culture change. Elders are especially aware of the conflict between past life ways and new economic opportunities that require young Waorani to leave the Protectorate. It is clear that the Waorani are in transition. They live in a world where contrasting cultural systems require them to practice their traditional life ways while simultaneously incorporating and practicing new attitudes, beliefs, and practices grounded in both Quichua and Western society. The Waorani recognize that they have no choice but to be incorporated into the Ecuadorian state, but the style and meaning of that incorporation are still evolving and it is not at all clear what final form it will take (Wilson and Yost 2002). In effect, the Waorani are about to manifest considerably more constitutive diversity in the rising generations than they have shown in the past. Through this process, they are constructing what being Waorani means in a globalized world.

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